



# Sweet Betrayal

**Author:** *Gemma Ford*

**Category:** Romance, Adult, Thriller, Suspense

**Description:** A scarred soldier. A woman on the run. A passion they can't escape.

Caught in a country torn apart by rebellion, Hannah's world is crumbling. On the run with dangerous secrets, her only shot at survival is Sergeant Tom Wilde—a disgraced U.S. Marine assigned to lead the evacuation of American citizens from the U.S. Embassy. For Tom, this mission is nothing short of hell. Haunted by a botched operation that nearly cost him everything, he sees this assignment as exile... until he meets Hannah. The fierce, defiant woman could hold the key to ending the war, and Tom is determined to get her to safety. But the fire between them is undeniable—and as the chaos around them deepens, so does their connection.

Hannah knows better than to trust a soldier driven by redemption, especially one whose secrets run as deep as her own. But every moment they share pulls her closer to him. With danger at every turn and betrayal lurking in the shadows, can she put her life—and her heart—in Tom's hands? Or will his need for redemption cost them both everything?

Previously published as *Personal Assistance*, this newly updated and revamped edition by the same author offers fresh content and a thrilling new experience for readers. The original version is no longer available.

**Total Pages (Source):** 92

## CHAPTER 1

The folder that would change her life looked like any other piece of official correspondence. Made of heavy cream card stock, it bore the royal falcon embossed in gold on the front, the emblem gleaming under the fluorescent office light. Tucked neatly inside was a single sheet of paper. Across the front of the folder, printed in bold block letters, was the warning:

**FOR H.H. PRINCE HAKEEM'S EYES ONLY**

After six months as the Crown Prince of Syman's personal assistant, Hannah barely noticed the admonition. Everything bound for His Highness carried a similar stamp.

She collected the folder from her glass-topped desk, tucked it under her arm, and set off for the prince's private quarters. It wasn't yet 0700. He would still be in the dressing suite, and protocol demanded that critical documents reach him immediately.

Hannah enjoyed her job at the royal compound. Syman, an island monarchy perched in the Gulf, marketed itself as a cosmopolitan playground. Turquoise coves, glittering casinos, five-star hotels that lured celebrities, billionaires and influencers every long weekend.

As the prince's PA, she often accompanied him to charity galas on the marble terraces of the Miraj Resort, impromptu shopping sprees in air-conditioned malls the size of small towns. In many ways it was a dream job.

But glamour wasn't the only reason Hannah had taken the position. After the blow-up

with her father, Walter Evans—fourth-generation owner of Evans & Son Accountancy in Savannah—she was cut off.

With what the prince was paying her, she could save enough in two years to return to the States and open up her own boutique PR agency. That was her real goal.

She could still hear her father's disapproving voice.

Evans & Son is one of the most prestigious accounting firms in the county, Hannah Leigh. It's your duty to come home and take your place.

The only problem was she had no interest in the family firm. Ledgers suffocated her. She was a people person like her late mother. A future in public relations was what she wanted, and this job was a giant step in the right direction. Shaping the prince's image was exactly the kind of high-pressure brand work that would electrify her résumé.

Rounding a corner, she slammed straight into a housekeeping attendant whose arms overflowed with linen. Sheets scattered across the brocade runner.

"Ma' as-salaama—sorry!" Hannah blurted in fluent Arabic. She'd learned it from her grandparents as a child. It was the chief reason why the Prince had hired her over the other English-speaking applicants.

The attendant knelt to gather up the discarded linen. Hannah crouched to help her—then froze. Her official folder lay open exposing the heading on the letter inside. She couldn't help but see it.

URGENT: MEASURES FOR CIVIL UNREST

Unrest?

There had been rumors, but nothing concrete. Her mind struggled to make sense of the heading. Confused, she read on.

Due to unrest in neighboring countries like Egypt and Syria, we need to prepare a plan for the immediate evacuation of the royal family and take steps to stop similar uprisings from spreading inside Syman.

Hannah glanced around, but apart from the maid scurrying away, the hallway was deserted. The plush carpets made no sound as she snatched up the letter, shoved it back inside the folder, and ran to the nearest restroom.

She didn't want to think about what would happen if anyone found her, but this was too shocking to ignore. Locking a stall, she read the four-page memorandum in one breathless sweep.

Protests in the southern seaport of Hamabad had turned violent. If the unrest spread north, civil war could ignite in hours.

Security chief Abdul Anwar had outlined a response plan that read more like a crackdown than a strategy. It included the immediate imposition of strict curfews across the capital and surrounding cities, along with a total blackout of all news outlets, mobile networks, and internet access to prevent the spread of information. Most chilling of all was the authorization for military forces to use live ammunition against civilians if protests escalated. No warning shots. No rubber bullets. Just real rounds fired into real crowds.

The memorandum also detailed a series of coordinated escape routes for the royal family. Two private coastal villas with direct access to the Gulf were prepped for rapid evacuation by boat, and three safe houses in neighboring countries were already stocked and staffed. It wasn't just a plan—it was a blueprint for survival at the cost of civilian lives.

By the time she'd finished reading, she was trembling. But thanks to the memory that had served her so well in school and through years of high-pressure admin work, the contents were already locked in—word for word. She couldn't unsee it now, even if she wanted to.

Footsteps entered, then left. Hannah remained motionless, the lines of text still floating before her eyes.

Move!

She'd been gone too long. Someone would come looking for her. Then what? How could she explain she'd seen the confidential document by accident?

They'd never believe her.

Somehow, she managed to get to her feet and stumble from the cubicle. She splashed cold water over her face, then stared at her reflection in the mirror. A shocked, pale woman gazed back at her, made even paler by the blond curls that she'd pulled back into her signature chignon, the way the Prince liked it.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 9:21 am*

In the space of five minutes, her whole reality had shifted.

The situation was serious, and one question plagued her.

How did I not know this?

Then again, the palace was a bubble. Outside news was censored, if it got to them at all. She suspected it was like that all over the country. The Palace controlled the flow of information. The few e-mails from college friends that had made it through the firewall had urged caution, but nothing had hinted at this.

Anger at the brutal crackdown suggested in the memo coursed through her. Surely the Prince wouldn't condone this? He prided himself on being a forward-thinking, liberal and modern ruler.

Doubt clogged her brain. Hakeem was popular abroad but divisive at home. He talked big reforms but didn't follow through. Still, the economy boomed. Skyscrapers, malls, and resorts lifted living standards across the island. Surely he couldn't be all bad.

Hannah pursed her lips at her reflection. What should she do?

Could there really be a civil war?

Was she in danger?

The letter included an evacuation plan for the royal family, should the compound fall

to opposing forces. Did that include her?

No way. They wouldn't take a westerner with them, and certainly not an employee at that.

Tension radiated through her as she thought about Abdul Anwar. She'd never liked the creepy Head of State Security, and one of the prince's closest allies. He went out of his way to make her feel uncomfortable. She shivered thinking about the way his dark eyes crept over her, filled with loathing, like he had some unspoken grudge against her.

Of course, on the surface he was painstakingly polite but underneath, he simmered with pent-up aggression. To think he was the architect of this... this unimaginable horror made her realize how evil he was.

Suddenly, Hannah knew what she had to do.

In just a few months, she'd grown to love Syman's stark beauty and the quiet dignity of its people. The thought of the principality reduced to rubble—families uprooted, jobs wiped out, civilians caught in the crossfire—turned her stomach. If the regime went ahead with a full-scale assault, innocents would pay the price.

No, she'd walk away and find another way to fund her PR dream.

Decision made, she went back to her office to write her letter of resignation. She buried the folder under a pile of briefing documents. She was not going to be responsible for passing it on to the prince. There would be no blood on her hands.

A shout from across the open-plan office made her look up. Ahmed, the rake-thin receptionist with nervous hands and wide eyes, was pointing at the television mounted high on the far wall. The screen was muted, but the images playing on the

local news channel needed no sound to deliver their message.

A wide boulevard filled the frame, choked with protesters. Men in street clothes raised rifles and fired into a saffron-tinted sky, while women clutched their children, dragging them through thick, swirling clouds of tear gas.

She felt her stomach tighten as she turned to Ahmed. “Can we turn it up?”

He did so, curiosity and shock overriding his fear of being reprimanded. Shouts and screams filled the air, along with the sound of bullets being fired.

“Where is that?” she asked, already fearing the answer.

“Hamabad,” he whispered, his face paler than hers had been only moments before.

The fine hair on her arms stood on end. Hamabad was the principality’s second-largest city after the capital, where she was based.

The memo seemed to smolder in her inbox as she reached the inevitable conclusion. Civil war was breaking out.

Hannah stared at the TV screen. It was really happening, just like Abdul Anwar had said. That’s why he’d taken early action, that’s why he’d formulated an escape plan.

She let out a long, slow breath, trying to still her thumping heart. None of the palace staff were aware of the danger. They’d been insulated, living behind high walls and wrought-iron gates.

“How are we watching this?” she rasped.

“It’s a dissident broadcast. My friend messaged me to turn it on.”



Somehow, this had got through the Palace censors. It would only be a matter of time before they were shut down—yet she'd seen enough.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 9:21 am*

The unrest was occurring less than fifty miles south of her, right now. She watched in morbid fascination as the riot police attacked demonstrators with batons. It was getting ugly.

She thought of the measures Abdul Anwar had outlined. Water cannons and teargas, and if that didn't work, live rounds. Nausea made her grip the desk in front of her. Resignation was pointless. She needed to escape.

But how?

Forcing herself not to hyperventilate, she considered her options. Airport routes were uncertain, given the current situation, but the U.S. Embassy, a concrete fortress on the city's west bank, sat within walking distance, and she could use the backstreets.

She ran back to her desk, opened a drawer and pulled out her purse, passport, and employment contract. Everything was kept on hand in case the prince wanted to go somewhere on a whim. She checked inside her passport and fingered the eagle watermark. It was a fragile lifeline.

Looking around, she snatched a dove-gray hijab off the back of a nearby chair. Once she got outside, she could use it to cover her blond hair. The disguise wasn't perfect, but it was better than nothing.

She cast one final look around the office that had been her workplace for the last six months. Never in her wildest dreams had she pictured it ending like this.

Her eyes flickered to the memo in her in-box. Should she take it or leave it? Those

pages held secrets the regime would kill to protect, yet without them the embassy might dismiss her story.

If she left the file where it lay, the prince might assume she'd never opened it—might. But carrying it out of the palace was treason, and treason here meant a death sentence. Did she really want that hanging over her head?

What to do?

A fresh roar from the TV sealed her choice. Grabbing the folder containing the memo, she tucked it under her arm and slipped into the colonnaded corridor.

## CHAPTER 2

Whenever Hannah's responsibilities took her beyond the compound walls, she was never allowed to go alone. Aneez, her assigned driver, or the prince's steward—both of them men—always accompanied her. Women did not step outside the confines of the palace without an escort. That's just the way it was here.

Right now, however, everything was different. There was no one to enforce protocol. No escort trailing behind her. No official clearance or nod of approval. It was just her, moving swiftly and silently across the manicured lawns and along the gravel paths that lined the palace grounds.

The thought of Prince Hakeem discovering her absence sent a dry chill through her mouth. He lived by a schedule with the precision of a surgeon. His office doors opened precisely at eight o'clock. Not a moment before. Never a second after.

She checked her watch. 7:45.

Holy crap! Where had the last forty-five minutes gone?

When she failed to bring his morning coffee, he'd ask where she was. Ahmed—if he'd shaken off his stupor by then—would tell His Majesty that Hannah had gone out half an hour ago and hadn't returned.

The prince wouldn't jump to conclusions. Not right away. He'd be puzzled, maybe mildly annoyed. Hannah was never late. Never careless. She was the one person he didn't have to worry about.

Over the last few months, she'd made herself indispensable. Ran his diary with precision, remembered names he never bothered to learn, fetched gifts for his wives, and smoothed over the rough edges of his public life. Whatever he needed, she anticipated it before he asked.

In return, Prince Hakeem had rewarded her with something rare: trust. Freedom, even—more than most of his staff were allowed. Abdul Anwar had warned against it, but Hakeem had overruled him.

It was that freedom she was gambling on now.

She glanced at the time. Thirty minutes—that was all she had before someone noticed she was missing and started asking real questions. By then, the security team would have rewound the footage.

Every gate, every hallway, every exit was under constant surveillance. Real-time video streamed into the administration building, monitored by a rotation of stone-faced guards trained to notice the smallest anomaly. If even one red flag was raised, the State Security force would be deployed without hesitation. They were fast, heavily armed, and fiercely loyal. She knew the men. She knew their names, their routines, the weapons they carried. Just imagining the sound of their boots pounding down the corridor behind her sent a chill through her entire body.

There was no such thing as sneaking out. No forgotten camera. No dead angle in the system. So she hadn't tried for stealth.

Instead, her plan was simple. She would walk through the front gate and talk her way out.

It wouldn't be easy.

She thought through the scenarios. Aneez, her driver, was probably still at breakfast. He wouldn't be needed until midmorning, but even if she found him, he wouldn't help. Aneez was loyal. Traditional. He'd know this wasn't official business—and he'd report it.

Bougainvillea spilled over the compound walls in a riot of hot pink, offering scraps of cover. The heat shimmered across the manicured garden. A perfect day, cloudless and still. Her urgency felt out of place, but everywhere she looked, the colors were too sharp, the flowers too loud.

She moved briskly toward the staff entrance. It was tucked behind the complex, near the employee quarters, out of sight from the palace. The grand front entrance was off-limits unless she was accompanying His Royal Highness and his retinue. Four armed guards manned the staff gate. Unlike the front, it remained open, but the black iron spikes rising skyward looked less ornamental now and more like a warning.

## Page 4

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She scanned the guards' faces. Two were strangers, so no chance there. The third had made a crude remark last month and she'd shut him down, so she wasn't banking on him helping her either.

Panic stirred. Dammit! Time was bleeding away.

Then she spotted him.

Ibrahim.

Stationed off to the side. Ibrahim knew her well, but he also owed her. She'd fetched his child from school one afternoon when his wife was sick. A small favor, but hopefully it would be enough.

Steadying her breathing, she walked straight up to him. "Hello, Ibrahim. How's your family?" Her Arabic came easily, warm and familiar.

"Hana." He smiled as he said her name. It was Arabic in origin, an ode to her grandmother's heritage. "We're well, thank you. Where are you going?" His eyes flicked past her, looking for an escort. When he saw none, his expression tightened. "You know I can't let you out alone. Palace rules."

She forced a sheepish grin. "I've done something foolish. I forgot to deliver this document yesterday. It's urgent—it has to reach the Chief of Police before His Majesty notices."

She flashed the official stamp on the folder. Her thumb masked the bottom line: For

HRH Prince Hakeem's Eyes Only.

Ibrahim's brows drew together. She knew what he was thinking, and he'd be right. That it wasn't like her to forget something this important.

She held his gaze, let her voice drop. "Please, Ibrahim. You owe me."

He hesitated, his shoulders drawn tight, but then he exhaled—and she felt a surge of hope.

"Go. But be quick. If this comes back on me, we'll both lose our jobs."

"It won't," she lied, guilt making her chest tighten. He was a good man. He didn't deserve to be dragged into this. None of them did.

Did they even know what was happening in Hamabad? If they didn't, they would soon. It was only a matter of time.

She gave his arm a brief squeeze. "Thank you. You've saved me."

More than you know.

Then she turned, slipped through the gate, and vanished into the hum of the street beyond.

She moved fast through the crush of morning foot traffic, head lowered, heart thudding. Each step took her farther from the palace. Hakeem's advisors would have informed him of the revolt in Hamabad already. With a bit of luck they'd be too distracted by the crisis to notice she was missing. At least for a while.

But someone would notice soon enough. Her absence at the morning briefing would

trigger questions. Her desk would be checked. Abdul Anwar would look for the memo.

That's when it would begin.

The siren would sound, the gates slam shut, and the entire compound would be searched. When they couldn't find her... When they saw the security footage... they'd send State Security operatives after her. The prince's most loyal enforcers. And they wouldn't stop until she was found.

She gulped over the lump in her throat. How long would that take?

Her meeting with the prince was in three quarters of an hour. Forty-five minutes to get to the U.S. Embassy.

She veered off the main road and slipped into a narrow alley, ducking under hanging laundry and low balconies. With her scarf pulled tight and hair hidden, she blended easily—another veiled woman with somewhere to be.

Syman City wrapped itself around the coast in elegant sprawl. When she'd first arrived, she'd marveled at the whitewashed walls and tiled roofs. Now she hardly noticed them.

She silently thanked the near-photographic memory that had always served her well. In her mind, she pictured the city layout from a map she'd studied months ago. The palace compound stood in the northern sector, while the U.S. Embassy was located to the west. Cutting straight through the downtown district would be far too risky—there were too many eyes, too many checkpoints, and not enough cover.

The souk was her best chance. The bustling local market opened early and was always crowded, noisy, and in constant motion. If she could reach it, she might be



able to vanish into the chaos, at least for a little while.

She turned out of the alley and onto a road flanked with shops selling everything from olives and vegetables to clothing and materials. The pungent smell of incense thickened the air. The colorful market stalls and their exotic produce were one of the things she loved most about Syman. Shoppers, mostly women, scurried around, packets in hand. They wanted to get back to the safety of their homes. Hannah didn't blame them. She'd rather be anywhere else but out here on the street.

But she had no choice.

## Page 5

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Two blocks to the souk.

She didn't look back.

Then she heard it. The sound she'd been dreading.

Sirens.

Shit. Her heart leapt into her throat. They must have viewed the tapes, and seen her leave with the memo. It was happening faster than she'd anticipated. She'd hoped for—no, needed—more time.

The road was cobblestoned and thankfully too crowded for vehicles to pass. It was also impossible to traverse in heels. She stepped out of her work pumps and broke into a run. The rough ground tore through the thin material of her pantyhose and pebbles dug into the skin of her bare feet, but she ignored it, grimacing against the pain. It couldn't be helped. Being able to move quickly was more important. Her feet would heal.

Once she got to the crowded souk with its dimly lit aisles that crisscrossed each other like a web of tunnels, she could vanish amongst the clothes and textiles. She'd be safe there, if only for a little while. She pushed forward.

A siren split the air behind her, making her jump. She moved faster, trying not to make it obvious, as a police car crawled along the road, honking at shoppers to get out of the way. A tiny glimpse over her shoulder told her they were scanning the road, heads turning from left to right like satellite beacons.

Looking for her.

She ducked her head and slipped past a group of men smoking and laughing on the sidewalk. Her pencil skirt clung too tight for speed, and the concrete scraped at her bare soles, but she kept going. To stumble now would draw attention to herself.

The entrance to the enclosed souk appeared in front of her, and relief welled up.

Thank God.

She hurried inside, weak with relief. There was no time to pause. She zigzagged through the tunnels, weaving among the garments that hung off railings, obscuring the way. It was blissfully dark, the dim interior lanterns aimed at the items for sale rather than the shoppers.

The sirens dulled, then stopped altogether. Presumably, the police were searching for her on foot. Had they seen her enter the souk?

She didn't think so but she couldn't be sure. There was always a chance they'd figured out where she was headed and intended to cut her off.

A woman in a traditional robe—an abaya—beckoned to her from behind one of the stalls. She pointed at Hannah's skirt and torn pantyhose, then at her merchandise. Traditional clothing and scarves hung from the overhead railings like big black bats.

Yes! That's what she needed. A disguise.

Hannah rummaged in her handbag for a crumpled bill and passed it to the woman. Then grabbed a full-length black robe off a misshapen metal hanger.

"Keep the change," she said, shimmying into it, pulling it down over her clothes. In a

dark corner, she adjusted the headscarf so it covered the lower half of her face, leaving only her eyes visible.

Hah! Prince Hakeem's men would have a hard time recognizing her now.

She scurried out of the souk and hurried away from the market district, keeping her head bent low. No one stopped her, and thankfully, she didn't hear any more sirens. Twenty minutes later, she turned onto a wide avenue that circled a park and heaved a sigh of relief.

Finally.

On the other side stood the U.S. Embassy. The solid, rectangular building whitewashed and orderly, with crisp American lines and rows of tall windows, seemed to beckon her like a promise of safety.

Then she froze.

Oh, no!

She'd left the folder containing the letter back at the stall where she'd bought the abaya.

How could she be so darn stupid?

Distracted by the sirens and a frantic need to disguise herself, she'd put it down on the piles of scarves and forgotten to pick it back up. If they found it, it would condemn her.

Treason.

Even worse, now she had no leverage to get out of Syman. No physical proof of what was about to happen. Another thought struck her. Once the palace police questioned the store owner, they'd know she was in disguise.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 9:21 am*

Well done, Hannah.

This spy stuff really wasn't for her.

Hot tears welled up, but she blinked them away. Now what? She thought about going back, but then immediately dismissed it. Worst idea ever! The police would be trawling the souk by now. She had no choice but to go on.

Hurrying up the palm-tree-lined street, she passed some fruit sellers and, in front of them, a wooden bench, just begging her to sit down and rest. She eyed it longingly, but rest was a luxury she couldn't afford. Not with the embassy building beckoning from the other side of the park. She propelled herself forward, ignoring the pain in her feet, still beating herself up.

Not far now.

She crossed the park and there, at last, stood the front gate to the U.S. Embassy. Tears welled when she saw the American flag fluttering out front.

Approaching, she gazed longingly at the interior grounds. The garden overflowed with succulents and cacti, manicured lawns, and a fountain shaped like a lion. No water was spraying from it, but that was understandable given the current situation.

Finally, she had a sanctuary. Somewhere she'd be safe.

Boy, did she need it.

She ran straight up to the pedestrian gate and tugged at the iron bars. It didn't budge.

Was it locked?

Dismayed, she looked around. Where was the guard?

A shiver went down her spine. Why wasn't there anybody here? No people waiting for passports or visas.

She peered through the gates. Come to think of it, the magnificent embassy gardens were deserted.

Still catching her breath, she cried, "Hello?"

There was a guard hut to the left of the gate. "I'm an American citizen. Is anyone there?"

No reply. Only the faint breeze rustling through the date palms overhead.

She rattled the gates and shouted louder, "Please! Someone help me!"

Still nothing.

What the hell was going on? Surely the embassy would be operational at a time like this. They wouldn't have closed it because of the civil unrest in Hamabad, would they? That had only just happened. If anything, the embassy should be overcrowded with people trying to get out of the country. Like her.

Fear clutched at her chest. What if they had shut it?

What if she couldn't get in?

Somewhere in the distance came a screech of tires, making her pulse leap. That couldn't be them. Not yet.

Soon though, her pursuers would come racing down the tree-lined avenue towards her.

I don't want to die out here.

She rattled the gates in a panic, but there was no response.

Despair made her desperate. There was nowhere else to go. She didn't know anyone in town. Her job required her to live on the compound, and the only people she'd interacted with were the prince and his aides. There had been very few women in the compound, so she hadn't had a chance to make friends. Not that she had time to socialize, the prince expected her to be available twenty-four hours a day.

She clung desperately to the gates.

"Please," she cried one more time. "Please let me in."

But no one came to her aid.



### CHAPTER 3

Crumbled before the embassy gate, Hannah glanced over her shoulder. The State Security force could arrive any minute—and her only safe haven in the entire country had locked her out. She was officially out of options.

“Can I help you?”

Thank God.

She sprang to her feet, drinking in the sight of a U.S. soldier approaching the gate from the inside. He wore desert camouflage and carried a serious-looking rifle slung across his chest. Muscular, alert, and armed, there was nothing soft about him, but she’d never seen anyone more reassuring.

“Please,” she said, her voice trembling. “I’m an American citizen. I need help. There are dangerous people after me. If they find me, they’ll kill me.”

His gaze swept over her from head to toe. He took in the robe, the headscarf, her bare, dust-covered feet and hesitated, trying to make sense of the contradiction.

Damn, he might think she was a local woman.

Yanking the scarf down, she revealed her pale face and blonde hair. His eyes widened in surprise. They were pretty nice eyes, to be fair. Clear, sharp and a vivid shade of blue. Not unlike the Arabic sky. Fumbling in her purse, she managed to pull out her U.S. passport and wave it at the hot guard.

“See? I’m American. Please let me in. It’s a matter of life and death.”

She glanced back down the street, bracing for the screech of tires or the glint of a patrol car.

He followed her gaze, checking the street. For now, it was quiet.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” he said, clearing his throat. “You’re too late. This embassy is closed due to the current unrest. All personnel were evacuated back to the States. There’s no one here.”

“What?” Her breath caught.

No! Please, no.

She pleaded with him. “But... I have to get in. I have information... critical intel about the regime. Please,” her voice cracked, “you have to let me in before they find me.”

If only she still had the damn letter.

“Calm down, ma’am,” the soldier said, not unkindly. “Who’s coming after you?” He still hadn’t moved toward the gate.

“The authorities,” she whispered. “If they catch me, I’ll be arrested. I’ve committed treason.”

He blinked. “Treason? That’s a serious crime. Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” she snapped. Maybe he wasn’t so hot after all. “It’s the memorandum?—”

He shook his head slowly, his eyes narrowing as they flicked back to her. She could see it in his expression. She must appear completely unhinged. A lone woman in a disguise, dusty and barefoot, rambling about treason and stolen documents. Not exactly the image of someone trustworthy.

“I’ve got orders,” he said finally. “No one gets in. I wish I could help, but... maybe try contacting the State Department in D.C. They’ll know you’re still here and send someone.”

“I don’t have time,” she hissed. He was obviously dense, as well as nothot. “They’ll be here any second?—”

As if summoned by her words, the wail of sirens rose in the distance. She tensed and gripped the bars.

“That for you?” he asked, already reading the panic on her face.

“Yes, that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

It was game over.

The soldier turned toward the sound and they both saw the ominous blue lights flashing at the far end of the avenue. The security operatives were close enough to see the gates. Had they spotted her? Did they know she’d come here?

The nothot guard checked his weapon with one fluid motion and squared his stance. His legs were planted, his rifle ready. Impressive reflexes, despite the sick twist in her gut. He wasn’t going to let her in.

## Page 8

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“Thanks for nothing.”

With a low, desperate moan, she turned to run.

“See the alley at two o’clock?” he called after her.

“What?” She barely heard him over the thundering in her head. The police vehicles, having spotted her, jumped the curb on the far side of the park. Instead of taking the approach road, they chose the direct route—straight across the grass.

She stared in dismay as stall owners scrambled for cover as their goods went flying. She had seconds to react.

“Look, do you want my help or not?” His voice was sharp now, urgent.

She forced herself to focus on him.

He pointed. “Go down the alley. It’s too narrow for a car, so they’ll have to follow on foot. That’ll buy you some time.”

She glanced to her right. The alley was half-hidden behind a thick hibiscus bush, but she spotted it.

He continued, “At the end, turn left. Keep going until the road forks. Take the left fork. At the end is a metal gate. Wait there.”

Without checking to see if she’d understood, he stepped back into the shadows of the

date palms beside the guard hut.

Wait there?

Was he insane? With those guys after her?

“I don’t think so,” she muttered, casting one last glance at the oncoming disco of police vehicles before sprinting for the alley.

The unhelpful, nothot guard was right about one thing, though, it was her best shot. The narrow path wouldn’t fit a vehicle or even two men running side by side. As she charged down it, instinct took over. With her pursuers forced to follow on foot, she might just have a chance. All she needed now was a place to hide.

A shout made her glance back. Two burly policemen had entered the alley behind her. She caught only a glimpse before she whipped around the next corner, but it was enough to fill her with dread.

As she’d suspected, these weren’t regular Symanian police or palace security. They were the high-level, scarier version: State Security operatives. These guys were elite soldiers, trained in close combat. She’d heard stories about their brutality, and she knew they were loyal to the prince without question. If they caught her, she wouldn’t get a second chance.

Perspiration dripped into her eyes, but she blinked and kept going. Thenothot soldier’s directions echoing in her mind.

Turn left. Follow the road until it forks. Take the left fork.

Why would he tell her to wait by an exposed gate? Was he going to send someone to meet her? There was no time to question it.

It was a hard truth. She was on her own. Not even her embassy had let her in.

She ran harder, scanning ahead for the fork.

There it was!

The men hadn't rounded the turn yet, but she felt them behind her like heat at her back. Every second mattered.

The road to the left curved sharply, a narrow stretch winding like a river through the old quarter. As she rounded the bend and nearly collided with a man on an ancient Vespa. He swerved and narrowly missed, swearing at her in Arabic.

"Sorry!" she yelled, her legs pumping, her chest burning.

Did they see which way she went?

She hoped not. She needed more time.

On the right side of the road, a line of squat concrete houses loomed, jammed together like Lego. Their windows were shuttered, their balconies strung with laundry. There were no yards, which meant no trees, and no cover.

To the left, a high hedge ran alongside the path, woven with bougainvillea and topped with curling strands of razor wire. No way she was getting over that.

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Her eyes darted everywhere, searching for the gate the soldier had mentioned. Why she was still following his directions, she had no idea. The guy was deranged. Standing out in the open felt like suicide.

But there was nowhere else to go. The hedge was too dense, and the houses were sealed tight. Aside from the moped rider and the men chasing her, the entire street was deserted.

Then she heard the faint, rhythmic sound of chanting. Prayer time.

That explained the lack of people. She sprinted on, the road curving beneath her feet. Still no gate in sight.

He did say the left fork... right?

A shout rang out. She turned.

Shit.

One of the men had spotted her, and he was charging up the road. At least he was alone, which meant they must've split up.

Adrenaline surged. Her legs burned. She pushed herself harder, and flew around the final bend?—

And saw it.

A plain wrought iron gate, about six feet tall, tucked into a recess at the end of the hedge. It was easy to miss, camouflaged by tangled bougainvillea and a stretch of chicken wire across the top.

She stumbled toward it, chest on fire. Her hand reached for the latch?—

The gate swung open from the inside.

A figure stepped out of the shadows. A man.

He seized her around the waist in one smooth motion, yanking her through the opening. Her scream caught in her throat as a hand clamped over her mouth.

“Be quiet,” a voice growled in her ear.

## CHAPTER 4

Sergeant Tom Wilde held the wriggling woman tight against his chest. Jesus—her heart was pounding like an M4 on full auto.

“It’s okay. You remember me?” His voice stayed low, steady. He didn’t want to spook her more than she already was. “This is one of the back gates to the embassy.”

She stopped writhing, but her legs gave out. He supported her as she collapsed, tightening his arm around her waist and pulling her flush against him. She fit snugly into his frame, her body soft and fragile, all heat and trembling femininity.

“You’re safe now.”

She looked up at him, wide eyes framed by the gray scarf. Beautiful, oval-shaped eyes. Panic, confusion... it was all there in her terrified face.



“You?” she panted, her chest heaving from the exertion.

“Yeah. Me.”

She blinked, like she wasn’t sure if he was real. “But I thought...” Her voice was sultry, husky, like the last note of a slow song in a smoky bar. It stirred something inside him.

“You thought I wasn’t going to help you?”

A hesitant nod. She glanced toward the gate, but he wasn’t ready to look away. Not yet.

She smelled like sweat and jasmine, her fear wrapped in something warmer and undoubtably female. Her mouth was parted, lips soft and enticing.

Then—footsteps. Heavy. Closing in fast.

“How many?” he barked, snapping out of it, dragging his gaze from her lips to the alley.

“One. Right behind me.”

“Get back.”

He pushed her behind him and stepping behind the overgrown hedge. Her pursuer was already charging straight at them, eyes locked on her.

But he didn't see him.

Tom stepped into the opening and met him head-on, slamming into the man with full momentum. The impact knocked both of them sprawling across the pavement.

Tom recovered first, his training kicking in. He drove his fist straight into the man's face, crunching bone. Blood splattered across the concrete.

The guy didn't flinch. No cry, no hesitation.

She did, though. A gasp that he ignored.

The guy got to his feet.

What the hell?

He was trained, Special Forces, by the look of it. Tom grimaced determinedly. The stakes had just got a lot higher.

The man pulled a sidearm from his thigh holster. Tom recognized it as a compact

Makarov. He ducked a split-second before the shot cracked past his shoulder.

Fuck. That was too close.

Still crouched, he grabbed the man's wrist and twisted hard. The joint snapped with a clean pop. The attacker howled and dropped the pistol. Tom kicked it out of reach, skidding it across the road.

But it wasn't over. The guy reached into his pocket with his good hand and drew a blade. Short, curved, lethal. He lunged upward in an experienced move, aiming straight for his gut.

Fucking hell.

Tom shifted his weight, dodged left, and drew his marine-issued Ka-Bar combat knife from his thigh sheath in one clean motion. The 7-inch carbon steel blade sank deep into the man's chest.

The attacker made a guttural choking sound, his eyes locking with Tom's in something like disbelief, before fading to nothingness. His knees buckled, and he slumped to the pavement.

Blood spread fast, dark and slick under his body.

Tom straightened, his heart racing. It had been a while since he'd had to kill up close. Longer still since it had been this personal.

There had been no room for hesitation. The man he'd taken down was a professional—he'd recognized the type instantly. He'd moved with purpose, his reflexes sharp, his technique polished. Tom had been trained the same way, cut from the same cloth, and built for the same kind of work.

The only difference was who acted first. And thankfully, he'd gotten the drop.

"Is he dead?" the woman whispered, venturing forward.

Tom gave a stiff nod, then knelt to retrieve the man's knife and gun. He was waiting for the admonishment, the accusatory tone, but instead, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank God. I thought he was going to kill me."

His eyes were hard. "He was."

She gazed up at him, eyes shiny with gratitude. "Thank you."

"Just doing my job."

Protecting an American citizen from a credible threat to life.

He turned over the weapon in his hand, inspecting it. As he'd thought, a Russian-made Makarov. A solid, no-frills rifle. Common with former Soviet allies. He'd seen a ton of them during deployments in the Middle East.

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The knife was military issue. High-carbon steel, with a textured grip. Nothing ornamental. Straight off the belt of a Symanian Special Forces operator.

Tom looked back at the woman.

What the hell was she mixed up in?

Tom dragged the dead man into the embassy garden and shoved him beneath a thick flowering bush. "I'll deal with him later. Let's lock up before his buddies arrive." There was nothing he could do about the blood on the ground.

The heavy wrought iron gate clanged shut. Tom looped a steel chain around the bars and locked it with an industrial padlock.

The woman stood watching him, breathless and flushed. He tried not to notice how the robe clung to her slender curves or the glimpse of collarbone where the scarf had slipped, or how wispy strands of blond hair clung to her damp cheeks.

Instead, he retrieved his M4 rifle from where he'd stashed it beneath the shrubs. It was too loud to use out in the street and the last thing he needed was more attention. That single shot the guy had managed to squeeze off would be a damn dinner bell to the rest of his team.

Slinging the rifle over his shoulder, he motioned for her to follow. They cut across the empty embassy lawn, moving fast through pristine flowerbeds and sculpted walkways.

The U.S. Embassy was a perfect rectangle of whitewashed symmetry, the Stars and Stripes hanging limp above the roof. It was three stories tall, but stretched the length of a football field.

Upstairs was the administrative offices. Tom didn't often have reason to go there, but when he did, he found them quiet, orderly spaces where embassy staff handled daily operations and internal affairs.

Downstairs was the consular section, which served as a lifeline for American citizens in need, whether they were applying for passports, sorting out legal documents, or desperately seeking help when things went sideways overseas.

"What happened to your shoes?" He nodded to her bare feet beneath the robe.

"I couldn't run in them," she said simply.

He appreciated her practicality, but given the heat, sunbaked asphalt, and uneven stones, her soles had to be shredded.

"You can take care of them inside," he said, a flicker of admiration sparking. She must be in pain but hadn't mentioned it once.

They entered through the back. "This is the staff entrance," he told her. "Unfortunately, the front's sealed."

"No kidding."

He masked a grin.

Inside, the corridor was cool and abnormally quiet. Now that there were no people about, you really noticed the cream-colored walls and white marble tiles underfoot.

Every painting that had once hung here had been pulled down, crated up, and shipped to a vault in D.C. before the evac. All that remained now was silence.

She padded quietly behind him as they moved through the hall. When he reached the end, he opened a door and gestured for her to step inside.

“Come in here. You can sit down and rest.”

It was the staff lounge, dimly lit with the blinds drawn tight against the morning sun. Tables stood stacked against one side, chairs on top.

He’d cleaned up after everyone had left. The place had looked like a student digs after an all-night party. Coffee cups half-full and forgotten, lopsided watercoolers, tubs of stale cookies crumbling beside stacks of unused napkins. Proof of a sudden and frantic exit.

“Looks unused.”

He snorted. “Should’ve seen it two weeks ago.”

It had been chaos. Paper shredders had worked overtime, even as the low rumble of armored vehicles pulled into the service entrance. Then came the hurried, anxious movement of diplomats being ushered out like cattle, taking only what they could carry.

He lifted down one of the chairs and set it by the window. “Can I get you some water?”

A nod. “Please.”

She unwound the scarf and dragged her fingers through her hair. That hair—golden,

mussed, sticking to her damp cheeks—had no business being so sexy under the circumstances.

Her eyes met his and something flickered there.



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Embarrassment, maybe. Or awareness.

“I don’t usually look like this,” she said, a little defensively. “I ran here from the royal compound.”

He handed her the glass.

“The royal compound?” Had he heard her right? He arched a brow. “You work for Prince Hakeem?”

“I’m—or rather, I was—his personal assistant.” She drained the water in one go. “Hannah Evans.” She held out a hand.

He shook it. It felt warm and soft, and very small in his rough palm.

“Tom Wilde.”

A quick smile, as if it had slipped past her defenses before she could stop it. Dimples appeared, and those brown oval eyes seemed to soften to amber, framed by a striking copper ring that made them hard to look away from.

It caught him off guard.

“Good to meet you, Tom.”

There was a pause, as he frowned, and gathered his thoughts. “Is that why the military police were after you? You ran?”

“Escaped,” she corrected, steel in her tone now. “They would’ve killed me if you hadn’t stepped in.”

She had that right. That guy meant business.

He grabbed another wooden chair, spun it around, and straddled it backward. Her gaze moved to his thighs, before flicking back to his face.

He probably owed her an explanation. “Sorry I couldn’t let you in through the front gate. I’m under strict orders.”

“I understand,” she said. “Although I was pretty pissed at the time.”

He grunted. That was understandable.

“The State Security force will be looking for their operative and when they figure out what’s happened and where you’ve disappeared to, they’ll come here.”

This place was the only logical safe zone.

“How do you know they were palace police?” she asked, her delicate brows rising.

“I could tell that guy had superior training.”

It was the only thing that made sense. It explained the Makarov, the close-quarters technique, the way they moved. These weren’t beat cops patrolling a market. They were professionals—well-trained, ruthless, and loyal. He had seen their kind before. And he knew exactly what they were capable of.

She nodded, but her gaze flickered over him again, deeper this time. More quizzical. “If the embassy’s abandoned, what are you still doing here?”

“Someone had to stay behind.” He hated the bitterness that crept into his voice, but he couldn’t help it. “I was the lucky one.”

Now she was blatantly sizing him up. He could tell she was about to ask a question, and he wasn’t comfortable answering that one. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Before she could speak, he interjected, “Mind if I ask you something, Miss Evans?”

Distracted, she smiled. “Please, call me Hannah. And yeah, go ahead.”

“At the gate, you mentioned treason?”

“Ah, that.”

She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. Her cheeks were flushed, skin glistening. “Did I sound like a raving lunatic?”

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Now it was his turn to grin. “A little, yeah.”

“Sorry, I was panicking. You were my only hope, and you didn’t help me.”

Those words.

Fuck.

He flinched as the memory hit—sharp, sudden, and too painful to ignore. It was like shrapnel lodged beneath the surface, healed over but still capable of causing pain without warning.

Amrain.

Another country. Another woman. But the words were exactly the same.

My only hope.

You weren’t there.

She’d been searching for a way out too, desperate for someone to save her. And he’d let her down.

Worse.

She was dead because of him.

The weight nearly crushed him with its heavy familiarity. He took a shuddering breath and looked away.

This was who he was now. A broken soldier.

A walking fucking disaster.

Hannah was still talking, her voice drawing him back to the present. “So after all that, when I got to the gates, I was exhausted.”

He had to ask. “What’d you do to piss them off?”

She hesitated, twisting her fingers in her lap. “That’s what I was trying to tell you outside. I stole a top-secret document. It was a sensitive official memo, for the Prince’s eyes only. Obviously, they want it back.”

He was taken aback. She was a surprise a minute, and the questions kept piling up.

What was in it?

Why risk everything?

How had a civilian gotten this close to the prince?

There was one thing that explained all that... “Are you working for the U.S. Government?”

She recoiled, the question landing like a slap. “You mean like CIA? God, no. I’m not a spy.”

He studied her face, looking for cracks. “You sure? How did you get the job at the

palace?”

“I applied, like everyone else.”

At his disbelieving look, she leaned forward. “My grandfather’s from Syman, okay. He taught me the language when I was a kid and that gave me the edge over the other applicants.”

“But you’re still American,” he said, watching her closely.

“Exactly,” she replied, nodding. “That’s why the prince hired me. He’s been working on strengthening ties with the West. I was recruited through an international agency in D.C. It’s administrative work, nothing more.”

Tom wasn’t convinced. He let her talk, watching every shift in her posture. “Then how did you get your hands on a classified document?”

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She hesitated, and he caught the flicker of guilt in her eyes. “It was an accident.”

“Come on.” He smirked. “Really?”

“Yeah, I didn’t mean to. You see, normally I deliver all official documents straight to the prince. I mean they’re in a folder, so I can’t see them.”

“Then what happened?”

“I dropped it, and it slipped out of the folder. I noticed the headline when I bent to pick it up.” She bit her lip. The action drew his eye. It was a lovely, soft, luscious lip.

“So, I read it.”

Goddamn.

Not relevant, soldier!

“What was it about?”

“Evacuation measures,” she said, quietly.

Why’d he get the feeling she was holding back?

He frowned. “For whom? Hakeem?”

“Yes, and his family. And key personnel. It was written by Anwar Abdul, the Head of State Security.”

That made him sit up.

“Can I see it?”

Hannah hesitated, her fingers tightening around the fabric of her robe. “I don’t think I should show it to you. Not yet.”

“Why not? It might be above my paygrade, but I don’t know if you noticed...” He spread his arms and looked around. “There’s nobody else here.”

He was a goddamned U.S. Marine. He was allowed to view classified documents if they required passing on to the powersthat be, and he was the only one around to do it. Not that he said that. She didn’t need to know how far he’d fallen.

She sighed. “It’s not that.”

“What then?”

She sighed. “I was hoping to hand it to the U.S. Ambassador or someone senior here at the embassy. I figured they’d know how to get it to the State Department.”

Tom worked his jaw. “Like I said, nobody here.”

He raked a hand through his hair. “I’m just trying to help you, Hannah.”

“I know, problem is, I don’t think you can.”

He fixed his gaze on her. “Try me. I’ve pulled people and intel out of war zones worse than this one. You can trust me.”

Her brows rose. “I thought you were a security guard?”



That did make him chuckle, although it was humorless. “Sergeant Tom Wilde, U.S. Marine Corps, at your service.”

Her brows rose. “You’re a Marine?”

“That’s what I just said.”

“Then what are you doing here, guarding the embassy.”

He sighed. “It’s a long story, okay. About the document?—”

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“If you really are a Marine,” she said, lowering her voice, “then you can get me out of Syman.”

“My orders are to stay put,” he said firmly.

She held his gaze. “Well, I’ve got information the U.S. Government needs.”

She was incredible. He had to give her points for trying, even though she was wasting her time. “You bargaining with me?”

“What choice do I have?” she shot back. Her arms crossed over her chest, defensive but not afraid. Her voice was taut with urgency, but her posture was unflinching. She believed what she was saying—and that was what made him nervous.

“There are no more outbound flights,” he said. “I can’t get you out on a commercial airliner.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “So telling me to call D.C.—that was just bullshit?”

“No,” he said calmly. “They would’ve sent someone.”

Amber eyes locked with his. “Someone like you?”

He didn’t flinch. “Maybe.”

Yep, probably.

She leaned forward, her voice dropping to a whisper. “The military just rolled into Hamabad. People are dying. And it’s heading this way. I need to get out now, before it’s too late.”

He didn’t argue with that.

Student protests had erupted into violent clashes, and the military had responded with force—real force. The kind that left blood on the streets and buildings burned to the ground. Hamabad was only the beginning.

“If they find me—” Her voice cracked at the edges now. “They’ll kill me. I have information they can’t afford to let reach the U.S.”

Tom watched her for a moment longer. Okay, so she wasn’t bluffing. Her fear was real. So was her resolve.

“Let me see the document,” he said again—quieter now, but with just as much weight. That way he could ascertain how much trouble she was really in.

Her eyes met his. “First, you agree to help me.”

He paused.

Truth was, he could’ve wrestled it from her in under a minute. No fuss. A simple takedown, quick search, done. But something in her eyes stopped him—something sharp, proud, unafraid.

God help him, he liked it.

He let the idea of wrestling her flash through his brain. Heat coiled low in his gut.

Instead, he stayed where he was.

He could get her out. If they moved now, before the city went into lockdown. He was itching to do something. His current post was a glorified exile—a holding pattern since the fuck-up in Kabul. They'd benched him after the last op went south. Let him disappear.

But now...?

She looked at him, eyes burning.

"I'd have to get permission."

Her breath caught. "Then do it."

"They might still send someone else."

"I don't want someone else," she said. "I want you. I trust you."

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He stilled.

I trust you.

She shouldn't. He didn't have a very good track record of late.

"I'll do it. I'll make the call, if you tell me what's in the document."

A slow smile spread across her face.

"Deal."

## CHAPTER 5

"The document outlines military action that the regime plans to take against opposition forces if the country falls into full-blown civil war. It includes attack plans on rebel strongholds, troop deployment, weapons to be used?—"

He stared at her, the seriousness of what she was saying finally hitting home.

"It's their military strategy?"

She gave a quick nod. "It's everything their enemies, as well as our government, would want to know."

Holy shit. If what she was saying was true, this was big. That kind of intel would be gold to the western forces if they decided to intervene.

“Does it give specific dates or times for the attacks?” he asked.

“No, it’s more of a general directive than an actual schedule. It was written yesterday, by Abdul Anwar, in response to the uprising in Hamabad.”

“That bastard,” Tom muttered, jaw tight. The head of State Security was a ruthless piece of work. U.S. Embassy officials had had several run-ins with him over the last few months. If anyone had the resources to track Hannah across the island, it was him.

“Hamabad has been stirring for weeks,” he said. “This wasn’t a surprise. Several other rebel-held towns have already been hit by airstrikes—Jemah, Mandhab, a few others.”

She gasped. “I had no idea.”

“An anti-government protest turned violent. Security forces opened fire and killed several civilians. Things escalated fast—riots, roadblocks, then the army moved in. Hamabad was the first major city to ignite. The military rolled in this morning. There were heavy casualties.”

Her face went pale. “It’s worse than I thought. This really is a civil war.”

“Yeah. It’s part of the broader unrest sweeping the region. Our evacuation orders came in two weeks ago.”

“Two weeks?” she asked, her eyes wide. “Why didn’t I hear about it? No one said a word to me. If I’d known, I’d have made arrangements to leave.”

“Maybe that’s why they didn’t tell you,” he suggested.

“But I worked inside the palace. You’d think something would’ve filtered through, but Ahmed was just as shocked as I was when the news broke.”

“Ahmed?”

“A colleague. We saw footage on the news this morning.”

“I saw it too. It’s out there now, but they’ll cut the signal soon.” He’d seen it many times before—in countries on the brink.

She shivered. “I can’t believe Prince Hakeem would turn on his own people. He’s always treated me well. Respectfully. I never imagined he was capable of something like this.”

“War strips everything down,” Tom said flatly. “And he’s got a hell of a lot to lose.”

She nodded slowly. “True. But just so you know, I wouldn’t have taken the job if I’d known it would come to this. I don’t support violence. And I sure as hell don’t condone killing innocent civilians.”

Tom didn’t say anything. With his background, it wasn’t a conversation he wanted to get into.

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She slapped her palms onto her thighs. “Wait. There’s more. I forgot to mention the evacuation plan. That was part of the memo, too.”

“Out of the country?” he asked.

She nodded. “It included detailed instructions on when and how to leave the capital, even listing the various safe houses.”

“Safe houses?”

“Yes. You know? Locations where they’d hide until the chaos died down. It would let the regime operate from the shadows while pretending they still had control.”

Hell, that kind of intel was priceless. To think he could be the one to deliver it.

“Do you have the actual locations?” he asked, carefully, his heartbeat kicking up a notch.

“I do.” She nodded emphatically. “There are five total. Two inside Syman, three in neighboring countries.”

“We’ll know where he’s hiding,” he murmured. It was the kind of intelligence field embassy agents had been chasing for months. And now, it was sitting right across from him in one frazzled, desperate, beautiful package.

Hannah leaned toward him, and he caught a whiff of jasmine. Sweet, delicate, made more potent by her body heat. “Do you think that warrants a personal escort out of



the country?”

Fuck, yeah.

“I’d say so.” He kept his tone measured. “But I’ll have to clear it with my commanding officer.” And before that, he wanted to see the document with his own eyes.

She seemed satisfied. “Best you do that, then.”

Tom stood. He’d contact his CO. With any luck, he’d be granted new orders—orders to escort Hannah Evans and her high-value intel straight out of Syman.

“Right, then. I think it’s time you show?—”

A sharp crash cut him off. Glass shattered somewhere nearby, followed by the acrid sting of smoke filtering into the room.

He jumped to his feet and grabbed his rifle in one swift motion.

“Stay here,” he snapped, already heading for the door.

## CHAPTER 6

Fear clamped around her chest like a steel trap.

Not again.

She’d only just begun to feel safe. There was something grounding about Tom. It wasn’t just that he was tough, which he definitely was. She’d seen firsthand that he could fight. He’d killed that operative within five minutes, if that. And the brute had

been a soldier in the State Security force.

It was more than that. It was the way he carried himself, so calm and assured, the kind of confidence that came from years of elite training. He was a U.S. Marine, and when she was with him, she felt protected.

But now...

Shouting erupted from somewhere beyond the embassy walls, followed by another crash. She cringed.

Holy crap! Were they under attack? Was this the angry swell of a street mob?

Or was this them? Had they come for her?

Prince Hakeem wouldn't dare strike the U.S. Embassy. Would he? This was American soil. It would be seen as an act of war.

Her heart hammered in her chest while she waited, her eyes locked on the door.

Deep down, she knew.

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They'd figured it out. The blood on the road, the missing body, the gunshot. She and one of their own had vanished outside the backdoor to the U.S. Embassy. It wasn't exactly a mystery.

The door swung open and Tom strode in, face set like stone. "We have to leave. Now."

"It's them, isn't it?" She got to her feet.

When he didn't answer right away, she stepped closer. "They know I'm here. Don't they?"

"Looks like it," he said grimly. "Whoever took out that window had firepower. Now, there's a column of armored vehicles outside the gate and they're gearing up to breach."

"Oh, God." Her blood ran cold. "What are we going to do?"

He grabbed her hand. "Follow me."

Tom led her quickly down the corridor, his hand warm and firm. They moved quickly, urgently, passing framed photos and empty desks. Finally, they marched through a pair of double doors.

"This is the ambassador's suite," he said, nodding to the dark wood desk.

It looked exactly like how she'd imagined. Polished furniture, a heavy Persian rug

beneath their feet, subtle lighting overhead. The glass doors at the back opened onto a private patio with a clear view of the embassy grounds. The space reeked of power, precision, and old money.

Tom didn't slow. Releasing her hand, he went straight to a built-in cabinet, threw it open, and reached for a set of keys.

A shrill whistling tore through the air.

Hannah turned to him in alarm. "What's that?—?"

"Down!"

Before she knew what was happening, he yanked her to the floor. She barely had time to gasp before his body came down over hers, shielding her against the impact.

The explosion hit like a freight train.

The walls rocked, glass shattered, and something heavy crashed in the corner of the room. Splinters rained down like needles. She flinched, feeling glass slice across her forearms.

But Tom—He took the worst of it.

He shielded her completely, pressing her down, arms locked around her head, his body a wall of heat and steel over hers. She could feel every breath he took, every muscle tensing in defense.

Her scream ripped through the air.

Another blast cracked somewhere nearby. The room groaned under the pressure. The

plaster above them split with a sickening sound. For one terrifying second, she thought the whole building might come crashing down on top of them.

“Tom?” she whispered, her voice shaking.

He didn’t move right away. She could feel the heat of his breath brushing her cheek—steady and controlled, even after the blast.

Then slowly, he lifted his head. His voice was a low rumble in her ear. “Still with me?”

“Yes,” she whispered. She tried to move but found she couldn’t. Tom was still on top of her, his body glued to hers. Her heart thudded like it might punch through her ribs.

Tom shifted his weight and rolled off her. Slowly, carefully, she sat up. Her arms and legs responded, and she didn’t feel any sharp pain. No blood that she could see.

His eyes scanned her, quick and efficient, checking for signs of injury. They lingered on her bare feet, but then he blinked and glanced away again.

“Was that a bomb?” she asked, looking around them. “I thought the whole building was going to collapse on us.” The office reeked of smoke and the air was heavy with dust. She glanced up and exhaled in relief when she saw the ceiling hadn’t caved in.

“No. Just a grenade.” He stood and brushed the dust from his fatigues.

“Just a grenade?” she repeated, staring at him. “Seriously?”

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He gave a humorless grin. "Rocket-propelled. It hit the west wing. We got lucky. Structural damage will be contained to a few rooms." He extended a hand. "Come on. We don't have a lot of time."

She took it, letting him pull her to her feet. Part of her wanted to cling to him, to stay tethered to that strength for just a second longer, but she forced herself to let go. She couldn't fall apart now.

The entire situation felt surreal. This morning, she'd gone to work like any other day, completely unaware of the political storm brewing outside the palace gates. And now, just hours later, she'd committed treason, was on the run from State Security, and had freaking grenades lobbed at her.

Tom approached the shattered patio doors then kicked away what remained of the glass.

"Hakeem and Abdul Anwar must really want that document back," he said as he cleared the frame. "There'll be a massive fallout for this. You don't fire an RPG at an American Embassy and expect no consequences. It's a straight-up act of war."

"He knows I read it," she said quietly, her voice wavering. "But I never thought he'd go this far."

Tom turned and studied her. "Now I know what's at stake, I don't think there's any lengths to which they won't go in order to get it back."

She wrapped her arms around herself and gazed at him. "I'm dead, aren't I?"

She couldn't outrun the State Security force. They were insane to even think they stood a chance.

"They won't get to you," Tom said without hesitation. "Not on my watch." Then, without asking, he bent and scooped her up into his arms.

She gasped as her feet left the ground, arms instinctively looping around his shoulders.

"I've got you," he murmured, stepping over broken glass and twisted metal. He cradled her easily, like she weighed next to nothing. His grip was solid, confident, and the heat of his chest against hers made her breath catch.

If only she could stay like this, cradled in his arms. Protected.

But once they were clear of the debris, he set her down on a patch of grass. Her feet were already torn up from the gravel, so more cuts would've been unbearable.

"Thank you," she murmured, touched.

"Can't have you slowing us down."

So much for chivalry.

Tom scanned the garden. "We'll get somewhere safe, make some calls, and figure out our next steps."

"Sounds good." She raked a hand through her hair and dislodged a cloud of dust, along with a few stray shards of glass and other debris. Then she stilled.

"Crap. I left my headscarf behind. It's the only thing I have to cover my hair."

“Forget it. We’ll get you another one.” His tone was clipped but not unkind. “Time’s ticking.”

He led her quickly along the outer wall of the embassy compound. They passed manicured flowerbeds and a kidney-shaped koi pond, its orange-and-white fish gliding aimlessly beneath the surface without a care in the world.

She almost envied them.

Tom moved like a soldier on mission. Shoulders squared, eyes scanning, body braced for the next threat. He had his rifle back in his hands, barrel low but ready. The dead operative’s handgun was tucked into the back of his fatigues, and God only knew where he’d hidden the knife.

“Here.”

He stopped near a thick tangle of creeping plants along the back wall. Pushing the greenery aside, he revealed a narrow concrete stairwell.

She peered down to where the steps disappeared into darkness.

“What’s down there?”

Tom glanced back at her, jaw tight. “The way out.”

## CHAPTER 7



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 9:21 am*

Hannah descended the narrow staircase, the jagged stones pressing into her already bruised feet. The air grew cooler as they moved deeper, the dim light casting freaky shadows on the damp walls. It smelled damp, like earth and mildew.

Midway down, their path was obstructed by a formidable gate. Thick metal bars stretched from floor to ceiling, secured by a heavy-duty padlock and a chain wound tightly multiple times.

“This gate hasn't been used in years,” he noted, giving the chain a firm tug.

“It doesn't look like it's going to open now, either.” She eyed the lock skeptically. “Do you have a key?”

A hint of a smile played on his lips. “Sort of,” he replied, unslinging the semi-automatic rifle from his shoulder. “Stand back.”

Oh, shit.

Was he about to?—?

Tom aimed at the padlock, and Hannah flew backwards, pressing herself against the wall. The deafening crack of gunfire echoed through the enclosed tunnel, and the lock shattered, the chain clattering to the ground in a cascade of metallic links.

“That should do it.” One strong push and he shoved the gate open.

They stepped through into a narrow alleyway. Hannah looked up at the high walls on

either side. Arabic graffiti adorned the concrete, and discarded cigarette butts littered the ground.

“Where are we?”

“A back alley behind the embassy.” He gestured for her to walk in front of him. “We need to keep moving. This is a perfect spot for an ambush.”

A distant explosion shook the ground beneath them. They both instinctively ducked. The reverberations sent a chill down Hannah's spine.

“The embassy will be breached soon,” Tom said grimly, pushing her forward. “They'll realize you're not there and start searching the surrounding area. They'll know you had help.”

Her heart sank, but she kept walking. “They won't stop until they find me.”

“I told you, they aren't going to find you.”

She glanced over at him, fighting the rising panic. “How do you know? Where are we going to go, Tom?”

Tears welled in her eyes, but she swiped angrily at them. She didn't want to cry in front of him, but she was so damn scared.

He stared fixedly ahead. “I know a place where we can rest up. Keep moving.”

They continued through the alley, emerging into the sunlight on the other side. The street was quiet with hardly anyone around.

Tom led her along the sidewalk, keeping to the shade. “We're making good time.”

Hannah nodded, grimacing as she trod on a pebble. Her feet were so ruined. She didn't even want to look at them. Once they got somewhere safe, she'd treat and bandage them. Until then, she'd just pretend like nothing was wrong.

Tom strode along next to her, hardly breaking a sweat. "Do you do this sort of thing often? You know? Rescue hostages, get people out of hostile territories, that kind of thing?"

He hesitated for a beat. "I used to, when I was active."

"But not anymore?"

He shook his head. "Not these days."

She caught the flicker of pain in his expression and wondered what had caused it. The long story he wouldn't talk about. The scar that hadn't healed.

None of her business, she decided. Although she was curious.

They kept going. At the end of the street, he pulled her behind a palm tree.

"Wait here."

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Before she could object, he disappeared into a nearby store, only to return moments later with a pair of sneakers, a scarf, and a plastic bag containing traditional clothing.

“Put these on,” he instructed, handing her the items. “We have a long way to go and we can’t do it with you looking like that.”

She slipped on the sneakers, grateful for the protection. Next, she pulled out the scarf, but it slipped through her fingers. He picked it up, shook it out, then gently draped it over her head, brushing a strand off her cheek.

She stared at him, speechless. Of all the things she’d expected him to do, that hadn’t been one of them.

“Best keep it covered,” he said, gruffly, turning away.

She nodded. “What else is in the bag?”

“A shalwar kameez,” he replied. “It’s a?—”

“I know what it is.”

He nodded. “It’ll be more comfortable than your current outfit.”

She pulled it on, then stripped off her dirty work skirt and blouse underneath. The loose-fitting fabric was a welcome relief.

Tossing the ruined clothes in a nearby trashcan, they continued their journey,

weaving through the western suburbs. The sun beat down, causing sweat to trickle between her breasts. Hannah was sure her face was as red as a beetroot, yet Tom didn't seem to be bothered.

Just when she was about to drop from sheer exhaustion, they arrived at a run-down apartment building.

“Where are we?” she asked, staring at the worn, weathered façade.

“My place.”

Her eyes widened. “You live here?”

He tensed. “Yeah. Do you have a problem with that?”

Hannah gazed up at the building, relieved. “No, it's perfect. No one would think to look for me here.”

He gave her a funny look. “That's what I thought.”

They climbed the stairs to the third floor, the coolness of the stairwell a welcome respite. She could tell by Tom's rigid stance that he was keeping a vigilant eye out as they approached his door.

Unlocking the door, he held up a hand and she waited while he took a quick look inside. “It's clear. Come on in.”

She stepped into his apartment and looked around. She stood in a living room, modest, but clean. A comfy, worn couch stood on one side. She walked over to it and dropped down.

“Oh, my God. It feels good to sit down.”

He smirked. “You did well. I usually catch the bus, but I didn’t think that was wise under the circumstances.”

Hannah tended to agree.

Tom disappeared, then returned with two glasses of water.

“Here,” he offered, handing one to her.

“Thanks.” She was so thirsty, she could drink the entire Persian Gulf. As she took the glass, their fingers brushed, and she swore she could feel a spark pass between them.

There was silence as they drank. Hannah suspected she was probably slurping and gulping her way through, but she didn’t care. It felt that good to rehydrate again.

Once they’d had their full, Tom set his glass down and looked at her. “We can rest here overnight. You’re safe now.”

The words were like music to her ears.

### CHAPTER 8

The first thing Tom did was close the curtains and lock the front door, just in case. He meant it when he said she'd be safe here. Nobody knew who he was, or where he lived. There were no records left at the embassy, and the State Security had no way of finding out who'd been posted there.

"How long have you lived here?" Hanna glanced around his small apartment. It was sparse, he knew that. But he had everything he needed. This worn old sofa, a mismatched armchair, and a wooden table that he ate off.

Functional, nothing more, but it was home. For now.

"Three months," he replied. "Since I arrived in Syman."

She studied him, curious. "Where were you stationed before this?"

He hesitated, the memories surfacing unbidden. Quashing them, he scowled, but he may as well get this out the way, so she'd stop asking questions.

"A military hospital in Virginia," he said. "Before that, Afghanistan."

A look of concern flashed across her face. "Hospital? Were you injured?"

It had been a long time since anyone gave a shit.

"Took a bullet during my last mission." Actually, it was two bullets, and one had

punctured his lung. He'd been pretty banged up for a while. The doctors had done a fantastic job, but he was lucky to be alive. Unlike the others.

"Is that why they posted you here?" she asked, tilting her head. "Because you were injured."

"They assigned me here to recover." Not strictly true. He'd been cleared for active duty. Syman was a punishment, a reprimand. The embassy posting was a reminder of what he'd done, that they didn't want him around.

She nodded, believing him.

"It's not exactly front-line action, but it's something," he muttered.

When she didn't respond, he cleared his throat. "You have that document?"

He'd felt the bag under her robe when he'd carried her over the glass at the embassy.

She shifted uncomfortably. "About that..."

His eyes narrowed as a bad feeling crept over him. "Tell me you have the letter."

Her words spilled in a rush. "Oh, Tom. I'm so sorry. I lost it in the souk. I was trying to escape the security forces, so I bought an abaya to disguise myself, and must have left the document on the stall counter."

He stared at her. "You lost it?"

Was she fucking kidding, right now?

She bit her lip. This time he didn't look down at her mouth, he was too goddamn



angry.

She shifted in her seat. "I was worried that if you knew the truth, you wouldn't save me."

It wasn't up to him. He threw his hands in the air. "Now we have no leverage. They won't authorize me to assist you without that letter."

He paced up and down the room. With that letter went his one chance of getting out of here.

"You should have told me the truth."

A whisper. "I couldn't."

He tightened his jaw. Now what?

"You could just say I've got it."

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He stared at her. “You mean lie to my Commanding Officer? What happens when we get you out of here? When it’s time to deliver?” She stayed silent, so he shook his head. “What were you going to do then?”

“I don’t know. I was just trying to stay alive.”

He hissed out a long breath.

Another time, another place.

Same fucking thing.

Amrain had lied—and he’d fallen for it. Fooled to the point that he’d led his entire team into an ambush.

It was beginning to feel like he had “sucker” tattooed across his forehead.

He swung around. “Does the document even exist? Or did you make that up too?”

To his surprise she jumped to her feet, eyes flashing. “Obviously, it exists. Why do you think the State Security forces are after me? It’s not because I quit, you know. I’m not that indispensable to His Royal Heighness.”

Of course, he was being a dick. They’d bombed the shit out of the U.S. Embassy trying to get to her.

He was about to apologize, when she took a step closer to him. “For your

information, I didn't plan on losing it. That letter was my ticket out of here. I panicked, okay? I'm not used to being a fugitive. You may be able to think clearly under pressure, but I can't. Especially not with State Security breathing down my neck."

He paused, considering her words. At least that cleared one thing up. She wasn't a spy. No operative would lose such vital intel in a souk.

He raised his hands in a consolatory gesture and tried his best to calm down. "Okay, let's call a truce. You were desperate, I get that. But we're in a tough spot, now. Without that document, getting you out won't be easy."

"You could call your commanding officer and explain the situation," she suggested.

"And say what? That you tricked me into believing you had this top-secret intel?"

She gulped. "Tell him the truth—that I lost the document. What other option do we have?"

He sighed. "I need to call them about the embassy, anyway. They might not know what happened yet." His shoulders slumped. "I'll probably be sent back to assess the damage."

She swayed, her face pale, and clutched his arm.

"Hey, you okay? You don't look so?—"

Her eyelashes fluttered closed, and she crumbled in front of him. He just managed to catch her before she hit the floor.

"It's okay, I've got you." Gently, he carried her to the couch and set her down. "Rest

up. I'll make us something to eat, then you should get some sleep."

He turned to leave, but she reached for him. "Please don't leave me. They'll kill me."

She wasn't wrong there.

A tremor coursed through her body.

"I won't," he said with a sigh. He couldn't abandon her. Not now. Not after everything.

The bad feeling settled into a deep melancholy.

This had been it. His one shot to climb out of the hole Afghanistan had left him in. A mission that mattered. High-value intel. A civilian to protect. It should've been textbook—get her out, hand over the evidence, win back the trust that he'd lost in Kabul.

Instead, it had just been flushed down the toilet.

He stared at her as she lay on the couch, eyes closed, pale and exhausted. She was completely spent. No matter what the truth was, this woman was wanted, and she wouldn't survive without him.

He straightened up, clenching his fists. Delivering Hannah and the intel would've put him back in the game. Back where he belonged. Not babysitting an empty embassy in a country on the brink.

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Maybe, just maybe, it would've proven that he was still sharp. Still useful. That he hadn't gone soft. That the ghosts from the sandbox hadn't broken him completely.

Instead, she'd lied.

Looked him dead in the eye and fed him a story. Played him.

"I didn't trick you."

The words came so quietly, he almost missed them.

He turned his head slowly, narrowing his eyes. "What did you just say?"

"I said I didn't trick you. We can still use the information."

He hesitated. "What the hell are you talking about? You left the letter back at the market. You told me that yourself. Without it, we've got nothing."

She tapped the side of her head, forcing her eyes open. "I didn't lose anything. It's still in here."

He crossed his arms and stared at her. "You're saying you remember what it said?"

A nod.

Bullshit.

“You’re telling me you memorized a classified, four-page strategic defense memo in the middle of a panicked escape from the palace? Come on, nobody is that good.”

“Not exactly memorized,” she said, her voice unsteady. “It’s more like my brain took a picture.”

He studied her, wondering if she was full of shit. Sitting upright, her chin was raised in defiance, but there was a flicker of nervousness in her throat as she swallowed.

A long beat passed.

“I don’t follow,” he said, eventually.

“I have a gift. Or at least, that’s what my grandfather called it. I’ve always had it, since I was a kid. If I see something once, I can recall it exactly. Word for word. Picture-perfect. It’s how I learned Arabic so quickly, why I never had to study for exams. It’s just... there.”

He’d heard of people like that, but it was rare.

“You expect me to believe that?”

She flinched. “I know I’ve given you reasons not to trust me, but I’m not lying.” Her fingers twisted in her lap. Her bare feet shifted slightly beneath the robe. She was anxious, but not evasive.

Still, he couldn’t afford to go soft. Not again.

“You said you could recite the document,” he said slowly. “But it’s all in Arabic. That’s convenient. I’ve got no way of proving it.”

Her lips twitched. “Then give me something else to read. Something in English. I’ll prove it to you.”

He hesitated. She’d called his bluff, and now his curiosity had gotten the better of him. Wordlessly, he strode down the short hallway and into the bedroom. When he returned, he held a beat-up military thriller in one hand, the kind with a cover that screamed testosterone and covert ops.

He handed it to her. “Read something.”

She flipped the book open to a page in the middle. He watched as she scanned the page with laser focus, her eyes flicking line by line without pausing. She didn’t skim—she absorbed. Her lips didn’t move, but her chest rose and fell steadily as she processed the words.

A moment later, she closed the book and handed it back.

Tom took it, eyeing her the way he’d study an IED that hadn’t exploded. Dangerous. Possibly a trap. But he couldn’t ignore it.

She leaned back in the chair, stared past him at a spot on the wall, and began to recite.

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Her voice was smooth, mechanical. No hesitation, no filler. Just raw data, straight from the page—names, places, action sequences, dialogue. Everything.

He didn't interrupt, he was too busy following along. Didn't say a word until she finished the final sentence and looked up, her eyes meeting his.

“Well?”

He blinked once. “You’ve got a photographic memory.”

She broke into a smile. “Told you so.”

Tom scrubbed a hand over his jaw. “Shit. This changes everything.”

### CHAPTER 9

Tom punched in a number he knew by heart, tapping the digits into his mobile phone. Thank God the cell towers were still operational. Wouldn't be for long, though. It rang twice before a voice snapped through the line.

“Staff duty.”

“Sergeant Tom Wilde, United States Marine Corps. ID number 7129-Bravo-Charlie. I need to speak with Commander Larson. Priority One.”

There was a beat of silence. Then the voice said, “Copy that. Stand by.”



He exhaled through his nose, eyes fixed on the battered wall opposite him. Hannah lay on the couch, but her eyes were fixed on him. Hopeful, eager, tinged with desperation. She was waiting for the verdict. So was he.

The line clicked.

“Wilde,” barked the familiar gravel of Commander Larson. “What’s news?”

Instinctively, Tom stood at attention. Realizing he’d done it, he forced himself to relax.

“Sir, the U.S. Embassy in Syman has been compromised. RPG strike. Structural damage is severe. Security breach confirmed. I have evac’d from the premises with a high-value American civilian asset. Name: Hannah Evans.”

“Talk to me,” Larson said, after a brief pause. “What makes her high-value?”

Tom laid it out clean. He told his CO about her employment with Prince Hakeem, the classified intelligence she’d accessed, the contents of the document—military strike plans, internal security operations, and escape routes for Syman’s royal elite.

Larson didn’t interrupt, but Tom heard the rapid intake of breath at the mention of military strike plans. This wasn’t something he could ignore.

“Where are these documents now?” Larson asked.

Tom cleared his throat, while Hannah glanced down at her hands. Embarrassed.

“She had the file in hand, sir, but lost it during exfil.”

Larson gave a frustrated growl. Tom pushed through. “But here’s the kicker, sir.

She's got a photographic memory. Full recall. She can recite the entire four-page memo, word for word, including Arabic technical terms. I verified her ability firsthand."

There was silence on the line.

"Sir?"

Larson spoke, his voice lower now. "You may not be aware, Sergeant, but as of 0600 Zulu, the Symanian regime launched chemical ordnance on Hamabad. VX-grade neurotoxin, airborne delivery."

The words hit like a sledgehammer. "Jesus."

"Dozens are already dead with casualties rising by the hour. This is Syria all over again, except dirtier. We've got civilians dropping in the streets. Hospital footage just hit the wire. It's total chaos. The UN is convening, but it's already too late for diplomacy."

Tom's jaw locked tight. He knew what was coming. Boots on the ground. Airstrikes. Fire and fury.

"The President's being briefed. Western media's already condemning the offensive. Human rights watchdogs are screaming war crimes. The entire Red Sea theater is heating up."

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Tom's gut clenched. "Understood, sir."

"I want that intel in my hands within seventy-two hours. You've got that long before this turns into a goddamn international firestorm. Air Force assets are mobilizing out of Cyprus. We've got F-35 squadrons already spinning up. RAF and the French Navy just deployed a carrier group. Subs are moving into position."

Tom's fingers curled tighter around the phone. The shit was hitting the fan in a big way. "Copy that."

"This intel could change everything, Wilde. You get it here, and you give our side the advantage." A pause. "Do not screw this up."

His pulse kicked higher, adrenaline punching through his veins. "I won't, sir."

Across the room, Hannah was watching him, her wide eyes filled with equal parts fear and hope. He gave her a subtle thumbs up. Relief swept across her features. She closed her eyes for a second, just breathing.

Larson continued. "If we can neutralize Hakeem's next move before it happens, maybe—maybe—we avoid a full NATO engagement. But listen carefully, Wilde. There's something else."

"Yes, sir."

"We believe Hakeem has already fled the capital. If the locations of those safe houses she mentioned get compromised, and they fall into rebel hands... it's going to be a

bloodbath.”

Tom’s stomach turned cold.

“I’m authorizing you to use any means necessary to protect that intel. You hear me? Any means. If we can’t have it... I don’t want anyone else having it either. If anything happens to that woman, you have authority to eliminate the threat.”

A silence settled between them.

Tom felt his throat tighten. “Understood, sir.”

“Seventy-two hours, Sergeant. Make it count.”

The line went dead.

Hannah pushed herself into a sitting position. Her eyes were huge in the dim light of the apartment. “He’s okay with it?”

Tom slipped the phone back into his pocket. He tried for calm, but the adrenaline was still pulsing through his system. “Yeah. We’ve got seventy-two hours to get the hell out of Syman.”

“Oh, thank God.” She launched forward and threw her arms around his neck.

The move caught him off guard. Her body pressed tight against his, warm and alive and soft in all the ways he hadn’t let himself feel in years. Her scent—vanilla, maybe jasmine—wrapped around him, and something primal stirred low in his gut.

He went very still.

It had been a long time since anyone had touched him like that. Since someone had reached for him not out of obligation or fear, but out of raw, human gratitude.

She must've sensed the shift in his body because she pulled back abruptly, cheeks flushed. "I'm sorry. I didn't think."

"It's not a problem." His voice was low, too low, and he didn't meet her eyes.

But it was a problem.

His body was reacting like it hadn't since Afghanistan. Since Amrain. And that was dangerous. That was how mistakes got made. Emotions, feelings—those were luxuries he couldn't afford. Not with this op. Not with her life in his hands.

He turned away to collect himself, running a hand through his hair as if that could clear the tension coiling in his chest.

Hannah dropped back into the armchair, the relief on her face unmistakable. "I can't believe it. I thought we'd be stuck here for weeks."

Tom didn't answer. His mind was already running through contingencies. Routes. Checkpoints. Weak spots in the rebel lines.

Seventy-two hours wasn't a lot of time—not in a collapsing nation with rising hostilities and a target on your back.

He had to protect her. Not just because it was the mission. But because he couldn't let another innocent pay the price for war.

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She looked over at him, brows knit. “What’s wrong?”

“Just thinking,” he said, not meeting her eyes.

“About what?”

He hesitated.

She wasn’t going to let it go. Her gaze pinned him like a spotlight. “Tom. What aren’t you telling me?”

She had a sharp mind, he’d give her that. And a sharper instinct.

He exhaled. “Look. The intel’s in your head now, yeah? That makes you the mission. And if the rebels catch wind of who you are and what you know...” He trailed off.

Her eyes went wide, face draining of color. “You mean... they’d torture me?”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t have to. His silence said enough.

“Oh my God,” she whispered, folding into herself.

“I won’t let that happen,” he said quickly, stepping closer. “It won’t get that far.”

But she caught something in his tone—something grim, something final.

Her frown deepened. “What do you mean by that?”

He closed his eyes briefly. This wasn't the time. Not now. But the truth was already bleeding through, and there was no putting it back.

"I mean I've got orders," he said, voice flat. "Classified intel must not fall into enemy hands. At any cost."

She stared at him. "You mean... if we get caught, if there's no way out... you're supposed to...?"

He couldn't say it. So he didn't.

"Oh, God," she whispered, shaking her head. "Oh, my God."

Tom stepped forward again, crouched so they were eye level. "It's not going to come to that. I'll keep you out of sight, off the grid. No checkpoints. No scans. We won't touch a single road if we don't have to. But you need to trust me. Can you do that?"

"I want to," she said quietly. "But... it's a lot."

"I know." He stood again, jaw tight. "I didn't want to tell you, but you deserve to know what's at stake."

She took a slow, shaky breath, her fingers curling into the armrest like anchors. "Thank you."

He nodded. "We've got to prep. Every second counts. The smoother we plan this, the fewer risks we take."

"Okay." But she still looked shaken. He couldn't blame her. It was a lot to take in. "Tom?"

“Yeah?”

She pushed herself up and stood in front of him. “I am trusting you to get me out of here. You’d better not let those rebels anywhere near me. I don’t plan on dying out here in the desert, especially not by your hand.” She prodded him in the chest. “You got that, Marine?”

Something cracked in his chest. The way she stood there, fire in her eyes, shaking but unflinching. She was so damn brave.

Suddenly, her face morphed into Amrain’s and instead of standing in his living room, she was lying on a concrete floor, a pool of blood oozing out from beneath her.

He blinked, and the vision disappeared. “Understood.”

This mission was different. Hannah wasn’t Amrain. She wasn’t a traitor.



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She was an American civilian who'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time—and now carried the kind of intel that could change the course of a war.

And he'd be damned before he let history repeat itself.

He would get her out—no matter what it took. Failure, this time, was not an option.

### CHAPTER 10

Hannah bent over the basin, her breath shallow as Tom's fingers threaded through her hair. The dye was cool against her scalp, but his touch burned. He worked with a quiet intensity, careful, deliberate. Surprisingly gentle for someone trained to break things.

His presence filled the small room. She couldn't help but notice how his combat pants hung low on his hips, or how the gray tank clung to the cut of his shoulders.

Above her, his arms flexed with each motion, the play of muscle distracting as hell in her peripheral vision. The space was too small for both of them, too intimate. Every time he moved, she felt the warmth radiating from his chest, his breath stirring the fine hairs along her neck.

She tried not to look. Tried not to think about how those hands had snapped a man's arm not twenty-four hours ago. Yet now they were massaging dye into her roots like she was made of glass.

"You're good at this," she said, trying to sound normal.

“Three sisters,” he muttered. “Learned a thing or two.”

The corner of her mouth twitched. She wasn’t used to this version of him—quiet, focused, almost tender. Not the lethal Marine who’d dropped a man with a single move. This was different. Softer. Dangerous in a whole other way.

He shifted closer to reach the front of her head, and she inhaled sharply as his hips brushed her butt. For a split second, her knees threatened to give out.

Her heart pounded, blood warming. Had he felt the jolt too?

If he had, he didn’t react.

“I think I can finish up now,” she whispered hoarsely, needing space before she did something stupid. Like lean back into him.

He hesitated, his hands still cradling her scalp.

Then he stepped back, breaking contact.

He held up his hands and she moved aside so he could rinse them, her arm brushing his. Every bristled hair felt like a static shock.

Neither of them said anything as he turned on the faucet.

The air between them tightened.

She focused on the mirror, not daring to look up. He was too close. She could feel the heat coming off his body, smell the faint mix of soap and sweat that clung to his skin. He finished washing his hands, water splashing quietly, but made no move to leave.

She felt him looking at her.

The silence stretched.

Her skin prickled.

He straightened, drying his hands with a slow, deliberate motion, like he was buying time.

“I’ll let you finish,” he said finally, his voice low—rougher than before. Thicker.

She nodded without meeting his eyes.

He lingered a beat longer. Like he might say something else. Like maybe he didn’t want to go. But then he turned and stepped out, his broad frame brushing hers once more as he edged around her and disappeared into the hallway.

The door clicked shut behind him.

Hannah stood there, heart thudding, hair dye forgotten. Her scalp tingled, but it wasn’t the chemicals—it was him.

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And she knew, with a certainty that made her breath catch, that something was building between them.

Hannah stepped out of the bathroom, a towel draped around her shoulders. Her freshly dyed hair was darker, almost black, and curled around her face. It was startlingly different, and would take some getting used to, but she liked it.

Tom sat at the table, elbows braced wide, eyes locked on his phone. He wore the same desert camouflage pants from earlier, and the tight olive-green tank did nothing to hide the defined tension in his ripped shoulders. A map was spread across the table in front of him, its creases worn and corners soft.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

He didn’t look up right away. “Cell service is down.”

She stepped closer. “The whole network?”

“Yeah. Either the regime shut it down on purpose to control comms, or the rebels blew the towers. Either way, we’re dark.”

“Is that going to be a problem for us?”

Tom let out a slow breath, jaw tightening. “It could be. No backup. No way to reach out if things go sideways.”

“I thought we were on our own anyway.”

“Not entirely,” he said, looking up. “If the shit hits the fan, I know some people I can call.”

His eyes caught on her hair—and stayed. His gaze flicked over her, and she felt the warmth rise beneath her skin.

“Damn. That worked,” he murmured. “You look... different.”

She gave him a half-smile. “That was the idea.”

“No, I mean it. You could pass for a local.” His voice had gone lower, rougher.

Her hand drifted up to toy with a dark tendril near her cheek. She wasn’t used to being looked at that way—like she was something rare, something worth staring at. It caught her off guard.

Tom glanced away first, but not before she saw the flicker in his eyes. He busied himself with the map again, fingers tracing lines and routes across the country.

But something had changed.

It had started hours ago, back at the embassy, when he’d pulled her against him like she was the most important thing he’d ever protected. She hadn’t wanted to admit it, hadn’t dared give the feeling a name—but it had been growing ever since.

Her gaze dropped to his hands, so strong and capable. She could still feel them in her hair.

She shook it off. Time to focus. Her eyes dropped to the map. Syman City sat in the north, with Hamabad far to the south. Towns dotted the interior—some sizable, others no more than specks. All of it surrounded by the deep blue sweep of ocean.

“How bad is it?” she asked, meaning the situation out there.

He leaned over the map, one arm bracing the edge. “There’s a UN Air Force base five clicks west of the city. If we can make it there, they might have a flight heading out, maybe moving troops, diplomats, or whoever else they can evacuate before the border shuts down. If we’re lucky, we can hitch a ride.”

Her pulse leaped. “That’s our best shot?”

“It’s our only shot.” His eyes met hers. “But we can’t move tonight.”

“Why not?”

“There’s probably a dusk-to-dawn curfew. The whole city will go into a military lockdown. They’ll be sweeping the streets, arresting anyone who doesn’t belong.”

She looked out of the window. The sky outside had deepened to navy, stars beginning to scatter above the dusty skyline. Somewhere, far off, a pop echoed—distant but ominous.

“What if we wait too long? Won’t it be harder to leave?”

“It will. That’s why we’ll go at first light, when people are on the move. Factory workers, commuters, delivery trucks... we can blend into the noise and chaos.”

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Her chest tightened. “So, we just have to wait until then?”

“We can eat something, then rest up. We move at dawn.”

His eyes were back on the map, but he wasn’t focused. His hand had stilled.

“I appreciate everything you’re doing for me,” she said quietly.

He looked up, slow and deliberate. “You don’t have to thank me.”

“I do. I don’t know what I would have done if it wasn’t for you.”

He didn’t reply.

She moved closer to the table, close enough to see the flecks of green in his otherwise dark eyes.

He stood abruptly, scraping the chair on the floor. “We should get some food in you. You’ll need your strength tomorrow.”

They talked over dinner, finalizing the plan for the morning.

“We’ll need to move at first light,” Tom said, biting into a piece of flatbread stuffed with seasoned lamb, roasted vegetables, and a swipe of tahini. It wasn’t much, but it was warm, fragrant, and exactly what she needed. After the day they’d had, it might as well have been a feast.

“Prince Hakeem’s men will have eyes everywhere. So we keep our heads down, stay alert, and move fast,” he added, tracing a route across the map with one blunt fingertip. “If we head southwest, we can intercept this arterial road out of town. From there, we follow it until we’re within a few miles of the U.N. airbase.”

She frowned, chewing slowly. “Won’t they be watching the roads?”

“Yeah, but they’ll be looking for a blonde American moving solo. Not a local couple.” He paused and gave her a look that warmed her cheeks. “You can wear your souk outfit and scarf, plus you speak the lingo. It is still risky, but there isn’t time to go cross country.”

Her appetite dulled as the weight of the plan pressed in. “How long did your CO give us?”

“Three days. Tops.”

Her heart stuttered. “That’s... not a lot of time.”

“No, it’s not.”

He looked at her again, his expression thoughtful. The soldier in him wanted the intel now. She could tell by his calculated gaze.

Part of her wanted to hand it over.

“You know, you could give me the safe house locations now. That way we could send in a strike force to capture Hakeem. We’d cut off the head of the snake. We could end this now.”

She wanted to, she really did, but once she told him what she knew, she was



expendable. The rebels were a real threat. If they took her, he wouldn't hesitate to terminate her. He'd be duty-bound, and duty came first. It always did with men like him.

If she still held the information, he might try to rescue her instead.

Might.

"What are you going to wear tomorrow?" she asked instead, pushing the conversation in another direction.

Tom didn't fight it. He let the subject drop, for now. "Not this." He glanced down at his fatigues. "I'll pass for a rebel sympathizer headed to Al Teham. It's crawling with freedom fighters. They're all toting guns and rifles, so I won't stand out."

"Al Teham?"

"It's a village outside of Syman City. That's where the rebels are regrouping under their leader, Abu-al-Rashid. From there, they'll attack the head of Hakeem's organization."

"The Royal Compound?" she whispered.

"Yeah. The seat of power."

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“I know people there. Cooks, admin staff, security personnel. They’re civilians. They don’t deserve to be caught in the crossfire.”

His jaw clenched. “It’s war, Hannah. No part of it is fair.”

“But there has to be something we can do. Warn them somehow?—”

He cut her off gently. “There’s not. Best thing we can do is stop this before it escalates. And for that, we need you.”

There was a beat of silence. She watched the muscles in his forearm tighten as he rolled the map back up. To think she could save all those people, if she handed over the intel now.

A lump formed in her throat. Soon, she’d give it to him soon, once she was safely on a plane out of here.

“Why did you take the job with Prince Hakeem?” he asked, when the silence stretched on.

“It seemed exciting at the time.” If only she’d known. . . “I want to go into public relations, and this seemed like a great opportunity. It would look good on my resume. Plus, the salary package was excellent.”

“How long were you there?”

“Six months.” She laughed without humor. “Doubt I’ll ever see that last paycheck.”

He gave her a small smile. “You’re alive. That’s more than a lot of people will be able to say when this ends.”

That sobered her. He had to go there. Didn’t he know this was destroying her?

“And the language?”

“My grandmother. I was very close to her and my grandfather. Spent a lot of time with them growing up.”

“What about your folks? Were they around?”

“My mother died when I was in high school and I don’t get on with my father.” They hadn’t spoken in almost a year, ever since she’d told him she was taking this job.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

She shook her head. Frustration, guilty, exhaustion, they were all making her snappy. “I think I should turn in.”

“Yeah, we both should. You can take my bed, I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“You sure? I don’t mind the?—”

He got to his feet. “I’m sure.”

Hannah followed him down the short corridor to the bedroom. He opened the door and switched on the light. “It’s not much, but it’ll do.”

She walked inside and immediately felt a weird sense of intimacy. The bed was a single, unmade, the covers thrown hastily over the mattress. The stand beside it

contained a lamp, a half-drunk glass of water, and a pencil. Beneath the bed, she could see a set of free weights.

“I’ll get you some clean bedding.”

“Please, don’t worry on my account. I’m so tired I’ll be out like a light, and it’s too warm to get under the covers anyway.”

He hesitated. “Are you sure?”

“Of course. We’re leaving tomorrow and not coming back. Changing the sheets is pointless. I’ll sleep on top.”

Giving her an awkward nod, he went to the closet and took out a couple of items of clothing. “So I don’t wake you rummaging around.”

She watched him, suddenly struck by the intimacy of the moment. His things. His space. Her heart tugged in her chest.

“Thanks, Tom. For everything.”

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He paused in the doorway. “It’s not your fault, Hannah. Don’t blame yourself.”

He was wrong there.

She looked down. “If I hadn’t gone to the embassy... maybe none of this would’ve happened. We wouldn’t be in danger, and you wouldn’t be stuck babysitting me.”

He didn’t answer at first. Then, surprising her, he said, “If you hadn’t shown up, I’d still be rotting in a guard hut wondering if I’d ever do something that mattered again. This? You? It matters.”

Her breath caught. “It does?”

“If it means stopping this war, then yeah. Definitely.”

She swallowed hard, her gaze locking with his. For a moment, the air between them thickened, charged with everything they hadn’t said.

Then he stepped back. “Good night, Hannah.”

“Good night, Tom.”

## CHAPTER 11

They set off at first light.

Hannah felt a jolt of anticipation as she stepped outside into the cool morning air.

This was it—the point of no return. From here on out, they were exposed. Out in the open, hunted.

She wore her disguise, a flowing robe layered over the shalwar kameez Tom had picked up for her and the gray headscarf wrapped tightly over her freshly dyed dark hair.

Her reflection in the bathroom mirror that morning had startled even her. She was no longer the American personal assistant, but someone who belonged here. And for now, that was the goal.

She felt much better after a night's sleep, even if she had woken up a few times. The room had been unfamiliar, and the bedding had smelled of Tom. But knowing he was in the next room, had been a great comfort. She hadn't felt safe, not since leaving the palace compound. But last night, lying on his bed, in his house—she'd come close.

Looking over, she admired how seamlessly he blended in. Gone was the crisp, commanding Marine from yesterday. In his place was a rugged, dust-streaked freedom fighter. His beige combat trousers were worn, his T-shirt clung to his chest beneath a threadbare military jacket. A bandana masked the lower half of his face, leaving only his eyes visible—and even those were different now. Sharper. Hardened. Dangerous.

Where he'd gotten the gear, she didn't know. But if she hadn't seen him load the M4 over his shoulder herself, she might not have recognized him at all. He didn't just look the part—he became it.

And he wasn't the only one carrying. Nearly every man they passed had a rifle slung across his chest or strapped to his back. This was a city on the brink, a powder keg waiting to ignite. The streets pulsed with tension, but no one looked twice at them as they made their way from Tom's apartment through the residential area.

He leaned in, his voice low. “Keep your head down. Hakeem’s people will have spotters out looking. You can bet on it.”

She nodded, keeping her gaze on the pavement as they passed a group of men gathered at a corner café.

“They must’ve found the document in the souk by now,” she murmured.

“Does Hakeem know about your memory?” Tom asked, eyes scanning the windows above them.

“I don’t think so. It’s not something I advertise.”

“But he’ll know you read it. That’s enough.” His jaw flexed. “He doesn’t need to know what you remember, just that you saw it. You could’ve taken photos. Passed it on. With comms down, he’ll assume you haven’t sent anything yet—but he’s not going to wait to find out. He’s going to throw everything he’s got at stopping you.”

She gulped as anxiety clutched at her chest.

Tom’s pace never slowed, but she sensed the tension in his body. Muscles coiled, eyes alert, head constantly moving, but not making it obvious. Always that control. His hand resting lightly on his weapon, ready to spring into action, should the need arise.

They pressed deeper into the city. The buildings around them grew taller and narrower, many still under construction. The country’s immense oil wealth had resulted in a massive surge of development. Hakeem had also invested billions into banking and tourism. He’d wanted Syman to rival Bahrain or Dubai. A pearl of the Gulf. Now, with the protests and civil war imminent, the work had been abandoned.

They stopped outside a battered newsstand. Tom grabbed a local paper, scanning the bold Arabic script that covered most of the front page.

“Can you translate this?” He tapped a smaller headline toward the bottom, away from the horrific images of burned buildings and bleeding civilians. She tried not to look at those.

“It’s a sandstorm warning,” she said after skimming. “It’s coming in today.”



His eyes narrowed. “When?”

She checked again. “Three p.m.”

He checked his watch. “We’ve got until fifteen hundred to reach the base. After that, visibility will drop, and we’ll be forced to take cover. We won’t be able to move for a while.”

Hannah felt her throat tighten. “That doesn’t leave us much time.”

He folded the paper and tossed it back onto the stack. “No, we’d better up the pace.”

They set off, faster than before, but still not rushing. Still not drawing attention to themselves. Hannah noticed that Tom didn’t even take the most direct route to the southern highway. Instead, they zigzagged through town, merging with other people, acting as normally as possible.

They didn’t talk much. He issued instructions on which way to go and when to stay in the shadows, but apart from that, he remained silent. That suited her. She was still trying to get her head around the fact that she was a walking memory stick of information, vital to ending this war.

They’d just turned into a short road bustling with pedestrians when Tom gripped her arm.

“Watch out!”

A group of men sprinted past, rifles slung across their backs, bandanas tied around their faces. They looked like rebels. A few seconds later, another group followed—grim-faced, underdressed, and armed. The tension in the air thickened.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

“Protest rally.”

They slowed as they neared a wide, circular square, where two main roads converged in a chaotic knot of foot traffic. The area had once been designed for leisure. There were ornamental palms, benches, contemporary glass façades set beside centuries-old stone buildings. But now it swarmed with people. Angry civilians and armed rebels, their banners waving, fists raised.

It was chaos.

Hannah flinched violently, as a gunshot cracked the sky. Someone else yelled an anti-government slogan, and soon a group of them were chanting it, waving their guns in the air.

Then came the scream behind them.

They both turned in unison.

A woman had fallen. Two large men in dark uniforms stood over her, grabbing her arms to pull her to her feet. Definitely not locals. It was then she noticed the woman was a westerner and had blond hair. Her stomach flipped.

“Oh my God, it’s Abdul Anwar’s men,” she cried.

Tom didn’t even look. “Don’t make eye contact,” he snapped, but it was already too

late. One of the men had seen her and raised his hand to an earpiece.

She reached blindly for Tom, clutching his shirt. “What do we do?”

“We’re going in.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her straight into the crowd. “We’ll lose them in the rally.”

Bullets peppered the wall beside them with a sickening rattle, shards of stone and paint exploding around them.

“They’re shooting at us!” She was living a nightmare. The whole thing seemed totally surreal.

But Tom’s grip on her hand was iron. “Keep going. A moving target is harder to hit.”

The crowd swallowed them. He moved with brutal precision, zigzagging through bodies, dodging elbows, leaping over curbs. His focus was absolute. She tried to keep up, her breath burning in her lungs.

The protesters grew thicker by the step until there were hundreds around them, maybe more. Mostly men, packed shoulder to shoulder. Everybody had guns, and the chanting roared in her ears.

“Free Syman!” over and over, rising in intensity.

“We’re safer inside it than outside,” Tom shouted over the din. “They won’t fire into the mob.”

She couldn’t see the two men anymore, there were too many bodies crushing around her, but she felt the danger pressing in from every side.

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“We’ll push through the middle and exit on the other side.”

She stumbled, and had she not been clinging to Tom, she would have been crushed underfoot. It was like being in the middle of a stampede.

A sob caught in her throat, but Tom steadied her, putting his hands on her shoulders. “Hannah, I’ll get you through this, but you have to trust me.”

She met his gaze—clear, fierce, and steady. A lifeline in the storm.

Her voice was hoarse. “I trust you.”

He nodded, just once, then charged forward, pulling her in his wake.

A loud bang sounded as someone discharged a shotgun only inches away. The noise of the crowd dimmed, and she clutched her head, knowing as she did so that it wouldn’t do anything to stop the sudden, shrill ringing in her ears. Tom didn’t miss a beat. He linked an arm around her waist and thrust her through the mass of protesters, using his bulk as a shield and his incredible strength to barrage his way through.

She let him half-guide, half-carry her to the opposite side. She felt battered and bruised, and more than a little disoriented by the time they got to the relative safety of a mosque entrance, set back from the square.

“You’re okay now.”

His words were dim, unclear. Everything was muted, like she was watching the

television on a very low volume.

“Hannah, look at me?”

She raised her head.

“Breathe.”

Only then did she realize she'd been holding it. A man brushed past, and she staggered. She put a hand on Tom's chest to steady herself and could feel his heart beating underneath her palm. Steady, solid, reassuring, not going like a jackhammer like hers.

“We'll wait here until you get your breath back.”

She dropped her forehead to his shoulder, waiting for the ringing to subside. “That gun discharged right in my ear.”

“It takes a while.” His arms came around her, not stiff or awkward, but protective, while he kept a lookout for Hakeem's men.

Without thinking, she pressed closer. Her cheek grazed his collarbone. She breathed in the scent of him—sweat,gunpowder, and something masculine. She wasn't thinking. Just needing. Anchoring herself in the feel of him.

Tom went very still.

Then, slowly, he pulled her in tighter. His breath caught, and she was suddenly aware she was flush against him, enveloped by his arms. When she dared glance up, the way he was looking at her stole the air from her lungs. It was raw, intense, wanting.

It made her melt. It made her weak with longing. For a moment, she almost forgot the chaos around them.

A shot cracked in the distance.

He jerked away, his eyes scanning the crowd. A man had climbed up on a statue and was shouting slogans at the crowd. They yelled back in unison. Protesters poured in from all directions. Another shop window shattered. The crowd surged again.

“It’s turning,” Tom muttered. “Time to go.”

They cut through the back alleys, weaving their way through the city. How he knew where they were going, she had no idea. She’d never been in this area before. They finally emerged beside a dingy sidewalk café that looked out toward Highway 80—the main artery south.

“The base is ten miles that way,” Tom said, watching the road from beneath the grimy awning. “We’ll try to catch a ride.”

“From here?” she asked, watching cars barrel through the intersection, their tires screaming on the cracked pavement.

“No. We’ll cross over, head for the shoulder, and wait it out by a rest stop. That’s the safest bet.”

Other civilians had the same idea. Whole families were on the move, dragging suitcases and clutching children. Everyone wanted to leave the city before the violence began.

Hannah’s heart ached watching them. She wanted to tell them it would be okay, that she had a plan, that the world wasn’t going to end here in the dust and heat. But what

if she was wrong? What if they couldn't get out in time or if she was captured? What then?

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“Won’t Hakeem’s men be expecting this?” She felt sick to her stomach. In a way, all these people depended on her, and she in turn depended on Tom. She glanced at the U.S. Marine, so confident, so capable. But would he be able to protect her from a regime that couldn’t afford to let her live?

“They’re looking for a blond Westerner, not a local woman with a rebel sympathizer. Those two guys in the square wouldn’t have seen your hair, and if they did, they wouldn’t have had time to relay the information back to their colleagues yet. We’ve got a narrow margin in which to exit this city.”

They crossed at the traffic lights. Hannah kept her head well down, shuffling like she’d seen the local women do in their long robes. Beside her, Tom remained alert, always one hand on his rifle.

No one stopped them. They were just part of the civilian exodus from Syman City.

They’d almost made it to the rest area when a convoy of police vehicles screamed past, sirens wailing. Tom pulled her into the sparse vegetation at the edge of the road. Tom yanked her off the road and into the brush.

The convoy braked ahead—hard.

“Shit,” he said under his breath.

Hannah turned to him, her pulse thudding.

“What is it?”



His voice was cold.

“It’s a roadblock.”

## CHAPTER 12

Hannah felt like crying as the blue lights spread out across the road and the traffic started backing up. They’d almost made it.

“Now what?”

“They’re trying to stop more rebels from entering the city and joining the rallies.”

“You mean it’s not for me?”

“Not officially, no. But they’ll have orders to watch out for you.”

Cars were slowing down. It was easier to flag someone down now.

The first car was a lone male driver. Tom let that one pass.

The next was a smart Mercedes with two businessmen inside. While she was tempted to shove Tom out into the road to get their attention, he didn’t stop them either.

“What are you looking for?” she asked.

“Something they’re not expecting,” he replied, squinting at the next car—a silver sedan, slightly run-down, not the latest model. There was a woman next to the driver and two more people in the back. Tom stepped into the road, waving his hand and forcing the driver to stop. The army definitely wouldn’t be looking for a family.

Tom beckoned Hannah over. “Ask him where he’s going.”

She obeyed, speaking flawless Arabic. The man didn’t seem to realize she was a Westerner. That was a good sign.

“He’s going to Bani Hatwah,” she whispered. A visual of the name written on the map popped into her mind. It was a tiny village, a thumbnail south of Syman City. The woman in the passenger seat looked impatiently at her husband.

“That’s good enough. Ask him for a lift. Tell him we’ll pay.”

“Okay.”

She relayed the offer to the driver, a slightly paunchy man of about sixty, with a beard and a turban. At first, he looked like he was about to refuse—then he heard the word “pay.” Money was essential during a crisis. Banks were often closed or offline, and prices climbed as demand surged.

“How much?” he asked.

“A hundred US dollars.” Tom didn’t wait for her to translate. He already had the cash out.

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At the sight of the bills, the wife nudged her husband eagerly. Reluctantly, the driver signaled for them to get in. He shook his head at the rifle, though. He didn't want to be caught harboring rebels.

Hannah couldn't blame him, but she also knew there was no way Tom was going to leave his weapon behind. He was joined at the hip to that thing. Besides, he was carrying another handgun and at least two knives as well.

Hannah couldn't blame him, but she also knew there was no way Tom was leaving that weapon behind. He was joined at the hip to it. Besides, he had another handgun—and at least two knives.

“Get in.” Tom opened the back door for her. Two faces stared up—an older woman in a burka and a young girl of about fourteen, in jeans and a pink sequined T-shirt. Despite the age gap, the resemblance was unmistakable.

Hannah smiled, trying to reassure them, but it didn't help. They continued to stare.

Then Tom did something strange. He dropped onto his back and rolled under the car. A metallic clunk followed. She guessed he was securing his weapons to the undercarriage. Ten seconds later, he was back on his feet, dusting himself off as if nothing had happened.

The driver, tight lipped, said nothing. He didn't want the weapon in the car, but not as much as he didn't want the hundred dollars.

His wife climbed into the back beside Hannah, and Tom took the front passenger

seat. It would have looked odd with him riding in the back with the women, and right now it was essential to look like a normal, extended family.

Tom nodded to the driver, who eased into the slow-moving traffic. The roadblock loomed less than a mile ahead.

Hannah took some deep breaths, fighting against the rising panic. Would they make it through? Or would they recognize her and drag her out onto the street?

Her stomach lurched at the thought. She'd be handed over to Abdul Anwar and then God only knew what they'd do to her?

She gripped her hands tightly in her lap and stared at the back of Tom's neck. He was tense too—she could tell by the way the muscles stood out. He was trained for this. She wasn't.

To keep from spiraling, she dug her nails into her palms.

Five cars ahead. The businessmen in the Mercedes were right in front of them. A pickup behind that, loaded with men sitting on planks of wood, dressed like construction workers.

“Tell him to overtake this car,” Tom said.

Hannah relayed the instruction. The driver frowned, confused, but complied. He slid into the outside lane, pulling back into traffic behind the pickup. He waved apologetically to the Mercedes driver, who honked in irritation.

“Why did you do that?” Hannah leaned forward, murmuring. “Are you trying to attract attention?”

“I’ve got a feeling about those guys,” he whispered, nodding toward the vehicle ahead. “They could be a diversion.”

Hannah studied the pickup’s occupants. They looked like ordinary workers to her.

Three cars away.

She focused on breathing. In for four, out for four. Don’t panic.

Two cars. . .

Checkpoint officers waved the pickup over. The men climbed out and lined up on the side of the road. Their driver argued, pointing at the planks and then his watch.

One soldier kept a weapon on him while the other inspected the workers. He walked down the line, studying each face. Suddenly, the second-to-last man bolted. He dashed into open terrain, zigzagging through the dust.

He didn’t get far.

The soldier guarding the driver raised his rifle and fired.

The woman next to Hannah cried out, clutching her husband’s shoulder.

The runner fell, unmoving.

“They shot him,” Hannah gasped, blinking in shock. They’d just killed a man in cold blood at a security checkpoint. They hadn’t even questioned him first.

Tom didn’t say anything, his gaze was fixed on the guards.

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Hannah began to hyperventilate.

What did that mean for her? A traitor?

The old woman rocked silently. The teenager stuffed her fingers into her mouth to muffle sobs.

“I thought there was something off about them,” Tom muttered, the tension in his neck visible.

“How did you know?” Hannah watched, horrified, as two soldiers dragged the body back to the checkpoint and dumped it in a waiting van.

“I saw that guy jump into the truck back at the lights. He was trying to do what we’re doing. Stay anonymous.”

She felt sick with nerves. Would it work for them? The rest of the crew was loaded into the van along with the body. Only one soldier remained at the checkpoint.

Their car was next.

The driver pulled over. Hannah thought about the rifle under the car. Then about the dead man.

Please let us get through.

The soldier stared through the windshield. His gaze moved from the driver to Tom.

His eyes narrowed.

“Family?” he asked in Arabic.

The soldier circled to the back and tapped the window. Hannah rolled it down. It squeaked.

He leaned in.

The girl beside her whimpered, shaking uncontrollably. Alarmed, Hannah met Tom’s eyes in the side mirror. If the girl lost it now, they were done. Tom gave the slightest nod. Hannah wrapped her arm around the girl’s shoulders and gave her a firm squeeze.

The soldier’s eyes flicked over them. Hopefully he took the gesture as sisterly.

After what felt like forever, he snorted and stepped back. He waved them on, already focused on the next car.

They were through.

## CHAPTER 13

They were dropped off on a straight stretch of highway twenty miles past the checkpoint. Hannah thanked the driver and his family, as Tom retrieved his weapon from beneath the car.

“What about your other gun?” she asked.

“It’s here.” He patted the small of his back. “I wasn’t going through a checkpoint unarmed.”

She didn't ask what he would've done if things had gone wrong. They'd have been completely outnumbered. Not even a U.S. Marine could shoot his way out of that.

Hannah looked around. The landscape was barren and gravelly, with hardly any vegetation to speak of. Worse still, it stretched endlessly in every direction, no buildings or cover in sight. Whenever she left the compound with Prince Hakeem or his entourage, they'd traveled in armored vehicles, usually along the scenic coastline. The island's interior remained a mystery to her.

"How far from the base are we?" she asked.

"I'd estimate four or five miles."

Tom glanced at his watch, then up at the sky. "We've got less than three hours before the sandstorm hits."

Hannah peered up at the cloudless blue. Not a single gust stirred the air. Hard to believe a sandstorm was on the way.

"That should be enough time," she said.

She'd been in Syman for six months, but she'd never experienced a sandstorm. They were a summer thing, and she'd arrived in January.



“Which way?” she asked.

“East.”

The midday sun scorched overhead. A trickle of sweat slid between her breasts. She realized she had no idea which way east was.

Tom set off, angling to the right. His boots crunched across the gravelly sand.

Okay, then. She quickened her pace to catch up and fell into step beside him, boiling in her full-length black robe.

“You can take it off.” Tom motioned toward it without looking. His eyes stayed locked on the horizon.

“Are you sure?” She glanced around, uneasy.

“Yeah. We’ll see anyone coming miles off.”

There was nothing here but wide-open space—and a lot of sand.

She pulled the robe over her head, sighing in relief. The light tunic and trousers underneath, in cream and beige, were far cooler. Unsure what to do with the robe, she tied it around her waist.

They walked for an hour, and with each step Hannah grew more hopeful. They had to be getting close.

Squinting into the distance, she spotted a shimmer on the horizon. “Is that it?” she asked, hopeful.

“Yep,” he confirmed, shielding his eyes from the sun.

They picked up speed. One of Tom’s long strides matched two of hers, but she hardly noticed her aching feet or the sweat on her skin. All she could think about was getting out of Syman and back to England, where she’d be safe.

Then a terrible thought struck her.

“You don’t think they’ll come after me in the U.S., do you?”

“I doubt it. Not with this going on,” he said, but his tone gave him away.

Oh, God. Hannah felt like crying. Would she ever be free of this?

The hard truth was, probably not. Not until she handed over the intel—and Hakeem and Anwar were behind bars. Or dead.

As they neared, she realized the shimmer was actually a long, low hangar made of corrugated metal, gleaming under the mid-morning sun. A short runway stretched out in front of it, black tarmac stark against the sea of beige. The perimeter was marked by a tall electric fence.

“We made it,” she breathed, clutching his arm. “We’re here!”

Tom didn’t respond.

She let go, glancing up at him. “What’s wrong? We made it with time to spare.”

“We’re not clear yet.” His eyes tracked the fence to the entrance on the far side. A guard tower loomed over heavy-duty wrought iron gates. Two flags drooped from poles on either side.

“What do you mean?” She was so desperate to get inside. “Come on, let’s go introduce ourselves.”

Tom held up a hand. “Wait. I need to check it out first. We can’t just waltz in unannounced. You see all that security?”

“Yes, but we’re the good guys, remember?”

“I’m not so sure.” He scanned the area. “Wait behind those dunes. They’ll give you a little cover. I’ll be right back.”

“But why? I don’t see?—”

She sighed as he waved her off and stalked toward a cluster of outbuildings a few hundred yards from the base, just outside the fencing. His rifle was slung low, in a ready position.

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Surely he was overreacting. What trouble could there possibly be here? It was a UN Air Force base.

She trudged off toward the dunes. A soft breeze stirred and she lifted her face to it, savoring the touch of cool air on her overheated skin. What did a few more minutes matter?

She sat and pulled out her water bottle. Tom had made sure they each had one, though hers barely fit inside her bag. She took a drink and mentally counted the minutes.

Twenty minutes later, she was still waiting.

What the hell was he doing?

Peering out from behind the dune, she saw no movement near the outbuildings—only wind sweeping sand across the ground. The breeze had picked up, turning the dunes from refuge to obstacle. Grit stung her cheeks and got into her eyes.

To hell with this.

She stood and cautiously made her way toward the buildings. If Tom wasn't there, she'd head to the main gate. No way was she getting caught in a sandstorm out here when she could be safe inside.

The outbuildings looked deserted.

She poked her head into the first one—a concrete shell, probably for storage. It was empty, so she moved on to the second.

That's when she saw it. A man lying motionless on the floor.

Her heart slammed against her ribs.

Tom?

She rushed forward—then froze. It wasn't him. The body was too small. The shape all wrong.

Thank God. She exhaled shakily. Then Tom must've been here. This had to be his doing.

But who was this guy? And why had Tom killed him?

Heart pounding, she bent down and grabbed a fist-sized rock—the only weapon she had.

No sign of Tom in the second building, and she didn't dare call out. Who knew if others were nearby? She edged toward the side of the building facing the base—just as something cold pressed hard against her temple.

The barrel of a gun.

## CHAPTER 14

“Get down,” a voice commanded in Arabic.

Hannah didn't move. She was frozen in place.

“I said, get down!” The muzzle dug into the back of her skull.

“Okay, don’t shoot.” She dropped to her knees.

He shoved her hard. She landed on her stomach, sand flying into her face. Her hands shot out to break her fall. The rock she’d been holding rolled away, useless.

Turning her head, she caught a glimpse of her captor. He was dressed like a soldier, and for a fleeting second, her heart lifted. Maybe he worked at the base? If she identified herself, maybe he’d help.

“I’m American,” she said, as he patted her down. “I’ve come for your help.”

He grabbed her hair and yanked her head back to see her face. “What’s your name?” he growled in Arabic.

With her throat stretched painfully, she could barely speak. It was no good. He wasn’t one of the good guys.

She was so confused. What the hell was he doing here?

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She stared toward the base. A military aircraft sat on the runway, just beyond the fence, being prepped for takeoff. So close, yet out of reach.

A sob rose in her throat as she realized—she'd never make it onto that plane now.

“Put your hands where I can see them,” demanded a low voice. d

Hannah nearly wept with relief.

Tom.

He'd found her—and just in time. She tried to turn, but the swirling dust was too thick. Instead of complying, her captor hauled her to her feet. She stumbled back against him, his arm locking around her neck, rifle pressed under her chin.

“Move and she dies.” Still Arabic.

“Tom,” she whimpered. “He said?—”

“I got the idea,” Tom growled.

She looked at his face—and what she saw terrified her. Tom wasn't backing down. Not an inch. His hands were steady as he raised his rifle, aiming directly at her captor's head. He wasn't even looking at her.

Oh God.

This was it. She was going to die out here in the desert.

She squeezed her eyes shut.

“I wouldn’t do that.” Tom nodded toward the man’s weapon. “Do you know who this is? She’s wanted by Abdul Anwar. There’s a price on her head.”

“What are you doing?” Hannah hissed. Was he completely mad? Did he want her to die?

The soldier may not have understood all the words, but he recognized the name of Hakeem’s security advisor.

His eyes widened. He hesitated.

That split second was all Tom needed.

He fired. The bullet hit him in the middle of his forehead, and the soldier’s expression shifted from suspicion to disbelief as he crumpled to his knees and fell forward.

Hannah screamed.

Tom fired again, center mass—just to be sure.

The man now lay lifeless, in the dust.

Hannah was trembling so hard her legs gave way. He surged forward, catching her.

“Oh, God,” she whispered, eyes locked on the dead man. Blood seeped out from underneath him, pooling on the ground. She couldn’t stop shaking.



His arms were firm. “Hannah, look at me.”

She couldn’t tear her gaze away. So much blood...

“Hannah!”

She blinked and looked up.

“I had to. He would’ve killed us both.”

Hot tears ran down her face as he eased her to the ground.

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“Tom, I—” Her voice caught. “I was so scared.”

They were both kneeling now. She reached for him, her fingers fisting his shirt.

“Shh... it’s okay.” He wrapped his arms around her, holding her close. “You’re safe now. He can’t hurt you.”

She clung to him, trembling. He felt so solid, so reassuring. God, she needed his strength right now.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured against his chest. “I should’ve stayed put. I should’ve listened to you.”

His arms tightened around her. “Forget it. It’s over now. I’ve got you.”

She didn’t move right away. She couldn’t. Her whole body was trembling, adrenaline still rushing through her veins. But more than that, being wrapped in his arms grounded her. She felt the weight of his strength, the steady beat of his heart, the roughness of his shirt against her cheek. And for just a moment, the danger, her fear, their situation—all of it faded into the background.

Eventually, reluctantly, she pulled back. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if you hadn’t?—”

“It’s okay,” he said, his voice deeper than usual. “That’s why I’m here.”

His eyes dropped to her lips, and she felt the heat of his gaze. The sudden silence

pressed in around them. He was looking at her like he wanted to kiss her. Like he was fighting the urge.

Her breath caught. One hand remained splayed on his chest, the other still curled around his back. Her body was flush against his, and every inch of her was aware of him—his warmth, his scent, the taut line of his muscles beneath her fingers.

Her lips parted slightly, not to speak, but because she didn't know what else to do. She wanted to say something, anything, but the moment had taken hold.

He leaned in.

But then the roar of an aircraft engine shattered the quiet. The low drone built into a wail that broke the spell between them.

Tom jerked away.

"It's preparing to take off," she whispered, her heart still racing.

"Yeah, but we don't want to be on it."

She stared at him. "Why not?"

He grabbed her hand and helped her to her feet. "Come on. I need to show you something."

She followed him toward a cluster of thorny bushes growing along the perimeter fence. They crouched low behind them, hidden from view. The guard's absence hadn't been noticed yet, but she knew it was only a matter of time.

"Look over there." He pointed to the hangar where uniformed men were unloading

crates from a truck. “Those aren’t UN Peacekeepers. That’s the Symanian Army.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “What? They can’t be.”

“Watch closely,” he said. “See the boxes? They’ve got the royal crest on them, and the men are wearing maroon berets. UN troops wear navy blue.”

She followed his gaze, heart sinking with every passing second.

“The guards are armed with AK-47s, not NATO rifles,” he continued, voice tight. “And the gear they’re carrying, that’s Symanian Special Forces kit, not UN-issue. Even their armor’s different.”

No! It couldn’t be.

He wasn’t done. “Look up. See that flag flying above the gate?”

Her gaze rose to the flagpole, and her stomach dropped.

She let out a broken sob as the truth came crashing down. “We’re not getting out of here, are we?”

He didn’t hesitate. He just looked at her.

“No.”

### CHAPTER 15

The airplane accelerated down the runway, its powerful engines roaring as it gained speed. The nose lifted, and the jet soared into the cobalt sky, climbing higher with every second.

Hannah watched it go, tears of frustration stinging her eyes. “If only that was a U.N. plane,” she whispered.

“They must’ve pulled out because of the fighting,” Tom replied.

“I thought that’s what they were here for,” she snapped, exhaustion making her tetchy. “To keep the peace.”

“They’re here to observe, not fight,” he said. “They’re not a military force.”

“Yeah, well, that’s not doing us any good now.” She blew out a breath and slumped her shoulders. They were stranded.

“They must’ve left last night.” He scanned the base. “There’s no sign of a hostile takeover.”

One day. They’d missed their chance by just one day.

“I can’t believe it.” She dropped her head into her hands. “We came all this way.

Now what are we supposed to do?"

He didn't answer.

She knew he'd tried. He'd gotten them this far. But now the Symanian Army held the base. If they set foot on it, they'd be arrested—or worse.

"First, we need to find shelter." He glanced up at the darkening sky. The wind whipped her hair about her face. It was getting stronger.

The sandstorm. How could she have forgotten?

"How much time do we have?" she asked. She remembered the newspaper article—three o'clock.

He checked his watch. "Less than an hour."

Crap.

They returned to the outbuildings for cover. Tom dragged the second dead soldier into the hut with the first. Hannah didn't look at either of them.

"Come in here." He ducked into the empty structure and spread his map across the concrete floor.

"This is us." He pointed to a speck southeast of Syman City. "There are ruins about a mile and a half east. If we get there before the storm hits, we can hunker down."

She glanced at the huts. "Why can't we just stay here?"

"They'll come looking when the guard doesn't report in," he said, nodding toward the

body. “We’re exposed. We need to move.”

“Okay.” Weariness crept in. She wasn’t sure how much farther she could go.

“It’ll be okay.” He gripped her shoulders, steady and firm. “I’ve got a plan. But first, we reach those ruins.”

“What plan? This was the plan!” She gestured toward the base, a flicker of hysteria in her voice. “Unless you’ve got another airstrip up your sleeve?”

“Hannah, there’s no time for this.” He grabbed her hand and met her gaze. “You said you trusted me. Then trust me now. I’ll get us out. I promise. But we’ve got to move.”

She stared at him. He couldn’t guarantee that promise. But she nodded anyway.

She slung her bag over her shoulder. The fence rattled in the growing wind. Heading into a sandstorm was madness—but it beat standing still and waiting to die.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Atta girl.”

He shouldered his pack, and they started east. The airbase shimmered behind them, heat waves rising from the tarmac.

Tom set a grueling pace. There was no time to talk. All Hannah’s effort was put into keeping up. They reached the ruins in just over forty-five minutes. Red dust swirled in the sky, and sand whipped around their legs and faces.

Hannah slipped her robe back on to shield her arms. Tom wrapped his bandana around his face, and she followed suit with her scarf.

“Next to that wall’s our best bet.” He pointed to a crumbling low wall—remnants of an ancient settlement. It still offered more protection than anything else around.

He gathered heavy stones, stacking them along the wall for added defense. Hannah stared at the horizon. A rust-colored cloud loomed, devouring the distance.

“Is that it?” she asked.

He didn’t turn. Just kept building.

“It’s a wall of sand,” she murmured, transfixed. It rolled across the earth like a living thing—thick, choking, unstoppable. How were they supposed to survive that?

Adrenaline fired through her veins. She dropped to her knees and helped Tom stack rocks. They created a three-sided enclosure, waist-high, enough to provide some



cover. It wasn't perfect—but it was all they had.

The sandstorm was almost upon them.

Hannah stared at the cloud, heart pounding. It was like something out of a nightmare. The roar rose as millions of sand particles collided in the howling wind.

“Tom, I’m scared.” She moved closer.

“Sit,” he said, motioning to the base of the wall. “We’ll be okay. This isn’t the worst I’ve seen. It’ll blow over in an hour or two.”

She stayed standing, eyes locked on the wall of dust. “Are you sure? What about you?”

“I’ll be right here.” He pulled off his shirt and unwrapped his bandana. “We’ll use these to cover our heads. Give me your scarf—we need all the protection we can get.”

“Oh God.” Her voice cracked.

“Lie down,” he ordered, gently pulling her beside him. The wind shrieked. Sand pelted their legs as the storm engulfed them.

“Tom...” she gasped.

He smiled, reassuring. “I’ve got you.” He secured the fabric over their heads, tucking it tight against the wind. Then he wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close.

She lay still, inhaling deeply in anticipation.

“Breathe normal,” he told her. “You’ll be fine.”

The sky darkened as the storm swallowed them. The wind howled like it was alive, hammering against the walls, clawing at the scarves covering them.

She wriggled closer, desperate for his warmth.

He held her tighter. “We just wait it out,” he said. His voice was calm, steady. She clung to him, burying her face in his chest as the wind tore at their shelter.

His body shielded hers—chest to chest, hip to hip. She felt the strength in him, his heat pressed into her everywhere. She clung on, praying it would end soon.

The sandstorm raged. Time slowed. Hannah couldn’t tell how long they’d been huddled there. The air inside their shelter grew thick and hot. Dust seeped in through every crack.

Her breathing quickened.

“Calm down,” he murmured, his hand sliding along her spine.

She couldn’t. The roar filled her ears. Grit scraped at her throat. The air felt too thin. Panic seized her lungs.

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“You’re hyperventilating,” he said, voice taut. “You’ve got to slow your breathing.”

“I can’t.” She clawed at him. “I can’t breathe.” The air wasn’t enough. Her vision swam. Dizziness washed over her. She was suffocating. The desert would swallow them whole.

The edges of her world dimmed. She closed her eyes, bracing for the dark.

### CHAPTER 16

“Hannah, you have to calm down,” Tom said urgently. “There’s not much dust in here. You can’t panic.”

She didn’t respond. He could feel the fear pouring off her in waves. She was on the verge of tearing the scarf off her face and sucking in a lungful of dust. He had to distract her—fast.

So he kissed her.

At first, it was soft, just his lips brushing hers. Maybe it would shock her into stillness. Maybe it would ground her, remind her she wasn’t alone in this chaos. He felt her freeze, the tremor in her limbs. Then she began to kiss him back.

It worked.

But something shifted.

The longer his mouth moved over hers, the more he stopped caring about the reason behind it. Her lips were warm and pliant, her breath shallow against his skin. He could taste her panic fading, being replaced by something else. Something hot. Something that stirred in him like a wildfire breaking past every firebreak he'd tried to build.

She kissed him again, deeper this time, and he responded before he could think better of it. She opened for him, and he slid his tongue between her lips. The scarf clung tight around their heads, but it didn't matter. In this tiny cocoon of darkness and dust, her scent filled his lungs. Her hand clutched his shirt. Her other arm still hooked around his back. His body burned.

Damn it.

He shifted his weight, pressing her down just a little, bracing himself on one elbow. Her soft curves molded against him—her breasts pressed to his chest, one of his thighs settling between hers. She didn't pull away. Her fingers tangled in his shirt. Her lips moved with his. He couldn't stop. Didn't want to.

Not until a sharp pebble whipped by the wind slammed into his cheek.

He flinched. The pain snapped him back to the present. Sand still screamed across their rock shelter, pelting the scarves, trying to rip them away. He pulled back slightly, just enough to break the kiss. Breathing hard, he eased off her and lay beside her instead, every inch of his body humming.

He needed to get his shit together.

This couldn't happen again. Not now. Not with her.

His CO's words echoed in his skull.

If we can't have her, no one else can.

He shut his eyes. Orders were orders. If he couldn't get her out, he'd been told what to do. And now he'd just kissed the one person he might have to kill.

Fuck.

They lay still under the cloth barrier, his arm still around her. Her hand stayed on his side, her breath brushing his collarbone.

He should move. He needed space to think, but the moment he shifted, the wind roared louder. Exposure was a risk. He stayed put.

Then she whispered, "Tom, why did you kiss me?"

Because I've wanted to since the day I met you.

"I didn't know what else to do," he said instead. "You were starting to panic. I needed to distract you."

A beat. Then softly, "I thought so. But then..."

Her voice faded. But he knew what she meant. He'd felt it, too—the heat, the pull.

"It was just a distraction," he murmured, lying to them both. He had to get his head on straight. He'd already let things go too far. "Don't read too much into it."

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She didn't respond. He listened to her breathing, regular now, as the storm began to die down around them.

"You okay now?" he asked, steering the conversation to safer ground, even though his body hadn't yet got the message.

"Yeah," she said, and gave a quiet, embarrassed laugh. "It worked, your distraction."

He cringed. "Sorry, I got carried away. It was unprofessional."

"It was nice," she countered.

God help him, it was. So nice he wanted to do it again. But now that his head was clear, he knew he couldn't afford to.

"I know," he said. "But it was dangerous. I can't let my guard down."

"What do you mean?"

"When I let my guard down, people die."

There was silence. Then, softly, "I don't understand."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does," she whispered. "Tell me what happened."

He hesitated. Dust clawed at their clothes, slipping through the rocks, hissing around them like a curse. There was nowhere to run, no way to dodge the truth.

“Who died?” she prompted.

“Everyone.” The word hit hard. “I can’t—” He stopped. She didn’t need this. Not now. “I made the wrong call, that’s all you need to know, and my team paid for it. I won’t make that mistake again.”

Not with you.

She was quiet. Processing.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured.

He didn’t want her pity.

“I know there’s a lot at stake,” she said, after a beat.

He nodded, the weight of responsibility hitting home. “The outcome of this war depends on whether we can get you out within forty-eight hours. Millions of lives are riding on this.”

“You don’t have to remind me,” she tensed, easing back.

“Don’t move.” He held her firm. The wind still howled around them. The sandstorm wasn’t over yet. He didn’t want her to have another anxiety attack, it put both their lives at risk. He couldn’t afford to kiss her again.

“You do your thing,” she whispered, “and I’ll do my best to stay alive long enough to deliver the intel.”

Tom stared at her in the dark. She was brave. Smarter than she knew. Tougher than she looked. And everything in him wanted to shield her from what came next.

Instead, he said nothing. Just held his breath and waited for the storm to pass.

## CHAPTER 17

“You said you had a plan,” Hannah said as they dusted themselves off.

The sandstorm had passed as quickly as it had arrived. Above them, the sky stretched cobalt blue, like the storm had been nothing more than a bad dream.

Tom pulled the map from his pack, already focused. Of course he was. Always moving forward. No space for distractions. Like that kiss.



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She clenched her jaw, pushing the thought away. It hadn't meant anything—not to him, anyway. Just a tactical move, a distraction so she wouldn't panic. He was all about the mission.

"I do." He spread the map on a flat stone block. Hannah thought it must once have been part of an ornately carved ceiling, judging by the faded engravings still etched into one edge.

"There's a guy I know in Mandhab. Not far from here." He pointed to a cluster of dots southeast of their current position.

She nodded, pulling off her shoes. Sand poured out like sugar. She didn't need to see the map, it was already etched into her brain from the last time she'd studied it. "How's this guy supposed to help?"

"He's well-connected and might be able to get us across the country, to the coast."

"The coast?" She arched an eyebrow. "That's your plan?"

"It's our only option. The airports are locked down or under army control."

"Can't the Navy airlift us out?" she asked. He was a marine, after all.

Tom smirked. "Too risky. We have no way of calling them, anyway. Boat's the best shot we've got."

She didn't love it, but she didn't argue. "Okay... so we're sailing out of here. From

where?”

“We’ll have to avoid the big port, it’s too obvious. I’m thinking we head south to Hamesh, a small fishing town off the radar. No one will expect us to go there. We find a dhow heading for the mainland and catch a ride.”

“And your guy in Mandhab can help us do that?”

He gave her a look. “He’s got contacts. We’ve worked together before. Trust me—if anyone can help, it’s Farid.”

“Right.” She sighed and leaned back against the rock. Grit stung her eyes and her entire body ached from being blasted by the sandstorm. “But please don’t tell me we have to get to Mandhab tonight.”

Unlike her, Tom looked like he could walk for another twelve hours, but to her relief, he gave a small shake of his head. “No. We’ll camp here tonight and leave before sunrise.”

Thank God.

She was dreading the next leg.

“You’re doing good, you know?” He crouched down beside her.

She snorted. “You don’t have to say that.”

He shrugged. “I’m not, I mean it. I’ve... escorted a lot of people out of hostile regions, and you’re handling it better than most.”

“I’ve probably got my father to thank for that,” she mumbled.

He looked at her, curious. “He military?”

She barked a dry laugh. “No, but he might as well have been.”

Tom tilted his head, inviting her to go on.

“My father was all about duty,” she said after a moment. “Businessman, not a soldier, but similar mindset. After my mother died, he sent me to boarding school and threw himself into expanding the company.”

Tom nodded, but didn’t interrupt.

“I think it was too much for him,” she said. “I was an awkward, grieving eleven-year-old girl and he had no idea what to do with me.”

Tom’s gaze softened. “That’s rough.”

She shrugged, as if it didn’t matter. Even though it did. It had taken years for her to get over his neglect.

“I spent all my vacations with my grandparents. They were amazing. Warm, funny, they looked after me. My grandmother used to tell me exotic stories about her childhood in Syman.”

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A ghost of a smile played at Tom's mouth. "That's how you learned Arabic?"

She nodded, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "I guess that's where I learned to adapt—bouncing between boarding school and my grandparents' place, shifting from one world to another. I got good at reading the room, figuring out who I needed to be."

Tom folded the map and gave her a long, considering look. "That actually explains a lot."

"Does it?" she asked, tilting her head. She couldn't tell if he meant it as a compliment or a subtle dig.

"Yeah. You keep moving forward, even when it's tough. You don't fall apart. You adjust, keep going. That takes real strength."

For a moment, she just looked at him. The wind had stilled. The ruins around them stood silent, ancient witnesses to this strange, fragile connection between them.

"Thanks," she said quietly, her voice catching in her throat.

He nodded and stood. "Try to get some sleep. We head out early."

She gave a small, wry smile and mock-saluted. "Copy that."

And just like that, the moment passed. The mission came rushing back. But something between them had shifted. Maybe now he would see her as more than a

liability—maybe they were starting to be friends.

Hannah was deep asleep when she felt a warm hand on her shoulder, gently shaking her awake.

“Let’s head out.”

She blinked, disoriented, and stared up at the star-strewn sky. “But it’s still nighttime.”

Every part of her ached. Her legs were stiff, her feet tender and sore. Grit lined her eyes from the sandstorm, and she had a kink in her neck from using Tom’s backpack as a pillow. She ran a hand through her tangled hair—and winced when her fingers snagged.

She must look like hell.

The almost-full moon hung low, ready to slip below the horizon and leave this side of the world behind.

“It’s 0500 hours.” Tom was all business again. “If we leave now, we should reach Mandhab by sunrise.”

She groaned. Another long walk.

His words from last night came back to her.

Adjust. Keep moving forward.

She could do this—she had to.

She sat up and blinked a couple of times. Slowly, the moonlit ruins sharpened into focus.

“Wow.” She paused, taking them in. The pale stone formations shimmered faintly in the soft light, glowing like ghosts of the past. It was strangely beautiful, and a little haunting.

Tom followed her gaze.

“It’s so beautiful,” she murmured. “Hard to believe this used to be someone’s home.”

“There are ruins like this all over the country.”

She stood, brushing the dust from her clothes. “It’s such a shame they’ve all been destroyed.” There wasn’t much to gather. She’d slept in her clothes, and the warm night hadn’t called for a blanket. Exhaustion had knocked her out the moment she lay down.

Tom looked tired too—rumpled, unshaven, but still hot as hell. The dark smudges under his eyes softened him in a way she hadn’t expected. And that stubble was definitely turning into a beard. She remembered how it had felt when he kissed her, how it had brushed against her chin?—

No. She shut the thought down. That had been a mistake, a distraction.

“Did you get any sleep?” she asked.

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“A little.” He hefted his pack and clipped the straps across his chest. “I wanted to stay alert in case anyone from the Air Force base decided to follow us.”

She shivered. “I didn’t even think about that.” A chill crept up her spine. If they had been tracked?—

“Good thing the sandstorm hit,” she added quietly. “Probably the only reason we weren’t found.”

He grunted.

“I’m glad I’ve got you looking out for me.” She meant it more than he knew.

“It’s what I do.” He held her gaze a second longer than necessary. “It’s my job to keep you safe.”

He was terrible at taking praise.

“I know,” she said, smiling. “I’m just saying—I’m glad it’s you.”

She looped her scarf back around her neck, bracing against the early morning chill.

“I’m ready. Let’s go.”

## CHAPTER 18

It was just before sunrise when they spotted the lights of Mandhab twinkling ahead.

The town nestled against a stretch of rugged hills—shorter than a mountain range but still imposing, with jagged rock faces that glowed purple in the early morning light. Instead of heading straight in, they circled wide and entered through a small road at the base of the hills.

“This place is a rebel stronghold,” Tom said quietly, motioning for her to stay in the shadows.

“What?” She stopped short, pulse going into overdrive. “Didn’t you say to avoid the rebels at all costs? What if they find out who I am?”

“Don’t worry. These rebels aren’t interested in you—they’ve got their own problems to deal with. This town’s been through days of mortar fire and skirmishes with government militia. That’s why it looks like a war zone. The army only pulled out a few days ago, and most people here are still trying to adjust to the ceasefire.”

She glanced around. That would explain the shattered buildings with gaping holes, the exposed wires overhead, and the leaning street poles. The road was littered with debris from bombed-out homes, and burned-out vehicles sat rusting by the curb. Yet people were beginning to emerge—some heading to work, others inspecting the damage.

“I know a place where we can rest and grab something to eat. It’s just two blocks from here.” He offered a reassuring smile, but it didn’t help with her nerves. “We’re almost there.”

Hannah kept her eyes peeled. Now she had to look out for both soldiers and rebels—she didn’t know who she was more scared of. There were lots of men dressed in the colors of the freedom movement, but thankfully, there didn’t appear to be a military presence.



They came to what looked like a post-office riddled with bullet holes, then turned down a side street. It led to a small line of shops—or what was left of them. All the windows were covered with wooden or iron sheeting, even though they would soon open for business. The owners were taking no chances.

“Is this where we’re going?” They’d stopped in front of a small convenience store. It too was boarded up. The shop sign hung haphazardly over the door, while the ground outside was strewn with broken tiles and other debris.

Tom tried the handle. It was unlocked. A small bell jingled as he pushed the door open. A man with thick black hair and a beard poked his head up from behind the counter.

“Can I help you?” he asked in Arabic.

““Jamal. We’re looking for Jamal,” Tom said in English, hoping the man understood. He seemed to. He rose and studied their dusty clothes and tired expressions. His gaze lingered on Tom’s rifle.

“Why you want Jamal?” the man asked, his accent thick. He was neatly dressed, probably in his forties.

“We need his help,” Tom said. Hannah stood by his side, willing the man to help them.

“Jamal not here.” The man turned away.

Was that it? Hannah cast a worried glance at Tom.

He stepped forward, but Hannah placed a hand on his arm. “Let me try,” she whispered.

Without waiting, she stepped toward the man. “Please. We’re not here to cause trouble. We’re trying to get out of Syman—back to England. Jamal told us to come here if we needed him.”

She wasn’t sure if that last part was true, but she hoped it helped. They needed to look like anything but a threat.

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The man hesitated, studying her again. He frowned at her lack of an accent. “These are dangerous times. You can’t trust anyone.”

“I understand. But we mean no harm,” she said. “We just need help. He’s a friend of yours.” She motioned to Tom. “This is a friend of his.”

Tom stepped forward. “My name is Tom Wilde,” he said. “I met Jamal in Syman City. We worked together.”

The man nodded, turning back to her. “Jamal’s not here now, but I’ll contact him. Go to the mosque on the corner. He’ll meet you there in an hour.”

“Shukran.” She translated for Tom, who also thanked him.

They bought some food—plain bread and bottled water—and sat outside the mosque, perched on an overturned crate. Hannah eyed the rounded dome overhead, now shattered where mortar blasts had ripped through. The front entrance was gone, blown off completely. Cracked walls and sagging supports gave the whole place a feeling of barely hanging on.

More people were on the streets now that the sun was up. The town buzzed with quiet activity. A man and young boy set up a table with vegetables; another teen laid out fresh flatbreads.

“How long do you think the ceasefire will last?” she asked, watching children play among the rubble. Their bright eyes and laughter seemed at odds with the destruction.

“Not long,” Tom replied. “The army will want this town back. It’s too close to the capital. Strategically important.”

“These poor people,” she murmured. “How do they live with this constant threat? I couldn’t do it.”

“Jemah’s even worse,” he said. “Another town under rebel control. The army’s been attacking for days. It’s brutal.”

“When I took this job, this was the last thing I expected.” She motioned at the ruined streets. “It’s surreal. Me, caught in the middle of a civil war? Feels like a bad dream.”

His jaw tightened. “Things tend to go bad pretty fast in places like this.”

He would know. His entire career had been spent in hot zones like this.

She didn’t know how he handled it.

“There he is.” Tom stood up.

Hannah squinted into the sun. A man emerged out of the glare, smoking a cigarette, which he tossed into the dusty ground as soon as he spotted them.

“Tom. Good to see you, buddy.” They shook hands, while she stood aside, waiting to be introduced. His English was good, almost as natural as her Arabic, and was that a hint of an American accent she detected?

She studied him with renewed interest. He was tall, slim, dressed like many of the locals in jeans and a T-shirt, and his short dark hair and beard framed a handsome but serious face. The rifle slung over his shoulder caught her attention. It wasn’t the same kind as Tom’s, but it looked just as deadly.

“This is Hannah Evans,” Tom said in a low voice. “She’s why we’re here. I need to get her out of Syman. Urgently. Can we talk somewhere private?”

Jamal looked over at her and she got the feeling she was being assessed. A beat passed, after which he gave a curt nod. “Follow me.”

Hannah was unsure what to make of him. Tom had called him a friend, but their greeting hadn’t been exactly warm. She wondered what kind of work the two had done together.

Jamal led them through a maze of narrow alleys, some barely wide enough for one person. Eventually, they stopped outside a three-story apartment block, wedged tightly between two similar buildings. Bullet holes marked the walls, and looking up, she noticed many of the windows were cracked.

Jamal unlocked the door and stepped inside.

“This is my sister’s place,” he said, ushering them into the kitchen. It was clean, neat, and sparse. A dough-covered breadboard rested on a wooden table. “You can stay here as long as you need.”

“Thanks, but we can’t stay long,” Tom said. “I was hoping you could help us get out.”

Jamal’s gaze shifted to Hannah, and he hesitated.

Fine. She got the message. He wanted to speak to Tom privately.

“I would love to freshen up,” she said. “Would your sister mind if I used the bathroom?”

Jamal gave a relieved nod. “Please, feel at home. The bathroom is upstairs. There is also a shower, if you’d like one.”

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Obviously, she looked that bad. A shower sounded amazing, so she smiled gratefully and headed upstairs. Her absence would give them time to talk and hopefully hatch a plan to get her the hell out of here.

### CHAPTER 19

As soon as Hannah had disappeared up the stairs, Jamal relaxed. His shoulders dropped and the steel in his expression loosened. Without a word, he extended his hand.

Tom clasped it and pulled him into a brief, but firm hug. The kind shared by men who had been through shit together and had forged a bond.

When they stepped back, Jamal broke into a grin. "It's good to see you, brother."

Tom returned it. "Yeah. It's been too long."

Jamal gestured for him to sit. "So. What's this all about? My uncle said you needed help?"

Tom settled into the chair at the small kitchen table, his gaze flicking toward the stairwell. "We do. Hannah's a westerner, abandoned in Syman City. The embassy's closed, and I promised to get her out."

Jamal sat opposite him. "Abandoned by who?"

"Everyone. Her work, the U.S. Government. She works in public relations, but she

got to the embassy too late. I said I'd help her. You know as well as I do, she's not safe here." It wasn't strictly a lie.

Jamal crossed his arms over his chest and studied him. "You just left your post?"

"I was tasked with getting her out. Saves them sending a team. Less of a diplomatic hassle."

Jamal gave a slow nod. Tom knew the excuse made sense, which was why he'd used it. "It's good to see you back in action."

He grunted. "I've been fine for a while."

"Uh-huh."

Tom looked him dead in the eye. "I can do this, but I need your help." The words came out sharper than he intended.

"I didn't say you couldn't." Jamal switched focus. "You trust her?"

"Of course. She's a civilian. An American."

He frowned. "She doesn't look American."

"She is, trust me. We've made her look like a local to blend in. It's all part of the job."

"My uncle said she talks like a native."

Tom sighed. "I forgot how cynical you are. Her grandparents were born here. They taught her the lingo. She's on the level, I swear."



Jamal raised his hands. "Okay, relax. I believe you."

A beat passed.

"She's attractive, yes?"

Tom shrugged like the thought had never occurred to him.

Jamal chuckled. "Ah, my friend. I see the way you look at her."

He shook his head "I'm doing my job. That's all this is."

Jamal got up and walked over to the window to peek into the street. Always on alert. He had to be. "Sure. If you say so."

"It's not like that," Tom insisted.

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Jamal glanced back over his shoulder. “You had the same look on your face in Kabul.”

Kabul.

The word hung heavily in the air.

Tom’s jaw tightened. “We’re not talking about that.”

Jamal turned and nodded. “No. We’re not. But it’s about time you moved on, don’t you think?”

Tom shut it down. “How are things here?” he asked, changing the subject.

Jamal smirked but returned to the table. Behind the stoic exterior, Tom could see the lines of fatigue.

“Not good, my friend. Mortar attacks, sniper fire, civilians caught in the middle. The army pulled out a few days ago, but we know it’s temporary. They’ll be back, and this time they won’t bother with warnings.”

Tom’s expression hardened. “How’s morale?”

“As expected. Supplies are running thin, but we’re regrouping. We’ve got some fighters returning from the south, and more people are stepping up. We’re holding on.”

Tom nodded. He'd fought beside Jamal long enough to know it wasn't in the man's nature to give up. He'd die before he surrendered.

"I wish there was something I could do."

"The U.S. Government is threatening military action," Jamal said, perking up. "I've got a contact who says they're mobilizing in the Gulf."

"They won't condone the atrocities," Tom agreed. He'd heard the same thing. "Hakeem crossed the line with the chemical warfare."

Jamal's expression darkened. "He crossed the line a long time ago."

Jamal's mother was American, so he'd trained and fought alongside Tom's unit in Afghanistan. That's how they'd met. But now, with Syman on the brink of war, he'd flown back to fight for his country.

Tom looked him square in the eye. "That's why I need your help. We've got to get Hannah out. The situation is going to get worse, before it gets better."

Jamal was quiet for a long moment. Then he said, "I might know a way. But it's risky."

Tom leaned forward. "I'm all ears."

## CHAPTER 20

"Where's Jamal?" she asked, coming back into the room. Damn, it felt good to be clean. She'd showered and washed her hair, and now tendrils sprung up around her face as it dried.

“Gone out,” came Tom’s reply, but his appreciative gaze lingered, making her flush. “He’s agreed to help us.”

“Oh, that’s great.” She managed a smile as she crossed the room and took a seat on one of the low cushions opposite him. A tray of tea and some flatbreads lay on a low table, and he gestured for her to eat. Starving, she reached for one. “How?”

“He’s arranged for us to get a lift to Jemah with some friends.”

“Isn’t there fighting in Jemah?” she asked, between bites. Having seen how this town had been destroyed by the bombing, she had no desire to walk into a town where it was actually happening.

“Apparently there’s a cease-fire,” he told her. He hesitated, then added, “But it could kick off at any time again.”

Hannah gulped over the bread. “Oh, great. So we’re heading into a potential warzone.”

“We’ve got little choice,” Tom said. “We can’t stay here, it’s too dangerous. Jemmah is on the way to the coast, so we’ll be closer to our destination. It’s worth the risk if it helps us get you out.”

She washed down the food with a cup of sweet tea. “There’s no other way?”

He shook his head. “Not if we want to get out of here in two days.”

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She pursed her lips. “Looks like we’re going to Jemah then.”

A dusty whitepickup truck idled outside the grocery store with its engine running. A group of rough-looking men with bandanas obscuring their faces climbed into the back. They were heavily armed and looked a dangerous, volatile bunch.

She swallowed hard. These were rebels.

A rebel convoy headed for Jemah—and they would be right in the middle of it.

How was this a sensible plan?

And why did Tom seem so at ease?

She watched him greet the men, shaking hands and speaking in low tones. Seeing him with them, she realized just how easily he blended in. With his tanned face, dark beard, and the bandana around his neck, he looked nothing like a U.S. Marine. Only his blue eyes gave him away, but that could be chalked up to a genetic quirk.

She wondered how Tom knew Jamal. It was obvious they were friends but judging by the way the others deferred to him, there was no question Jamal was in charge.

“Hannah, sit up front with the driver,” Jamal ordered, striding over to her.

She glanced at Tom, who gave a small nod. It was obvious Jamal played an important role in the anti-government movement. Maybe that was why he hadn’t wanted to speak openly in front of her. And Tom—who clearly knew exactly who and what his

friend was—hadn't said a word.

"I'll be right behind you," Tom said.

Sighing, she climbed in next to the driver, a hard-looking man with an angry scar slashed down his cheek.

"As-salamu 'alaykum," she said in Arabic.

He didn't spare her so much as a glance.

Great. She was in a truck full of armed rebels. She must be out of her mind.

What the hell was Tom thinking?

Once everyone was inside, the driver shifted into gear and pulled away. She sat stiffly, hands folded in her lap, wishing Tom were beside her and not in the back with the others.

They drove in silence. She couldn't make out what the men were saying behind her, but the way they were all huddled together, it looked like they were planning something. She began to get a bad feeling.

She wondered what it was—then decided she didn't want to know. As long as they made it to Jemah safely, that was all that mattered.

They bounced along for an hour. The road was rough and riddled with potholes, and she was jostled so much she had to hang onto the door handle to avoid hitting her head on the roof.

Eventually, just when she felt like she couldn't take another minute of it, the driver

veered off the road into a shaded rest stop beneath a small cluster of overhanging fig trees. He cut the engine.

“What’s wrong?” she asked in Arabic.

The man ignored her, his eyes locked on his rearview mirror.

It was maddening. She might be a woman, but she was still a human being. She wasn’t invisible.

Then again, working for the prince had given her a false sense of entitlement. He had allowed her a level of freedom and respect she wouldn’t have gotten elsewhere in Syman. Most areas outside the cities were very traditional, and women weren’t meant to ask questions.

Angling her side mirror, she watched Jamal issue a command to the men in the truck bed, then leap down. A moment later, two other men followed, both carrying bulging backpacks. After a brief exchange, Jamal clapped them both on the back and they disappeared into the low dunes beside the road. Then the rebel leader climbed back in and thumped on the roof of the cab, making her jump. The driver started the engine again and pulled back onto the road, leaving the two men behind.

The whole thing was incredibly suspicious.

She turned and tried to catch Tom’s eye, but he was staring ahead, his expression unreadable, his eyes narrowed slits against the sun.

What the hell was going on?

The bad feeling she had got worse.

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The traffic got progressively heavier, then ground to a halt altogether. Craning her neck, Hannah spotted two army vehicles parked across the road at an angle.

Her blood ran cold.

Not another roadblock? The second in as many days.

Except this time, there was no contingency plan. No family to flag down. No truckload of rebels to provide a distraction.

Oh, wait. They were the distraction!

Heart racing, she twisted in her seat, trying to get Tom's attention. He didn't see her or didn't want to. His eyes were locked on the roadblock ahead.

She considered jumping out now and making a run for it. Had everyone lost their minds?

"Trust me," he'd said.

She broke into a hot sweat and glanced over at the driver.

He was perspiring too, his whole body tense. He glanced at his wristwatch. As the line of vehicles crawled forward, he eased his foot onto the gas and moved with them. Closer to the checkpoint. Closer to certain death.

Desperation surged through her. No. She was not going to die as a fugitive in Syman.



If Tom wasn't going to help her, she would help herself.

She reached for the door handle.

As she touched it, the driver leaned over and clamped a hand around her wrist.

"No," he said firmly, shaking his head. His grip was strong, his message unmistakable. She wasn't getting out.

"But the roadblock—" Her voice came out a choked whisper.

"Wait." The driver released her and nodded toward the vehicles ahead. He checked his watch again.

That's when she realized something major was about to happen. Goddammit, why hadn't Tom warned her?

Then she got it. He must have known she wouldn't agree. This plan wasn't just reckless, it was downright insane.

The driver gripped the wheel, knuckles white, engine revving. His expression was set. He was preparing to punch through the checkpoint.

It was suicide.

A knock tapped against the back window. She looked up.

Tom's blue eyes locked onto hers. He made a quick motion across his chest.

Put on your seatbelt.

Oh God.

He must have seen the fear in her eyes, because he gave her a confident nod and a thumbs up.

Thumbs up? Was he serious?

Her hands shook so badly she could barely pull the seatbelt across her body, but after a few tries, she managed to clip it into place.

In the back, the men were tense. There was no talking now, and all eyes were forward. Every one of them clung to the truck's slatted metal sides, knees bent, ready for the hit.

Hannah shut her eyes. Please let them make it.

A deafening blast shattered the stillness, making her gasp. She glanced ahead as an orange fireball shot into the air.

What—?

One of the military vehicles had exploded, but she barely had time to register it when a second, larger detonation followed.

Thick, black smoke swallowed them up, covering the road.

Pandemonium erupted.

Through the haze she saw army officers sprint toward the flames, rifles raised. Drivers leaned on their horns. Voices shouted conflicting orders, while panic spiraled out of control.

Their own driver seized the moment. He floored the accelerator and veered sharply onto the gravel shoulder.

Gunfire erupted behind them.

She flinched as a volley of bullets screamed through the air, ducking down in her seat. From the back of their truck came a rattling burst of machine-gun fire. She saw one soldier collapse, while the others scrambled for cover behind the flaming wreckage.

Their truck surged forward, bouncing over debris and small mounds. She hit the ceiling once, then was slammed back into the seat.

Thank God Tom had told her to buckle up.

Finally, they punched through the cloud of smoke and burst out the other side. They were back on the open road to Jemah.

## CHAPTER 21

“You didn’t tell me they were going to blow up the roadblock!” Hannah yelled at Tom as he opened the door to let her out. Her voice shook with fury. “Are you trying to get us killed?”

They’d skidded to a halt near a low building that might once have been a school or hospital. Now it was just a skeleton of rubble and broken concrete. The driver and the others in the back, including Jamal, scattered the moment the truck stopped. Already, the blue flashing lights of the military police could be seen closing in—seconds behind.

“You wouldn’t have come,” Tom shot back, grabbing her hand and pulling her into the shattered structure.

“Damn right, I wouldn’t!” she snapped, following him through a hole that had once been a window. “That was madness. Those guys are crazy. They’re full-on rebel activists. I can’t believe you?”

“Get your head down,” he cut in sharply. She dropped low without protest as they sprinted through one derelict room after another, hugging the walls.

Gunfire cracked behind them.

“That’s Jamal and his rebel activist friends covering us,” Tom muttered. “It’ll buy us some time.”

Hannah ran blindly, heart pounding, ducking as best she could while he led the way

through the maze of rubble. A bullet zinged past, striking the pillar next to them with a vicious thud.

More gunfire, closer this time.

Tom launched himself on top of her, shielding her as they hit the ground behind a low wall. He rolled to one side and fired rapidly in the direction of the gunfire.

Hannah lay frozen, eyes squeezed shut.

“Come on, let’s move!” Tom shouted, yanking her to her feet in one fluid motion. She stumbled after him around a corner and into another burnt-out room.

He paused, scanning quickly for exits. His eyes locked on a window still crusted with broken glass. With a few hard scrapes of his rifle, he knocked the jagged shards away. Then he turned to her.

“After you.”

Shouts echoed behind them. Gunfire popped again.

Hannah placed her hands on the windowsill.

“Brace yourself!” he called out.

Before she could ask why, he grabbed her legs and boosted her through. She hit the ground awkwardly, surprised more than hurt. They were only on the first floor, thank God.

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“Sorry. Coming through,” he shouted, leaping after her. She scrambled aside just in time as he landed hard, rolled, and popped to his feet.

He yanked her up. “We’ve got to keep moving.”

She clung to his hand with a death grip as they sprinted up a side street and ducked into another crumbling building across the road. This time, he charged straight for the stairs and took them two at a time, spiraling upward until they reached a metal door barely hanging on its hinges. He shoved through it and they burst onto the roof.

“Lie down,” he ordered.

She threw herself onto the tarred rooftop, chest heaving. Tom crept over to the edge, crouched behind the low wall, and peered at the street below.

Heavy boots thudded through the building beneath them.

Her pulse was racing. “Are they coming?” she croaked.

A loud bang below answered her question.

He glanced back. “It won’t be long. We need to move. Can you keep going?”

“Yes, let’s go.” Waiting around to get caught wasn’t an option.

“We’re going to have to jump.”

Her mouth went dry. “Oh my God. How high is it?”

“That’s not important. The gap’s only about a meter wide. You’ll make it. I’ll go first—just follow my lead.” She stared at him like he’d lost his mind. They were at least three stories up.

But he was serious.

“If you don’t follow, you’ll be left behind,” he warned.

That got her moving.

Tom backed up a few steps and ran. He cleared the gap with ease, landed solid, and turned to hold out a hand.

“Come on.”

Don’t look down. She chanted the words in her head as she stepped back.

The soldiers were coming. Their boots pounded the stairwell.

Now or never.

Tom’s hand was waiting. “Now, Hannah!”

She sprinted forward. The edge of the roof rushed up. She launched herself—and landed hard at his feet.

She’d made it.

But there was no time to celebrate. He yanked her behind a cement block just as

soldiers burst onto the roof behind them.

“You okay?” he whispered.

She nodded. “I think so.”

“Good. Because I need you to do that again.”

Her heart dropped. “Again?”

Sweet Jesus.



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She was not cut out for this. Jumping between rooftops was something out of a Bond film, not real life.

“Ready?”

Shouts rang out. Their pursuers were already on the move.

She barely nodded.

“You go first. I’ll cover you.”

She peeked at the next gap. It was wider than the first—at least a meter and a half.

She kept her head down and ran. A yell went up behind her. She braced for gunfire. It came, but not from behind. Tom’s rifle barked a warning as she launched herself through the air.

She landed and rolled, just like she’d seen him do. It helped, winding her less.

Before she’d caught her breath, Tom landed beside her.

“Get under cover!” he yelled as bullets rained down on them. They scrambled behind another concrete structure just in time.

A soldier leaped across the gap, and she screamed.

Tom spun out from their hiding place and, with a powerful kick to the torso, caused

the man to stumble backward over the edge. His partner halted, raising his weapon, but before he had time to fire, Tom shot him in the head.

Hannah squeezed her eyes shut, turning away.

“Them or us,” Tom said matter-of-factly. “Let’s push on. We don’t know how many others are coming. Once we get into the rebel-controlled suburbs, we’ll be okay. They won’t follow us there.”

Hannah stayed close to his side. She didn’t have a clue which suburbs were controlled by the rebels. How the hell did he? They skirted the long, flat roof that appeared to be the top of an old apartment block. There was no fire escape, which would have made life easier, but at the far end, she spotted an open window.

Tom had seen it too.

“This way.” He forced it open as wide as it could go.

She peered inside. “This is someone’s home,” she hissed, but Tom had already hopped over the windowsill and was scouting about inside.

With a quick look around, she followed suit.

They were in a bedroom—and a messy one, at that. The bed was unmade, and clothing was strewn all over the floor. Gingerly, they picked their way through the clutter toward the door.

So far, so good.

They heard the television from another room, so presumably someone was home. Hannah held her breath, praying they wouldn’t suddenly make an appearance.

A dank, musty passageway led from the bedroom toward the front door. Treading lightly, they inched past the entrance to what she assumed was the living room. The door was slightly ajar, offering a partial view of the TV, but nothing else. Hopefully that meant the occupant couldn't see them, either.

Then they heard a clunk, like someone had set a mug down on a tabletop. Tom held up a hand. She froze, waiting for a creak or a groan—anything to indicate the person was getting up.

Nothing happened. They hadn't moved. She exhaled. After a few more seconds, just to be sure, he motioned for them to continue.

On the right was a small kitchen, even messier than the bedroom. She turned up her nose at the smell as they passed by. Tom slid open the old-style bolt that served to lock the frontdoor. It grated slightly but not loud enough to rise above the noise from the living room.

Slowly, he eased open the door, and they slipped out into a communal stairwell.

## CHAPTER 22

Tom had committed the address of Jamal's contact to memory and managed to locate it without much trouble. There was a sense of urgency on the streets, with people going about their business quickly and silently, not stopping to chat or socialize. No one wanted to spend too much time out in the open.

Shops were boarded up, and residents had nailed anything they could find over their windows to protect them when the shelling began. This was a town on the brink of war. It felt as if everyone was holding their breath, waiting for Hakeem's armed forces to attack.

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Their location was a narrow double-story house in much the same state of disrepair as most of the other residences in town.

He knocked, and they waited.

Jamal opened the door a crack, and they passed through. He thumped Tom on the back. "I'm glad you made it, brother."

He gave a nod. "Likewise."

"You sure you weren't followed?"

Tom shook his head. "Lost them several clicks back." He'd made sure of that, taking a roundabout route and doubling backtwice. Not that any soldier who valued his life would follow them this deep into rebel-held territory.

He led them into the sparse living area. "Good. This is one of our safe houses. We can rest up here for a while."

Tom noticed the bloody bandage tied around Jamal's upper arm. "You're injured?"

Jamal waved it off. "Just a graze. The important thing is we made it. Our plan worked." He lowered his voice so Hannah couldn't overhear. "Now we can join Abu-al-Rashid and his army and prepare for the imminent attack."

"I wish you luck." Tom cast a glance at Hannah. She stood at a respectful distance, letting them talk.

“You can use the spare room,” Jamal said, nodding down a narrow hallway. “I can only spare the one.”

“We’re just grateful to have a place to sleep,” Tom said with a grateful nod. Jamal had put himself out enough for them.

“Stay as long as you need.”

“Thanks, but we’ll be heading off first thing.” He nodded in Hannah’s direction. “We don’t have much time.”

“You’ll need transport,” said Jamal, matter-of-factly. He was a strategist, first and foremost. Tom remembered that about him. Always the man with a plan. That’s how he’d known to come to him for help.

He pulled out a map and placed it on the scratched coffee table. Tom beckoned for Hannah to come over. “It’s at least another ten miles,” he told her.

She gave a nod, but he saw the weariness on her face. She was done in.

“Why don’t you get some rest?”

“What are you going to do?” She was spooked too, he could tell. To be fair, the events of the day would freak the most stoic civilian the hell out. She’d done well to get this far.

“I’ll be right here,” he said, forcing a smile.

Jamal glanced between the two of them, a knowing look on his face.

Tom ignored him. “It’s okay. We’re safe here.”

She gave a tremulous nod, then disappeared down the hall.

“Don’t—” he warned, as Jamal opened his mouth.

His buddy laughed. “I was just going to say I’ll see if I can arrange some transport for you.” He patted Tom on the shoulder. “Rest up, my friend. I think she would feel better if you were with her. We’ll talk again later.”

He was about to argue, then noticed Jamal rubbing his arm. “Okay, you get that seen to before it gets worse.”

Jamal gave a half nod. “On it.”

He found Hannah sitting on a mattress on the floor, her back to the wall and her knees pulled to her chest. She swiped at her eyes as he walked in. “I’m not crying,” she said, with a sniff.

His lips quirked. “Didn’t say you were.”

She might be disheveled and exhausted, but she hadn’t lost her spark. That was something, at least.

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“You haven’t told him about me, have you?” Her gaze was almost pleading. He could see how frightened she was but trying bravely to hide it. His heart nearly broke. He longed to take her into his arms and tell her everything was going to be all right, but he’d be lying.

“Of course not.”

As good a friend as he was, Tom didn’t think Jamal would be as accommodating if he knew what secrets Hannah held. Just being here was insanely dangerous, but the alternative was worse.

“Why not? You’re obviously close.”

He straightened. “Because I wouldn’t do that to you. And because if that kind of information gets out now, it could sparksomething we can’t control.” He paused, weighing the cost. “Taking down Hakeem and Anwar will be a win, yes—but only if it’s done right. If we act recklessly, we create a power vacuum. And that’s when extremists step in.”

He’d seen it happen.

“We get the intel out, let the international forces act, then help local leaders stabilize the country. Jamal and his people have to be part of the solution. That’s the only way this holds together without more bloodshed.”

One more night, and he’d get her out. They could risk that. She needed to rest and recover. While he could have kept going, she desperately needed sleep. Even now, he

could see deep purple shadows forming beneath her eyes, and lines of exhaustion marking her forehead.

“So they don’t know about the impending attack?”

He shook his head, guilt slamming into him. “He knows they’re mobilizing, just not when it’s going to kick off. If there’s time, I’ll tell him once we’re safely on a dhow away from here.”

“Do you think we’ll make it?” she whispered, hugging herself. Her vulnerability tore at him. It took all his willpower not to stride over to the mattress and take her in his arms and kiss away the tremor on those beautiful lips.

“It’ll be close, but yeah.” An attack might be just the diversion they needed to get out undetected, but he didn’t say that. She was scared enough.

She nodded, but he could tell she wasn’t convinced.

He sat down on the only wooden chair in the room and removed his shoes. He needed a shower, food, and some sleep, in that order. “Jamal says we’re safe here for the night.”

“Jamal is a rebel leader, isn’t he?” she asked, quietly.

He glanced up, wondering how much to say. She’d worked out most of it anyway. Hard not to, under the circumstances. “More of a faction leader. He’s a member of the opposition party, led by a man called Abu-al-Rashid. There are a few rebel factions, but these are the guys the allies would like to see in power once this war comes to an end.”

“This Abu-al-Rashid, is he one of the good guys?”



Tom tilted his head. “He’s better than most—and Jamal is a good contact to have. We wouldn’t have gotten this far without him.”

“How did you two meet?” she asked.

He’d known this question would come. “We served together,” he said, opting for the simple answer.

Her eyes widened. “He’s American?”

“Half. We trained him, and now he’s here fighting for freedom for his country.”

She stared at him, then nodded. “I can understand why he’d want to. I thought Prince Hakeem was a good leader. That he was making positive changes in Syman, but I was naïve. He’s a monster, just like Abdul Anwar.”

Tom didn’t comment.

“All those innocent people—” She stopped and shook her head.

“Don’t think about that now. The best way you can help them is to get some sleep, so we’re good to go tomorrow. The sooner we get off this island, the sooner we can put a stop to Hakeem’s rule.”

She gave a weary nod, but didn’t move.

“I’m going to take a shower,” he said, but when she tensed, he added, “I’ll be as quick as I can.”

A little sigh, and she gnawed nervously on her lower lip. He suddenly found he wanted to do the same.

Shit. What was wrong with him?

A shower would clear his head. He'd better make it a cold one.

### CHAPTER 23

"I'll take the floor," he said when he got back. He'd gotten dressed in the bathroom after shaking the dust out of his clothes. Sleeping fully dressed meant he'd be ready to move if they needed to.

Hannah was curled up on the bed, but her eyes were open. He had the sense she'd been waiting for him to walk in so she could finally relax.

A rush of heat surged through him. So much for the cold shower.

"Don't be silly," she said. "You need sleep as much as I do."

He couldn't argue with that, but still he hesitated. Lying next to her, feeling the warmth of her body, her curves inches from his... He wasn't sure he had the willpower for that.

"Please."

It was that one word that undid him.

He nodded and walked to the mattress. Lowering himself down, he lay on his back, arms folded tightly across his chest. If he didn't move, didn't touch her, maybe he'd get some rest.

“Tom?”

“Yeah.”

“Will you hold me?”

Jesus.

“I don’t think that’s wise,” he said carefully, his voice lower than intended.

Her voice was a breathy whisper. “I’m scared. What if we don’t get through this? What if they find us before we reach the coast?” A sob caught in her throat.

Goddammit.

He turned on his side to face her. “Nothing’s going to happen. We’ll make it. I told you I’d get you out—and I will. We’ve come this far, haven’t we?”

She nodded, eyes shimmering in the dark.

“Fuck,” he muttered, opening his arms.

She moved into them, slipping hers around his waist. She was warm and soft, and fit against him like she belonged there.

Too damn well.

He drew in a ragged breath. God help him.

“Thank you, Tom,” she murmured against his chest.

His body reacted instinctively. Her scent, the brush of her hair, the curve of her hip pressing into him—it was driving him crazy.

Maybe she wouldn't notice.

“You don't have to thank me. I was just doing?—”

“I know,” she whispered, tilting her head to smile up at him. “You were just doing your job.”

He swallowed hard. He was on dangerous ground.

He knew better than to get romantically involved with the woman he was protecting. She was his responsibility, they were in a potential viper's nest and here he was cradling her in his arms like there was nothing to worry about.

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The shit could hit the fan at any moment. They'd have to act, fast.

He couldn't afford to let his guard down.

"Hannah," he croaked, glancing down at her. "Hannah, we can't?—"

He broke off.

She was fast asleep.

### CHAPTER 24

The flashes are white, blinding. She ducks, but not before the smoke engulfs her. It's thick, suffocated. She begins to choke, except it isn't smoke, it's sand... in her mouth.

She runs, always running, the rooftop is a blur beneath her feet. Gunfire cracks behind her like fireworks. Too close.

She leaps but misses. Frantic hands grab for purchase. A voice shouts her name, but it is distant and garbled.

She turns. A soldier stares at her, blood on his uniform. His eyes lock on hers. Judging.

"No," she whispers.

He reaches out, but she can't get to him. Her feet won't move. He falls. Over the edge.

Gone.

Screams echo. Are they hers? She's falling too now. Down... down... into nothingness.

There's a weight on her chest. She can't breathe.

Then suddenly, a hand—familiar, steady—reaches through the dark.

Tom.

“Trust me.”

She clings to him. He's warm, solid, real. She wants to hold on. Wants to stay in that touch. But he's pulling away.

“No!” she screams, lashing out. Desperate.

But he's gone.

## CHAPTER 25

At first, he thought she was just turning over in her sleep, but then she whimpered—a sound so soft and broken it pulled him fully awake.

Her breathing quickened, shallow and panicked. One of her arms flung out, hitting his side as she twisted in the sheet.

“Hannah,” he said, sitting up, instantly alert.

She jerked again, her entire body tensing. “No! No, please...”

Tom reached for her, his hand on her shoulder, then her cheek. “Hannah, wake up.”

She gasped, still caught in the grip of her nightmare.

“Tom? Don’t go...”

The plaintive cry made his chest tighten.



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“Hannah? Hannah, wake up. You’re dreaming.”

Her eyes flew open, wild and unfocused in the dark. Seeing his shadow, she scrambled backward, pressing herself against the wall. Her chest rose and fell like she’d run a mile.

“Who—?” she panted.

“It’s me,” he said gently, moving slowly so he didn’t scare her anymore than she already was. “It’s Tom. You’re okay. You’re safe.”

Her eyes locked onto his. Her breathing was ragged. She blinked and looked around the room, slowly realizing where she was. Who he was.

“Oh, thank God.” Tears shimmered at the corners of her eyes. “I thought—I thought we were still out there. I saw the soldier again, the one who fell. He looked at me, Tom. He looked right at me before he went over.”

Tom slid closer and wrapped his arms around her. She didn’t resist. In fact, she clung to him like she was drowning, and he was the only thing keeping her afloat. He rested his chin atop her head, his hand running slowly down her back.

“I’ve got you,” he murmured. “It’s over. You’re okay.”

She nodded against his chest, still shaking. “I thought I’d lost you. I couldn’t breathe.”

His throat tightened and he held her closer, absorbing her fear. Wishing he could make it disappear but knowing he couldn't.

He'd had similar nightmares himself, after the ambush. The faces of his team had haunted his dreams for weeks. He'd wake up yelling their names, covered in sweat.

It was hell.

"I'm right here," he murmured again. "It was just a dream."

A long moment passed where she didn't move. He could feel her hands fisting in his shirt, the tension in her body. He stroked her back, whispering that it was all going to be okay, and slowly, he felt her relax.

Finally, she gave a little shudder and released him. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to?—"

He shook his head. "It's okay. You don't have to explain. I get it."

"You do?"

"Yeah. I've been there."

PTSD, the doctor had said. A trauma response. He'd felt broken, powerless, strewn with guilt. Thankfully, it wasn't permanent. He rarely had those nightmares anymore, although the guilt lingered. He'd never get rid of that, and in a dark, twisted way, he wasn't sure he wanted to.

A nod. "Of course you have. My experience is nothing compared to what you?—"

“That’s not what I meant,” he said roughly. “I just meant, I understand what you’re going through. It’s tough, but it’ll get easier.”

She bit her lip, drawing his gaze. “You have nightmares too?”

He hesitated. “I used to.”

“Why? What happened?”

He sensed her need to talk, her need for normalcy, but this conversation was anything but normal.

“Please, Tom. Tell me what happened to you. I want to know.”

He sucked in a breath.

Fuck. Here he was dragging her through hell to get her off the island. The least he could do was tell her why he was here to begin with.

“It started in Kabul,” he began, his voice unsteady. It had been a while since he’d talked about this, and not to anyone other than his doctor right after he’d been hospitalized. Back when it was still so raw.

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She nodded, shifting closer so she could hear better. He steeled himself for the emotions he knew would come crashing down, railroading him again. Maybe if he turned on the lamp, it would be easier but then he decided against it. Secrets were easier to tell in the dark.

“I had a contact there,” he said, his voice low. “A woman. Her name was Amrain. She was a nurse at one of the clinics. I met her when I took a member of my team there for treatment. When I realized she had ties to the Taliban, I decided to befriend her.”

He glanced away, so she wouldn't see the pain.

“Go on...” she whispered, reaching out and taking his hand. Her touch was cool, soft. It helped.

He cleared his throat. “I asked her to spy on someone for me. A suspected Taliban leader. She agreed, and I promised to protect her.” He paused, struggling to find the words.

“What happened?”

“They got to her,” he said, bitterly. “Threatened her family if she didn't betray me. So she led me into a trap. Said she had information on the whereabouts of the men we were after. I believed her and we arranged a raid. We were going to go in and take them out.”

His voice hardened. “We walked straight into a fucking ambush. They were waiting

for us. Opened fire as we walked into the place.”

She gasped.

“My team was annihilated. Didn’t stand a chance. They left us for dead.”

Her hand around his tightened.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

He felt the anger, the bitterness, and the guilt wash over him, and belatedly realized he was gripping her hand so tight his own was going numb. “By rights, I should have died with them that day.” He should have bled out on the concrete warehouse floor with his team. His brothers.

Struggling for control, he loosened his grip.

“How did you survive?” Her voice trembled.

For him. She was worried for him.

It was a foreign feeling, and one he wasn’t comfortable with. Nobody had cared about him like that in a long time.

“I’d been shot but I was conscious—just. A passer-by heard the gunfire and called the police. They sent for the paramedics, and I was taken to hospital. From there I was airlifted to the nearest naval base.”

“Thank God they got to you in time. Were you badly injured?”

“I got shot in the shoulder. The impact spun me around, and I took another bullet in

the back before I collapsed.”

A punctured lung. Two major operations. Months of rehab.

Her eyes widened. “It’s a miracle you survived.”

He nodded. Miracle. Mercy. Or just damned bad luck. The jury was still out.

“What happened to the woman?” she whispered. “Amrain?”

His voice was flat. “She was already dead. They executed her once she’d made the phone call.”

She didn’t say anything—didn’t have to. He felt her sympathy. Her concern. She moved forward, embracing him. He stiffened as her arms went around his neck, and almost pulled back, but something made him stay there. She didn’t move, didn’t speak, just held him, like he’d held her, until the waves of pain eased.

Without meaning to, he drew comfort from her body. He’d been holding it in for so long—the anguish, the guilt. It was exhausting. Wordlessly, he rested his head against hers.

They stayed that way for a long time, until the air around them shifted. Suddenly, he was acutely aware of the softness of her curves, and the gentleness with which she held him. Her fingers had somehow snaked into his hair, and she was arching in toward him, pressing herself close.

He sucked in a breath and straightened up. Her warmth, her scent lingered.

“That’s why I’m here,” he said, moving away. “That’s why they posted me to the embassy. I’m not fit for active duty.”

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She snorted, and it lightened the mood. “You sure fooled me.”

Yesterday had hardly been a walk in the park.

They stared at each other through the thin beam of light that crept in beneath the blinds. Tom didn’t know who moved first, but it didn’t matter. The moment their mouths met, something inside him snapped.

All the pent-up emotion he’d been carrying around with him for the last few days erupted in a volcano of need and desire. He crushed his lips against hers, and she opened for him with a soft moan.

She tasted as sweet as he remembered, and he devoured her mouth like a man starved. Her hand curled around the back of his neck, his slid to her waist, pulling her even closer.

The room disappeared. The war. The danger. Even the mission. It was just her—soft, real, and alive in his arms.

He deepened the kiss, savoring her, letting it sweep through him like wildfire. She wasn’t passive either. She responded with hunger, kissing him back like she’d been waiting for this, needing it as much as he did.

His hand slid up her side, over her ribs, feeling the rise and fall of her breath. She arched into his touch instinctively, and that small, unconscious movement nearly undid him. If he wasn’t careful, he was going to lose it entirely.

“Hannah—” he gasped, when they came up for air.

“Please... I need this, Tom. I need to feel something other than... fear.”

He got it, he really did, and had he been thinking clearer, he might have objected, but right now, as his lips found hers again, all rational thought vanished.

He was in the moment. Drowning in her hot, sensual femininity.

She shifted so she was sitting in his lap, one leg crossed over his thigh. It was close, intimate. He could feel her heat against his hips as she anchored herself to him. As if letting go wasn't an option.

He felt her hands on his back, her fingers digging into his shoulder blades like she needed him as much as he needed her.

With a groan, he released her mouth and kissed his way down her neck. She tilted her head back to give him better access, her hair tumbling down over his hands. He grabbed a fistful, tugging gently.

Christ, she was beautiful.

He couldn't stop kissing her, tasting her, working his way down to where her shirt hung off the shoulder. Her fingers fiddled with the remaining buttons, and then it fell open.

Goddamn.

One hand cupped her left breast, while his lips found her right nipple. He sucked it into his mouth, exploring the taut nub with his tongue. She gave a little cry of pleasure, and he felt a jolt of heat run straight down to his groin.



Everything about her was soft and warm, and he couldn't get enough. She writhed against him, desperate for contact, but when she felt the size of his erection, her eyes flew open.

He looked up, "Can't help it. Sorry."

"Don't apologize," she whispered, and rubbed her core against it. He groaned, clutching her waist with both hands.

"Shit, Hannah. If you keep doing that?—"

He found her mouth again, their breath tangling as their tongues danced.

Wanting to feel her, he moved his hand down and cupped her sex underneath the soft, linen pants she still wore.

"Oh, God. Tom..." she murmured, her thighs opening wider, legs locked around him.

He slipped his fingers into her folds.

Damn, she was wet.

Knowing it was for him, nearly made him come right then and there. Somehow, he hung on. He knew she needed this, needed the release—and darn if she didn't feel good.

He stroked her slickness until she was writhing back and forth against his hand in jerky little movements. He felt the tension inside her build. She'd been so pent up, so terrified by the events of the last few days, that she needed this release.

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Faster and faster, until her breath was coming in short gasps, and she clung to him, her hands gripping his shoulders like her life depended on it.

“I’m close,” she murmured, her eyes glazed. Tom had never seen anything so beautiful as this woman losing herself to the ecstasy that he was giving her.

She rode his hand, lips parted, thighs trembling with tension. He groaned, his own erection painfully throbbing against his pants. If he didn’t bury himself inside of her right now, he was going to go insane.

He withdrew his hand. She gave a sob. “Oh, God, don’t stop. Please...”

He kicked off his combat fatigues. “Darling, if I don’t get inside you now, I’m going to lose my mind.”

She groaned, feverish with desire. “Hurry up, then.”

“I don’t have a condom.”

“I’m on the pill. It’s okay.”

“You sure?”

She nodded, her arms already reaching for him, clawing at his shirt.

“Good, because when you explode, I want it to be around me.”

He peeled it off, not caring where it landed. They crashed together again, skin against skin, tongue melding with tongue.

After another mind-blowing kiss, he positioned himself between her legs. “Ready?”

“So ready,” she gasped.

He slid inside, just a little, trying to go slow. He didn’t want to hurt her. He needn’t have worried, she arched upwards, impaling herself on his cock, gripping him with her legs. He sucked in a breath at the sudden tightness, heat radiating into his groin and through his body.

Holy fuck, she felt good.

He thrust harder, feeling her fingers digging into his butt, drawing him in. He bit back a growl as all self-control vanished. Soon he was grinding against her, plunging in to the hilt, floating on the sensations building inside of him.

He heard her cry out and knew she was going to come. Thank God, because he was about to explode too. He rode her to a frenzy, until they were one gyrating, sweaty mess of uncontrolled desire.

It shouldn’t feel this good. They’d only known each other for a few days, but he felt like they were joined, connected by some mysterious force that bound them together. Not even a deadly secret or a civil war could prevent this from happening.

He pushed harder, deeper until she was crying out his name with almost every breath.

“Tom!” she cried, convulsing around him. He felt her whole body shake as her orgasm hit. And he watched, in wonder, as she came undone.

It was so damn sexy, it sent him careening over the edge. The hot tension released, and fireworks exploded behind his eyes. He clutched onto her as he rode it out, shuddering with every stroke. His entire body tingled with electricity, he was a live wire, his nerves firing faster than an AK-47.

He tensed as the current swept over him. He kept pounding into her until he couldn't anymore, and then he collapsed. He felt her heart hammering beneath his.

He leaned in and kissed her with a sense of wonder. She smiled against his lips and kissed him back. Tenderly, sensually. For a brief moment, Tom felt something close to heaven.

## CHAPTER 26

Hannah woke to a high-pitched wailing. She sat up, disoriented. "What's that?"

Tom was already on his feet, yanking on his cargo pants. The heat between them from only hours ago vanished beneath the shriek of the siren.

His jaw was tight. "That's the air raid alert. We're under attack. Get dressed. Now."

She rolled out of bed, then stumbled toward the bathroom, her heart racing.

The explosion hit a second later.

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A blinding flash seared the room white. The window shattered inwards as a fireball punched through the air. The blast knocked Tom off his feet, slamming him into the wardrobe with a sickening crack. The shockwave hurled a chair across the room and splintered the side of the bedframe.

“Tom!”

She stumbled back in, trying to avoid the glass and debris strewn on the floor. Smoke poured through the shattered window, thick with the stench of gunpowder and scorched concrete.

Tom lay sprawled against the floor, half-covered in dust and plaster. Blood trickled from his temple.

She dropped beside him, heart pounding. “Tom, can you hear me?”

He groaned, one hand lifting to his head. “Yeah. I think so.”

“Don’t move,” she said, brushing debris off his shoulders. “You might be concussed.”

He shook his head slowly, then winced. The streetlamp outside gave an apocalyptic flicker, then died, casting the room in darkness.

Outside, the dust was still settling.

“I’ll be okay,” he said groggily. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

She pulled on her shoes, then scrambled around collecting her clothes, before disappearing into the bathroom. Once dressed, she ran back to Tom.

Another bang, muted this time, but the sky lit up like a strobe.

“It’s begun.” Tom was sitting up, fully dressed, and tying his shoelaces. He still looked disheveled, and a little bit out of it, but he was making sense. If he was concussed, it was a mild one. She breathed a sigh of relief. It could have been a lot worse.

“The army?”

He nodded. “They’re attacking while people are getting ready for morning prayers.”

She looked at him in alarm. “What should we do?”

The door burst open and Jamal appeared. He was wearing the same clothing as the day before, with the addition of a military vest holding spare rounds and other gear. His brow was creased into a frown.

“I’ve been with Abu-al-Rashid’s men. Luckily we had a few minutes’ warning to signal the siren.” He looked from Tom to Hannah. “We’d better move.”

“On it.” Tom reached for his pack, which sat in the corner of the room. “Let me get my gear on.”

If Jamal noticed the mused-up mattress and entangled sheets, he didn’t let on. “Meet me downstairs in two. We’ll go out the kitchen entrance.”

Tom’s face was set in a grimace as he walked toward the door.

“You’re not all right,” Hannah said, taking his arm.

“I’m fine. Just annoyed at myself. This is my fault. I knew the attack was imminent. We all did. I should have been better prepared.”

“How can it be your fault?” she argued, leading him to the stairs. “You had nothing to do with that explosion.”

“I was in bed with you while the army moved in,” he muttered, dragging a hand down his face. “I should have seen it coming, should have been prepared, but I let my guard down.” His voice cracked. “I put the mission at risk. I put your life at risk.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself,” Hannah said, though her chest tightened. Last night had meant something to her. It had felt real—raw and close and honest. She’d trusted him, surrendered to him. She’d cried out his name. And now he was looking at it like a failure.

How could what they’d shared be a mistake?

“What if you’d been killed by that mortar?” he said. “What if we’re both killed as we walk out the door?”

“You couldn’t have done anything to prevent that,” she reasoned. “We’re caught up in a civil war, an uprising that has nothing to do with us.”

“Exactly,” he said, holding onto the banister as they made their way downstairs. “It’s a war zone. I should be making sure we’re safe, planning our escape, not frolicking around in bed with you.”

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Stung, she released his arm.

He squeezed his eyes shut. “Hannah, that’s not what I meant. I’m sorry. I don’t regret last night, it’s just that...”

“Don’t worry, I get it,” she snapped. “There are more important things to do than frolic with me.”

He didn’t reply.

Heart wrenching, she stomped downstairs and into the kitchen. He could make his own way down. There was certainly nothing wrong with his brain if he’d come to that conclusion already.

A second explosion shook the whole building. It was another mortar, aimed at the rebel-held suburb.

“Let’s go!” Jamal called, his hand on the back door.

Tom marched in. “Ready.”

Without another word, they left the safehouse and slipped out into the night.

The air was laced with cordite. Hannah could smell it as they hid in the shadows behind Jamal. Both he and Tom held their rifles in front of them, locked and loaded.

“Stay together,” barked the rebel leader, half running, half crouching as he moved



down the road.

Tom nodded at her. “After you.”

Hannah took off after Jamal, while he brought up the rear. He was protecting her, making sure there were no nasty surprises from behind. She liked to think it was because he cared about her, but she knew he was just doing his job.

She could tell the two men had worked together before. It was the way they moved, in symmetry. Jamal would run to the end of the street, pause, wait for them to catch up, then they’d swap positions. Tom would take the lead, with Jamal looking out behind them. At the next block, they’d swap again.

“We need a plan of action,” Jamal said, as they paused beside a burned-out garage to catch their breath. “Obviously the car-smuggling plan has gone out the window.”

Hannah stared at him. “You were going to smuggle me out of here in the trunk of a car? That doesn’t sound like a very good plan to me.”

Tom glanced at Jamal who said, “It was a good idea. I have agents in the military who would have taken you out in their army vehicle. No inspections. You would have been home free—or at least gotten most of the way to Hamesh on the coast.”

She blinked, feeling stupid. “I’ve changed my mind. That does sound like a good plan. Can’t we still do that?”

“Possibly. I need to get to my men and regroup. Everything has—what’s the phrase?—gone to hell in a handbasket now that the army has attacked. I thought we’d have more time, but I was wrong. I have no idea where my agents are. We’ve lost contact.”

“Where’s your rendezvous point?” Tom asked as they set off again.

“Northern suburbs, al-Hazra.” Jamal dropped his voice. “That’s where we’re going to launch our defensive. Al-Rashid is mobilizing troops as we speak.”

“This attack might play in our favor,” Tom said thoughtfully. “If we can get out during the chaos, they won’t notice she’s gone. They’ll be too busy fighting to worry about searching vehicles.”

“True. If I can locate my men, we may still be able to work out a plan.”

“Let’s hope your guys put up a good fight,” murmured Tom. “The more firepower you have, the more distracted the army will be.”

“And the more likely we’ll be hit by something,” she added, unable to help herself. It seemed madness to be heading into the midst of the fighting.

Both Jamal and Tom turned to stare at her.

“Sorry, but it’s true.”

Tom adjusted his rifle, then looked up at Jamal. “We’ll come with you to the rendezvous point and try to get out in the thick of the army assault.”

Hannah stared at him. Maybe the explosion had affected his brain. “You want to head straight towards the front line?”

“Yes,” they said in unison.

She threw her hands up in the air. “We’re going to die.”

Unless she did something about it.

She turned to Tom. “What if we bypass the fighting and head west. According to the map you guys were looking at this afternoon, that’s the fastest way out of town. It’ll take us through the Old City, across the bridge over the gorge, after which there’s a road that breaks off to the south.”

“How do you know that?” barked Jamal.

“Photographic memory. I don’t have time to get into it.”

He gave her a strange look, then turned to Tom.

“It’s true,” he said, although he was frowning.

Jamal turned back to her, his jaw tense. “You are right. It would be but there are two problems with your plan.”

“What problems?” If her memory served her correctly, and it always did, that was the fastest way out of the city.

Tom shot her a warning look. She swallowed, knowing she mustn’t let slip about the real reason they needed to get out of Syman—the intel.

“The town is surrounded,” Jamal said. “The army will have troops mobilized around

the entire perimeter. The other problem is the bridge. It no longer exists. It got blown up weeks ago.”

Shit. She hadn’t accounted for the map being out of date.

“The army now controls all exits out of town. The gorge is be a natural barrier. You can’t get out that way.”

Her heart sank. So much for that idea. “So, our only option is to head right into the danger zone?”

Tom nodded. “That is where the rebel defenses will be strongest. If we’ve got any chance of getting out of Jemah, it will be when the army attacks the rebels to the north. It’s our only hope.”

It made a crazy kind of sense. If the army was preoccupied with a strong opposition, they might be able to slip away undetected.

She gave a reluctant nod. “Okay.”

They set off again, the men falling into the same formation, backing each other up and keeping her safe in the middle. Street by street, they inched their way through the town under attack.

Civilians huddled in darkened buildings, too scared to go outside. Freedom fighters and armed sympathizers ran through the streets, shouting rapid instructions to each other, but most were heading north, like them, to the rebel stronghold.

In the distance, machine gun fire punctuated the air. Hannah didn’t want to think why that was or who it was aimed at. Every now and then, a mortar would hit and there’d be a loud bang followed by screams and the sound of rubble falling.

It was a nightmare.

Finally, they rounded a corner and spotted a group of rebels sheltering behind a concrete wall.

“These are my men,” Jamal announced, going over to greet them. Two of the rebels she recognized from the truck journey the previous day. A couple of them nodded to Tom, but they all ignored her.

It was just as well. She didn’t want anyone remembering her face. Fastening her scarf securely, she tucked it under the black robe.

Up ahead, the rebels had barricaded the road with square concrete blocks about shoulder height. They provided cover for the rebels and protection from the sporadic incoming artillery fire from the north.

Shots were fired, but she couldn’t work out where they were coming from.

“Snipers,” Tom murmured, scanning the rooftops.

She flattened herself against the concrete, trying to make herself as thin a target as possible. She was afraid that if she moved suddenly, someone would see her and shoot.

Tom conferred with Jamal’s men. There was a lot of hand signals and head nodding, but eventually he turned to her, his expression grim.

“They’re getting ready to advance.”

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She watched as a small group darted forward to the concrete blocks. They hunkered down, weapons pointed through the cracks.

“Abu-al-Rashid and his men are farther forward. There’s another barricade closer to the enemy line. We need to see if we can reach it.”

Hannah felt her pulse jump erratically. “Are you sure?” She couldn’t even see beyond the concrete blocks. Who knew what was out there? Bombs, snipers, enemy fire.

“There could be snipers out there,” she whispered, worriedly.

“There probably are,” Tom confirmed with a shrug, as if it was inevitable. “We’re going to have to take our chances. Stay low and against the walls, and you should be okay.”

“I don’t know if I can do this, Tom.” Her legs refused to move.

“You have to.” He faced her. “This is the only way.”

She reached under her robes and pulled a piece of paper out of an inside pocket. “Here. I want you to have this.”

He frowned. “What is it?”

“You know what it is.”

Last night, before she’d gone to bed, she’d found a pen and a piece of paper and

written down the addresses of all five of the safe houses mentioned in the official memo.

He stared at her. “You didn’t have to.”

“I did. If anything happens to me... if I don’t make it out... you can still stop this war.”

She couldn’t live with herself if it had been in her power to do something to save these people and she hadn’t.

He touched her face. “Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

“You can’t make that promise.”

“Get down!” yelled Jamal, as a high-pitched whistle cut through the air.

Tom threw his body on top of hers just as the building next to them exploded in a ball of fire.

## CHAPTER 27

A fierce gust of hot air engulfed them, singeing their hair and clothing. Chunks of concrete, glass, and metal tore through the street. Her ears rang with the shock of impact.

Hannah lay still until she felt Tom shift above her, then she exhaled.

Thank God, he was okay. That was the second time in as many hours that he’d taken the brunt of an explosion.

He lifted his head. “You okay?”

Trust him to ask her that. “I’m fine. You?”

“I’m good.”

Slowly, they sat up. Tom was covered in a fine layer of dust, a cut seeped on his forearm where something sharp had nicked him, and there was a graze on his cheek, just beneath his eye. Still, she drank in the sight of him. Once again, he’d saved her from harm.

“What was that?” she asked, wondering if she really wanted to know.

“Felt like an RPG.” He got up, shook himself off, then helped her to her feet.

Jamal darted over, looped his arms around both of them, and led them to the safety of the barricade.

“Get down.”



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Hannah slid down it until she was sitting on the ground. No cuts or grazes, thank goodness. Tom had acted as a human shield. It was a miracle he was still alive.

Looking back, she stared in horror at the street where they'd been standing. It was a scene of total devastation. Smoking piles of concrete littered the road, cars were on fire—but most disturbing, were the panicked cries of the people affected by the blast.

How was the building still standing after that direct hit? Then she noticed the damage. It burned from within, like a pumpkin on Halloween, except the exterior was black and scorched.

There was a desperate yell and a man sprinted toward the fire, shouting in Arabic.

“There’s someone in there,” Hannah translated, gazing at Tom, horrified. “His cousin is still inside.”

“No!” Jamal tried to intercept him, but the man wriggled out of his grip and kept on going.

Tom followed, helping to subdue the man. Between them, they prevented him from running into the blazing inferno. Another freedom fighter came and led the distraught man away.

“Abu-al-Rashid’s nephew is inside,” Jamal told them when they got back to the barricade.

Tom drew in a sharp breath. “Let’s see if he’s alive.”

Hannah gasped. “You can’t go in there.” It looked like the burning gates of hell.

Tom surveyed the building. “The grenade hit the front of the house. We may still be able to get him out.”

God, no.

She watched, horrified, as the two men pulled their bandanas over their mouths and approached the burning building.

They were so brave, or totally insane.

Thick smoke billowed out of the door and windows—or rather the gaping holes where the doors used to be. Inside, it glowed orange as flames devoured everything in sight.

Surely, they weren’t going to go in there.

## CHAPTER 28

Tom felt the searing heat before he even reached the front entrance.

“It’s a no go!” he shouted, backing up. “We’re going to have to find another way in.”

They ran around the side of the house. Here, the walls were less scorched.

“Jamal,” called Tom, spotting a window. The glass had been blasted out during the impact, but the frame remained intact. More importantly, the fire hadn’t reached this side of the house yet.

The rebel fighter joined him, and they climbed through the window, landing easily on

the uneven floor on the other side.

It was smoky, visibility was next to zero. Tom secured his bandana over his nose and mouth. Jamal did the same. Without them, they wouldn't last five minutes.

Jamal called out in Arabic.

They heard a faint groan, but it didn't sound like it was coming from this room.

"Come on," said Tom, heading deeper into the gloom. They didn't have long. The heat was intensifying and soon the smoke would overwhelm them.

They ran into the next room, which looked like a study, although what little furniture had been there was now smoldering in broken pieces on the floor.

A sob came from beneath a pile of fallen tiles and concrete where the roof had caved in.

"Over here." Tom began pulling tiles and concrete off the top of the pile and throwing them behind him.

There was a hot gust of wind as the fire spread into the room. Its hungry, hot fingers drew ever nearer to where they were standing. The smoke was becoming unbearable.

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“Hurry,” coughed Jamal, helping him.

Another sob, louder this time. A small hand reached up through a gap in the debris.

“It’s a child,” spluttered Tom, throwing debris out the way to get to the boy.

Jamal dislodged the last few tiles and they stared down at a small, tear-stained face. He must have been about ten or eleven, with scorched eyebrows and hair, and bleeding from a gash at his temple. But he was alive.

Tom scooped him up in his arms. It was hard to see through the dense smoke. “Which way?” he choked.

Jamal grabbed his arm and led them back into the room they’d come from. The smoke was less thick in here, but all three of them were coughing now. The boy seemed to be lapsing in and out of consciousness.

Tom carried him to the window. Jamal leaped out and Tom handed the child over, before climbing out himself. They stumbled away from the billowing building, gasping and coughing to clear their lungs.

“Thank God,” Hannah said, as he collapsed beside her. Jamal laid the boy carefully on the ground. “Is he okay?”

“I think so.” Tom gulped down lungfuls of fresh air. He could still taste the acrid smoke in his mouth. Jamal was doing the same, leaning back against the barricade, his eyes shut.

Hannah inspected the boy. “He’s breathing.”

His eyes fluttered and he coughed, gasping as he fought for breath. Hannah stroked his back. “You’re okay. You’re safe now.”

The man who’d run towards the blaze earlier rushed over. His wayward curly hair was held back by a red bandana, his brow furrowed in concern.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” he said, bowing profusely and pumping Tom and Jamal’s hands over and over again. “You saved Hamez’s life. My sister will be extremely grateful, as will my father.”

“Your father is fighting up ahead, is that right?” asked Tom.

“He’s leading the defense,” the young man said proudly.

Tom gave a curt nod. “Then, I look forward to meeting him in person.”

“I’m coming with you,” Jamal said. “You’re going to need backup and I want to talk with Abu-al-Rashid.”

Tom gave a quick nod. Jamal didn’t say what about, but he guessed it involved their defenses and their plan to fight back.

Jamal went over to talk to his men. It looked like he was issuing instructions in his absence. When he came back, he said, “Let’s head for the buildings on the northern side of the block.”

Tom consulted his map, which he had folded so that he could see where they were without having to open it all the way up each time. Unlike Hannah, he didn’t have a visual in his head. “The warehouse?”

Jamal nodded. “Yeah, if we get separated, we can regroup there.”

“Gotcha.”

Hannah glanced up. “We’re moving out?”

“Yeah, you ready?”

She nodded but Tom sensed her reluctance. He didn’t blame her. It went against every human instinct to run into danger. He’d been trained to do it, while Jamal and his men had gotten used to it, but it sure as hell wasn’t natural.

He reached down and pulled her to her feet.

Jamal unclipped his rifle, checked the magazine, and made sure it was cocked and locked. Barrel pointing forward, he nosed out from behind the wall.

“Clear!”

He sprinted around a small apartment block and disappeared into the dim interior of what looked like an abandoned school.

Tom nodded at Hannah. “Your turn.”

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She took a deep breath, then dashed after Jamal, a fleeting, black-robed figure amongst the dust and debris.

Tom glanced up and swept the rooftops for the glint of a sniper's rifle. The sun had risen now, drenching the rubble-strewn streets in a soft yellow hue. Hoping for the best, he ran after them.

It was dark inside the school. Long shadows stretched across the floor. Lots of hiding places. They moved quickly through it and out into a playground. The ground was pockmarked by explosions and pieces of the jungle gym hung at haphazard angles like broken limbs. A pair of swings were no more than burned rubber globules hanging off a chain. A metal pole was all that remained of a merry-go-round. It resembled a post-apocalyptic movie scene.

"That's so sad," Hannah said, as they ran across the yard to the fence on the other side.

Tom gave the gate a firm kick and it fell outwards onto the street. A woman ran past, dragging a grubby child by the hand, while a group of unarmed teenage youths ducked down behind a low wall, surveying the action.

They reached an intersection and ducked into a shop whose frontage had been torn off. The cave-like interior would offer protection from stray bullets. Tom glanced around. It was filled with rubble, wires, and broken shelving. All the merchandise had long since been looted.

"See that burned-out bus." Jamal pointed across the road. "That's where Abu-al-

Rashid and his men are.”

Tom studied the ragtag group of freedom fighters, all armed with semi-automatic and automatic rifles, hunkering down behind the bus. They took it in turns to fire back at the government forces who’d surrounded the territory. This was their forward operating base, and their most dangerous position.

Ironically, the bus had a rainbow painted across it, still visible beneath the fire damage. There wasn’t much hope here, Tom thought grimly as a volley of shots pinged off the rusty bonnet.

“What are we doing?” Hannah stared up at him, wide eyed.

The sporadic gunfire was disconcerting, and the road was impossible to cross. The ground at their feet was littered with shell casings.

“I need to talk to Abu-al-Rashid.” Tom focused his narrowed gaze on the bus.

“You can’t!” She gasped, horrified. “You’ll be killed.”

“I’ll cover you,” Jamal offered, peering out into the street. “The shots are coming from the north.”

“Tom, no,” she pleaded. “It’s not worth your life.”

“I’ll be fine,” he told her tersely. “We need this. We need his help to get out.” He gave her hand a quick squeeze. “Wait here. Whatever happens, stay undercover. You got that.”

She nodded, biting her lip.



“Back soon.”

He nodded to Jamal, who leaned out of the shop, and opened fire. It was now or never. Tom crouched low and ran across the street.

## CHAPTER 29

Hannah watched as Tom sprinted across the road to the rebel position. Her heart was pounding in her throat. She could barely breathe.

Please let him make it.

Jamal’s cover had worked, and Tom skidded to a halt behind the bus. He gave Jamal a thumbs up.

“My turn,” Jamal said. He waited until his team unleashed their firepower to the north, then followed Tom across the street.

Hannah had never known such bravery. She was frozen with fright. Her legs had turned to jelly, and she was leaning against a broken shelving unit in an attempt to stay upright.

Her ears were still ringing from the gunfire, and now the men were gone, she was completely alone.

She watched as Jamal introduced Tom to Abu-al-Rashid, and judging by the hand signals, was telling him about the fire and rescuing his nephew. Abu-al-Rashid embraced Tom, thanking him profusely. The rebel commander seemed like a decent man.

Tom, Jamal and Abu-al-Rashid talked for about twenty minutes, before Tom glanced

up and pointed to her. Abu-al-Rashid turned and looked.

Should she wave? Perhaps not. She nodded in his direction, and he dropped his gaze and turned back to Tom.

There was another volley of gunfire from the north, and she ducked behind the counter, which was now strewn with plaster, dust, and flakes of paint. Still, it would protect her in case any stray bullets found their way into the shop.

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It seemed to carry on forever, making the hairs stand up on her arms and sending chills down her spine. A deadly hail of bullets, and Tom and Jamal were going to charge back across the road in it.

Thankfully, they'd picked up the door to the bus that had fallen to the side, and used it as a shield. Abu-al-Rashid's men provided covering fire, and Tom and Jamal made it back safely.

"Don't ever do that to me again," she hissed, overcome with relief.

His blue eyes twinkled. "I'll try not to. You okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. It's you I'm worried about."

"I've been in worse situations than this and come out the other end," he told her. She cringed. Was there any worse than this constant barrage of fire from an invisible enemy? Not knowing when they were going to hit, or what?

"What did he say?" she asked.

"He's going to provide the distraction we need to get behind enemy lines."

"What kind of distraction?" she asked.

He snorted. "You'll know it when it happens."

Jamal glanced at his watch. "Five minutes."

Hannah's pulse ratcheted up. That's when it was happening, whatever this distraction was. The minutes crept by.

"This used to be a great neighborhood," Jamal said sadly. "The fighting has destroyed it."

Hannah noticed all the doors and windows overlooking the street were boarded up. Unlike what she'd seen in Syman City, no elderly men played backgammon on tables outside their front doors, and there was no colorful washing swinging between balconies above their heads. Instead, glass glinted among the cobblestones and angry, red anti-government slogans covered the walls.

"Nearly time," Tom said, his voice heavy with foreboding.

Hannah took a deep breath. It was time to move.

All at once, the air around them seemed to erupt with gun fire. The rebels unleashed a torrent of firepower onto their unsuspecting adversaries to the north. Several men ran forward, diving behind mounds of sandbags and abandoned vehicles. They tossed grenades, and two men actually launched a rocket propelled grenade.

Tom grabbed her hand and they ran out of the shop and around the corner. They kept going until they were one street back from the fighting. The armed forces returned fire and the cacophony that ensued was deafening.

"I hope they're okay," Hannah whispered, as they flattened themselves against a wall.

"So do I," Tom said. Even Jamal looked worried.

"They'll keep them occupied for a while," he said.

They moved forward another hundred meters, keeping to the walls of the buildings, hiding in the shadows. The sun was stronger now, and the rosy glow had been replaced with a stark white light that hinted of another scorching day. In midsummer, the temperatures could go up to the mid-forties.

The main danger then would be exposure and dehydration. That's if they made it that far.

"We're on a par with the enemy line," pointed out Tom. Ahead of them was a gravel area that looked like it had once been a car park. Beyond that, a wide street swarmed with army soldiers. Sandbag walls and military vehicles had been parked strategically to offer cover, while the men popped grenades into grenade launchers and fired them at the rebel-held district. Others knelt behind the barricade and unleashed a torrent of firepower into the streets beyond their line.

Tom nudged Jamal. "Look!"

"What the hell?"

The rebel stared horrified at the convoy of army vehicles, including tanks and armored trucks mounted with rocket launchers driving in. It was a breathtaking display of firepower. The rebels were tough, but Hannah doubted they'd be able to outgun these guys.

Jamal had gone white.

"We're going to need reinforcements," he whispered. "We'll have to fall back and regroup. I must warn Abu-al-Rashid."

"Where did they get all this equipment?" Tom gazed at the tanks and missile launchers. "And how did it get here so quickly?"

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“They’ve got outside support,” Hannah murmured, without thinking. “Sympathetic neighboring states.”

Jamal gave her a sharp look. “How do you know that?”

“I—I used to work at the royal compound.” She glanced fearfully at Tom. Had she just made a humungous mistake by revealing this information to the rebels? Jamal had been so friendly, that she’d lowered her guard. She’d begun to think of him as a friend on their side, but he wasn’t. Any enemy of Prince Hakeem was her enemy too.

“You worked with Hakeem?” Jamal’s voice was incredulous.

She gave a tiny nod.

Jamal turned on Tom. “Why did you not tell me?”

Tom shrugged. “It’s not important. She was a secretary at the palace, but she escaped before the trouble started. We’ve been hiding her at the U.S. Embassy for days.”

“It’s true. I got scared and wanted to go home, so I ran to the embassy, but I was too late. Everyone had gone. Tom agreed to help me get back to England.”

Jamal studied her as if seeing her properly for the first time. “Perhaps she has information that can help us.”

“I had the same thought,” said Tom. “Unfortunately, she doesn’t know anything important. She’s never even met Hakeem.”

“I worked in admin,” she said.

“That’s why she’s still here. She wasn’t important enough to extract. Now we’re being forced to do it the old-fashioned way.” He gave a wry grin.

Jamal seemed to accept that.

“What else do you know of their weapons supply?” he asked.

She pretended to think. “Not much. I remember organizing a meeting with some foreign dignitaries. Abdul Anwar was there. As I was setting up, I overheard them talking about a shipment. I wasn’t privy to the meeting and didn’t take minutes or anything. Sorry I can’t be of more help.”

“Do you know what the shipment was or who was supplying them with armaments?”

“No, like I said, I wasn’t involved in the meeting. I just set up the overhead projector and made tea.”

Jamal ran a frustrated hand through his hair.

“After all you’ve done for us, if there was any way I could repay you, I would,” she said, hoping he’d believe her. Lying wasn’t amongst her skillset, but in this case, her performance had to be Oscar-winning.

As soon as they got out of here, they could hand the intel to the Western nations, who’d be best equipped to take out Hakeem. These guys didn’t have the resources or the firepower. It would be a disaster.

She jumped as a RPG launched in the air, its trajectory curving right into the center of town. Seconds later, they heard a muted explosion.

“That’ll do some damage,” muttered Tom, thankful for the distraction. “We’d better keep moving. The longer we stay here, the more chance we have of being discovered.”

“We’re going in there?” She stared at the frenetic activity behind the row of sandbags and military vehicles.

“Yeah, do you know how to shoot a gun?” Tom asked.

She shook her head.

“Well, you’re about to learn.” Tom unclipped the 9mm pistol from his thigh holster. “It’s loaded. Use two hands to keep it steady when you fire it. The safety is here.” He pointed to the little switch. “Make sure it’s off before you engage. Then all you have to do is aim and pull the trigger.”

It didn’t sound too hard. She took the gun, unprepared for the sheer weight of it. It was warm on the one side, from the heat of his thigh, and icy cold on the other. She gripped it tightly in her hand. Aim and fire, she repeated silently. She could do that.

“How are we going to get across the road?” she asked.

Jamal pursed his lips. Abu-al-Rashid will handle that.

“Time for round two,” said Tom.



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Another surge of fighting followed during which they ran along the outskirts of the carpark toward a bombed-out building that looked like a large barn.

“Hannah, stay here and don’t move,” Tom said.

She looked up in alarm. “Where are you going?”

“Scout around,” he said. “We need to meet Abu-al-Rashid’s contact, the man who’s going to get us out of here.”

“In the army vehicle, you mean?” She remembered the original plan.

Jamal nodded. “We need to find him first. With the cell networks down, we have no way of contacting each other.”

That wasn’t good. Hannah sank down behind a pile of crates. Her legs felt like lead but she was sure it was just the adrenaline wearing off.

“You’re invisible here,” Tom told her. “But if you’re discovered, use your gun.”

Would she be able to? Could she shoot someone at close range?

He sensed her hesitation. “Before they shoot you,” he said.

“Okay,” she whispered.

The men disappeared out the back and she settled down to wait. Would they be long?

Would they even find Abu-al-Rashid's contact? What if they didn't? What would they do then? They were behind enemy lines. Exposed.

A lump formed in her throat. Too many what ifs... too much uncertainty.

She wrapped her arms around herself and shut her eyes. Perhaps she could use the time to recharge her batteries, she hadn't had much sleep last night. Waves of exhaustion flowed over her, and she was about to nod off when a rustling made her open her eyes.

She gasped. A soldier stood directly in front of her, pointing a gun at her head.

## CHAPTER 30

Hannah stared at the gun in the soldier's hand.

"Who are you?" he asked, his eyes dark and suspicious. He wore the dark green and brown fatigues of the Symanian Army.

"I'm trapped," she said, thinking fast. "I need to get back to my family."

If he thought she was a local woman, perhaps he wouldn't report her to his commanding officer. There was also the chance he'd seen her photo or been briefed about her. She wasn't sure how far Prince Hakeem had gone in his pursuit of her. With all the fighting on the front line, she couldn't imagine a lowly foot soldier would know who she was.

He eyed her scarf that had fallen around her neck. She hurriedly pulled it up over her head and cast her face downwards. As she did so, she slid the gun under one of the crates, along with her shoulder bag.

“Get up.” He gestured with his weapon for her to stand.

She got to her feet. “Please... help me. I’m too scared to go outside with all the fighting.”

The soldier grunted. “Which part of the neighborhood are you from?”

“Al-Mahilyah” she replied, recalling one of the northern districts on the map. Thank goodness for her memory.

The soldier studied her face, then gave a curt nod. “Come with me.”

Thank God.

He holstered his weapon and gripped her arm to escort her out of the building. Unfortunately, her foot kicked the gun and it clunked as it hit the crate. He paused.

Crap.

She tried to move forward, but he held her still as he peered around her.

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“What—?” He’d seen the weapon. His hand flew to his holster.

Hannah bent down and grabbed her gun. She leveled it at him. “Don’t.”

He studied her warily. “Where did you get the gun?”

“I found it. This is a warzone.”

His eyes narrowed.

“I’m from al-Mahilyah, I told you. All I want is it to go back to my family.”

“You are lying,” he spat. His hand hovered over his own weapon.

It had been worth a shot.

“Touch it and you’re dead,” she warned, surprising herself by her resolve. Perhaps she could pull the trigger if she had to. If it was him or her.

His gaze flickered over her and ended up on the gun. “I don’t think you will shoot me,” he said.

She stiffened her back. “Don’t tempt me.”

He reached for his gun.

She pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. She tried again.

There was nothing but a dull click.

“Wha—?”

Before she had time to register what was happening, he'd grabbed her wrist and twisted the gun out of her hand. She yelped as he held her hand behind her back.

“You forgot the safety.”

She nearly wept. Idiot, she berated herself. Tom had warned her about the safety.

He grabbed her headscarf and pulled her head back. “You're not from here. Your skin is too pale.”

Hannah remained silent. Now she was busted, it was better not to say a word. Thankfully, he hadn't spotted her bag with her passport in, under the crate.

Where were Tom and Jamal? Now would be a very good time for them to come back.

She glanced at the door, willing him to walk through, but he didn't.

The soldier pulled her out of the building and into the baking sunshine. He glanced at her face again, then nodded, as if the bright light only served to confirm what he already knew. She wasn't local.

“Help!” she screamed, trying to draw attention to herself.

Perhaps Tom and Jamal would hear and come running. The soldier twisted her arm behind her, making her eyes water.

“Shut up or I'll break it,” he warned.

She nodded, in too much pain to speak. No one was coming to her rescue. This time Tom wouldn't be able to save her.

She was half marched, half dragged down the busy road. Army vehicles rattled past, men walked with purpose, commanders shouted. The rebels were fighting a losing battle against this lot.

She was taken to the rear of the encampment where some large tents had been erected. It was quieter here, less frenetic, but still tense. The army was fighting for control over the rebel-held town, and every soldier wore an expression of determination as they went about their business.

He pushed her into one of the tents. It was surprisingly spacious with a wooden table in the center, covered with maps and rulers. Someone's makeshift study.

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“Sit down.” He pushed her into a chair, securing her hands behind her back with plastic handcuffs. She had seen them on TV in cop shows but had never in a million years envisioned that one day they’d be used on her. They were tight and cut into her wrists.

“Wait here,” he barked, and left her alone.

She wiggled her wrists, but the ties were too tight. They wouldn’t budge. She tried to get up, but the bastard had tied her ankles to the legs of the chair.

She was screwed. The worst part was, Tom wouldn’t know where to look for her. He’d get back to the building, find her bag and realize she’d been taken. Would he try to find her? What if he couldn’t? Would he arrange for their contact to transport him out of the enemy base to the coast, taking the safe house locations with him? That was all he needed anyway.

Another soldier came in. Taller than the other, with a full beard and even harder eyes. His superior, perhaps? He held a large semi-automatic rifle, not unlike Tom’s. Was he going to use it on her?

She shuddered and tried to keep calm. Panicking wouldn’t help her.

“Don’t get any ideas.” He nodded to his weapon as he stood guard.

Great, now she had an armed guard as well as being tied to the chair. Hot tears burned her eyes. This was it. It was well and truly game over.

## CHAPTER 31

“Where the hell is she?” Tom growled, checking behind the crates.

Jamal looked around. “Could she be hiding somewhere?”

“No, she’s been found.” With a sinking heart, he bent down and retrieved her bag from beneath the boxes. “Here’s her bag. The gun’s missing though.”

Fuck. This was not good.

“We have to find her.”

“There’s no time,” Jamal said. “Ibrahim has been instructed to leave in fifteen minutes.”

“I’m not leaving without her.” His voice was firm. He surveyed the area. There was no blood, not evidence of a struggle. That was a good sign. It meant she was still alive.

“We don’t know where to look. This place is crawling with soldiers.”

“Then I’ll become a soldier.”

Jamal stared at him, then nodded. “I’ll try to stall Ibrahim. You have an hour. If you’re not there by then, he’s going to go without you.”

“Thanks.” Tom ran from the building.

He darted around the back and crept up to the corner of the street, staying close to the wall. He waited in the shadows until an unsuspecting soldier walked past. Less than a



minute later, he pulled the unconscious soldier into the nearest open doorway and stripped him to his underwear.

The uniform was a snug fit, but it would do.

He had to find Hannah.

Hannah sat quietly waiting for something to happen. Her guard didn't move, content to keep vigil by the tent flap.

Eventually, a man in a uniform covered with badges walked in. She could tell by the way the guard straightened his back and saluted that this man was important. A commander, maybe? He surveyed her with interest.

“What is your name?”

She didn't answer.

He stepped forward. “I said, what is your name?”

She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. As soon as he knew who she was, she was history. If they'd thought about an alias, she could have used that, but her brain was paralyzed with fear.

He grabbed her chin, thrusting it up toward the light. She focused on the apex of the tent roof, trying to pretend she was somewhere else. Anywhere but here.

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He squeezed, hurting her. Still, she stubbornly refused to acknowledge him. In disgust he released her face and yanked a piece of paper out of his breast pocket. He thrust it under her nose.

“This is you, isn’t it? You are Hannah Evans, the English spy.” He practically spat out the words.

She glanced at him in surprise. Traitor, maybe. Spy, no.

“Ah-ha. I see you know who I’m talking about.”

His eyes narrowed as he leaned forward. She could feel his breath on her face. “Our esteemed Chief of Security, Abdul Anwar, gave me orders to hold you until he got here.”

She broke into a cold sweat. He was coming here. For her?

“He is on his way. You must be very important for him to come and collect you in person.” He smirked. “Most of our traitors are executed on site.”

She felt sick. Anwar wanted to torture her, that’s why he was coming. He wanted to find out how much she knew.

“I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes, Miss Hannah Evans.”

Even the commander knew what was in store for her.

She had to get out of here before he arrived. She had to—or she was as good as dead.

Tom strode up the road, ignoring the shouts and commands echoing around him. As he walked, he took stock of the situation. These guys were well equipped. He spotted several rocket launchers, tactical ballistic missiles, and even anti-aircraft artillery mounted on a small truck.

Once they began advancing, it would be carnage.

He had to find Hannah. Where could they have taken her?

He roamed around until he spotted some administrative tents on one side of the makeshift base. He would start there.

He was counting on the fact that they wouldn't know who she was. Not at first, anyway. It would take some time before anyone put two and two together. How long, was anyone's guess.

He was rounding a stationary vehicle when an officer barked a command at him.

Fuck.

He turned around, unsheathing his fighting knife. He couldn't afford to "go loud" here. Not until he'd found Hannah. The officer repeated the command, but Tom played dumb. He clutched the knife behind his back.

Frowning at his subordinate's incompetence, the officer marched right up to him. Tom swung the knife around and stabbed the soldier in the neck. Blood spurted out at an angle, splattering the dirty hood of the vehicle. He held him still until the light faded from his eyes, then lowered him gently to the ground.

Tom glanced around, but nobody had seen. He rolled the officer's body beneath the truck and wiped his blade on the grass before re-sheathing it. Keeping an eye out for any more surprise encounters, he proceeded towards the tents.

The first one was a kind of open-plan office. There were several computers set up on trellis tables, a fax machine, even a printer. The electrical equipment was run by a generator humming outside. Several young soldiers typed frantically on keyboards and darted around receiving and sending communications. They must have a military network up and running, since the local communications were all down.

He moved on to the next tent. This one was a mess hall, but it was empty. A skeleton staff were loading dirty plates into a big bucket to be taken away and washed. They were very organized, considering the latest outburst. It made him think the government had planned for this eventuality in advance. Hannah's document couldn't have been the first time contingencies had been discussed.

He walked past the third tent. It was smaller than the other two and had an armed guard positioned at the entrance. What was so important it had to be protected? Especially out here in the middle of a Symanian operating base.

Hannah.

He bent down to tie a shoelace as a decorated officer strode out. He waved a piece of paper in front of the guard's face, then issued a terse instruction. Tom was sure he heard Abdul Anwar's name mentioned.

He snuck around the back and got down on his hands and knees. Tugging a tent pole out of the hard ground, he peered underneath the canvas and his heart skipped a beat.

She was there! Bound to a chair, but unharmed.

Thank fuck.

He couldn't see her face, but by the tension in her neck and shoulders, he could tell she was terrified. From what he could make out, there was only the one guard, but he was heavily armed. If he got off a shot, all hell would break loose.

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He took out his knife. What he needed was a distraction.

He slunk around to the entrance and was about to whistle to the guard when the pulsing throb of a helicopter made her look up. A Russian-built Mi-17 military chopper was coming in to land. It meant only one thing:

They knew.

No time to waste. He walked straight up behind the guard and plunged his blade into his kidneys. The man let out a grunt and fell to his knees. Tom held a hand over his mouth to stop him shouting for help, but it didn't take long for the man to lose consciousness.

He dragged him into the tent.

Hannah gasped. "Tom! Thank God." She didn't even glance at the dead guard, her eyes were firmly rooted on him.

He rushed over and cut her ties. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head.

"Good." He wanted to hold her, to kiss those trembling lips, but there was no time. "We have to hurry. Anwar is here. That's his helicopter you can hear landing."

"Oh, no!"

She jumped up. “What should we do?”

“Follow me.”

They exited the way he’d come in, through the front of the tent. The guard would soon be discovered, but hopefully not before they’d had a chance to hide.

He led her across a sandy patch of ground to where two well-used army SUVs were parked. The one on the left had a windscreen wiper that was lifted off the glass. That was the sign.

Thank you, Ibrahim.

He flicked the blade down and tried the door. It was unlocked. Tom peered inside. The keys were dangling from the ignition.

Yes.

“Get in the back and stay low,” he said. The backseat was narrow and stank of stale sweat.

“Where’s the contact?” she asked.

“I don’t know. He was supposed to meet us here.” He checked his watch. It had been over an hour since he’d left Jamal at the barn. The faction leader had said he’d ask Ibrahim to wait, but perhaps he couldn’t. That’s why he’d left the keys.

Tom jumped in the driver’s seat and started the car. It sprung to life with a deep growl.

“Aren’t we going to wait for him?”

“We can’t. Something must have happened?”

He reversed and then pulled on to the dirt track. If this worked, they would drive out of the Symanian army base in broad daylight. He pulled his cap down low.

The SUV bumped up the track. They were nearly at the gate when an officer motioned for them to stop. Tom hovered with his foot over the ignition. If he floored it, he could make it out of the gate before the officer knew what was happening. Except they’d send a convoy after them, and he didn’t know the roads in this area.

Damnit.

He slowed to a halt.

“What’s happening,” Hannah whispered.

“Stay down,” he snapped.

The officer approached the window. He said something in Arabic. Tom reached for his gun and held it just below the ledge. If he discharged it flush against the man’s chest, it would muffle most of the blast.



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Then a high-pitched whine made them glance up. An enormous fireball erupted less than a hundred meters in front of them. The officer talking to them was knocked off his feet.

Tom took advantage and put his foot down. The SUV jerked forward. The sandy ground didn't have much traction and the wheels spun, kicking up a deluge of sand behind them as they sped off.

"Hold on," he told Hannah, still hunkering down in the back.

A thick, dark cloud seeped over the soldiers, over the tents and over Anwar's helicopter that had just landed. In the mayhem, Tom slipped through the gates unnoticed.

That had to have come from Abu-al-Rashid. They were sending a message. We have firepower too.

But was it enough?

He didn't know how well equipped the rebels were, but he was willing to bet it was nothing like the army's arsenal.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Abu-al-Rashid making a bold statement. There's going to be hell to pay now."

"Do you think they'll come after us?"

“Yeah.” There was no doubt about that. “Once they realize you’re gone. They have a chopper, remember?”

“Oh, shit. How are we going to outrun them in that?”

“We’re not.” He set his jaw determinedly. “We’re going to find some cover. Do you remember the map we looked at?”

“Yes.” She sat up now that they were clear of the base.

“Wasn’t there some sort of farming structure nearby? I seem to recall seeing it on the map.”

There was a pause as Hannah filtered through the filing cabinet in her brain.

“Yes, there was. You’re right. It was a grain facility, I think. It must be approximately two miles west of here.

“Right.” He swung the wheel and headed on a westward bearing. “I’m going to head for that. It will give us some cover from an air assault.”

They bounced over the grueling landscape, keeping to their bearing until the grain handling facility came into view. It was hard to miss. The steel corrugated silos shone like reflective mirrors in the stark sunlight. It looked completely out of place in the otherwise barren desert.

“What’s that behind the silos?” asked Hannah, pointing into the distance.

“It looks like a warehouse,” he said, gunning it across the hard sand. It had large open garage doors and was perfect for hiding a vehicle.

They were nearly there when Tom heard the familiar throb of the helicopter.

Hannah cried, “Oh, no. They’ve found us.”

“Must have followed our dust trail,” he gritted out. “We may as well have left a line of breadcrumbs.”

He drove into the warehouse and cut the engine. With the double doors wide open, the occupants of the helicopter would be able to see right in.

“Should we try to hide it?” she asked.

“No point. They know we’re in here.” The warehouse was a storage facility for farm and industry equipment, but it was all neatly lined up at the rear.

“Let’s go.” Tom jumped out of the vehicle. Hannah followed, pale and disoriented. “Here’s a side door.” He tried it, but it was locked. With a mighty heave, he threw his shoulder against it, and it burst open.

The helicopter was approaching fast.

They ran toward the silos. The silver containers were so bright they had to squint against the reflection. They zigzagged around the first two and ducked in between the third and fourth. At several hundred metric tons each, they were fat and bulky and offered a good degree of cover.

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“Surely they can see us overhead,” Hannah said.

“Not with the glare. They’ll assume we’re still in the warehouse.”

They crouched down under the curvature of the silo, their backs flush against the warm steel, and waited for the chopper to land. Except it didn’t.

Tom felt Hannah start as the pilot opened fire on the warehouse. The noise reverberated off the structures around them, obscenely loud. They watched as the warehouse splintered and cracked under the bombardment.

Then the SUV exploded, bursting into flames. A portion of the roof collapsed, and all the windows shattered.

Hannah gripped his hand as the helicopter lowered itself menacingly until it was in line with the open garage door. Orange sparks flew from the front two automatic guns as the aircraft opened fire once again, this time aiming inside the warehouse.

“They’re taking no prisoners,” Tom muttered. The SUV was a burned-out wreck, while the warehouse looked like a category-five tornado had hit it.

“Thank God we aren’t still in there,” Hannah whispered.

Having depleted its arsenal, the chopper swung around, pausing in midair.

“Stay low,” he hissed. “Don’t move a muscle.” She crouched down farther and held her breath. The chopper hesitated for a moment before swooping down for a closer

look.

Tom could see Anwar in the passenger seat. He was scanning the ground through a pair of binoculars. Would the glare be enough to mask their figures from the air?

Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity, the chopper regained altitude.

Tom exhaled. “We’re in the clear.”

It circled the complex once more, before heading off in a northerly direction. Neither of them moved until it was a tiny black speck in the cobalt blue sky.

Hannah surprised him by bursting into tears, but he knew it was just the release of tension. The last few hours had been extreme. It would have tested even the hardest soldier.

He held her in his arms and stroked her hair. “It’s okay. We’re safe now. They’re gone.”

She nodded into his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” she muttered, already composing herself. “I can’t help it. I was so scared.”

“I know. It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

And he did. Somehow, they’d got through it unscathed. He’d nearly lost her at the army base, but luck had been on their side, and again here. He felt a little shaken himself, if he was honest.

“Tom. . .” She glanced up at him, her eyes wet with tears. His heart lurched, just a little bit.

“Shh. . . Now’s not the time. I’ve still got to get you off this island. We’ve lost precious time, and the clock is ticking. We’ve got to stay focused.”

She let out a shaky breath. “Of course.”

He released her and got to his feet. “You stay here. I’m going to have a quick look around. There might be something here we can use.”

She didn’t reply, so he left her sitting against the silo and headed towards a dusty field. Along the edge sat some rusty pieces of machinery.

He inspected them, but there was nothing of use. Then he saw a shed in the far corner of the field. It looked abandoned, like everything else around here.

The door was locked, so he kicked it in. When the dust settled, he broke into a grin.

Wheeling the items back to Hannah, he said, “Fancy going for a cycle?”

## CHAPTER 32

It was late afternoon when they cycled into the small fishing port of Hamesh. The fresh air was a welcome relief after the dry dusty heat of the interior. As they rode through the palm trees and cycads, Tom finally felt some of the tension dissolve. This was the last leg of their journey.

They stashed their bikes behind a small convenience store. He’d disposed of his rifle in a drain outside the town. It would draw too much attention to them here, and they had to keep a low profile. A gun-slinging rebel would raise eyebrows. He kept the handgun, though.

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They walked down a dirt road, worn from centuries of use to a half-moon beach and a little marina where an assortment of small fishing vessels and luxury yachts jostled for space.

Further along the coast was a larger, commercial port. They could see the long cement platform jutting out into the bay like an oversized runway dotted with bright yellow loading cranes and containers.

Tom counted five container ships moored in the quays waiting to be loaded, or unloaded, with several more out in the bay. That was a busy working harbor.

“We made it.” Hannah shook the dust out of her clothing. He could see by her pinched expression that she was exhausted. Even he felt weary, the effects of the day beginning to tell. They needed food, water and rest.

But first they had to find passage off the island.

“Let’s head to the marina and see if we can find a boat.”

She nodded, trailing behind him. Tom studied the fishing dock. Most boats would be heading back to shore after a hard day’s fishing out on the reef. He needed something different, something faster.

If they didn’t get the intel back to his CO in the next seven hours, the NATO strike would go ahead. A boat to the mainland would take three hours at the most, even in rough seas. That left just enough time to call HQ and deliver the information that would end the war.

He led Hannah to a shady bench under a palm tree, overlooking the marina. She sank down gratefully. “What kind of boat are you looking for?”

“I’ll know it when I see it.”

He scanned the coastal area for signs of police or the army. It seemed clear. Their ploy at the plantation must have worked. The only activity was the normal comings and goings of commercial vessels, fishing dhows, and private yachts.

Nothing looked out of the ordinary.

At the end of one of the marina’s rickety wooden piers, a small merchant vessel was moored. She obviously wasn’t big enough to warrant a mooring at the quays, or perhaps she didn’t want to pay the berthing cost.

“Over there. Keep your eyes peeled.”

She followed him down the pier.

Tom called to one of the weathered men on the boat.

He looked up. “Eh?”

“Ask him if he takes passengers,” he murmured to Hannah.

She did so.

The man waved a hand in the air. “No people.” He motioned to his cargo. “Bahrain.”

That’ll do.



“Tell him we’ll pay him. US Dollars.”

She relayed the information. It was obvious by the man’s response that he was keen. US Dollars, the universal currency.

“Tell him we’ll give him a hundred dollars for a ride to the mainland.” A hundred pounds was a lot of money in the current economic crisis—in the midst of a civil war.

Hannah turned to Tom. “He says to meet us back here at six p.m.”

“Great.” He nodded to show the man he understood.

With transport arranged, Tom took Hannah to a small diner a few roads back from the marina. It wouldn’t win any culinary awards, but it sold food and got them off the street for an hour.

They sat at the back, away from the windows. The only other customers were two elderly men playing backgammon.

A teenager with pock-marked skin took their order. Chicken kebabs and pita bread. They were both starving.

“I can’t remember when I last ate,” she said, leaning back in her chair.

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“We need to keep our energy levels up. We’re not in the clear yet.”

“But we’re nearly there, right?”

“Yes.” He smiled at her. “Nearly there.”

In one hour, they’d be off this island for good.

The food came and they ate with gusto. It was surprisingly good, or perhaps that was just because they were so darned hungry.

Afterwards, Hannah said she wanted to go and freshen up in the restroom, so he went down to the boat. “Meet me down on the pier when you’re done.”

He got halfway down when he noticed the mooring was empty. The merchant vessel had vanished.

“What the hell?”

Tom broke into a run. Sure enough, the boat could be seen chugging toward the horizon.

Bastard!

He kicked a wooden pole and turned around. Now they’d have to find another vessel to take them to the mainland.

He got to the café, and immediately noticed the two elderly men had gone. So had the pimply waiter. He pulled out his handgun. Dread clutched at his chest as he ran inside.

It was empty.

“Hannah!” he called, charging into the ladies restroom.

No reply.

He kicked in all the doors, but the cubicles were empty.

She was gone.

A muffled scream got his attention.

Hannah!

It was coming from out the back, behind the diner.

He stormed out the back and into a small car park. Two burly policemen held a struggling Hannah between them.

Tom raised his weapon. “Let her go.”

He’d underestimated the crafty Chief of Security. Abdul Anwar had known they’d head here. This was the only viable option they had left. He hadn’t been fooled by their little charade at the grain factory, or he was covering all his bases. Either way, he’d found them.

“Tom.” Hannah sobbed his name. He kept his gun trained on the men holding her.

Before he had time to act, a black SUV pulled up. The doors swung open and four armed police officers jumped out. Four rifles aimed at his head.

Not good odds.

He watched helplessly as they wrestled Hannah into the vehicle. He couldn't let them take her. They'd torture her, then kill her. There'd be no mercy. His finger hovered on the trigger.

"Don't," she cried, as they shoved her inside the car. "You have to get back to the mainland. You can't afford to die."

He didn't move.

"Please, Tom. Go. . ." The rest of her words were cut off when they shut the car door.

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“Take care of him,” spat one of the men before climbing into the passenger seat.

The SUV sped off, while Tom yelled in frustration.

### CHAPTER 33

“Drop the weapon!”

Tom was beyond reason. He’d had to watch, powerless, as these thugs took his Hannah away. “Make me,” he spat.

The officer’s orders were to kill him and dump his body.

But that was never going to happen. He needed to know where they were taking Hannah.

The officer’s eye’s glinted and Tom knew he was going to shoot. He ducked and rolled towards the man, taking him by surprise. The gun discharged harmlessly, while Tom tackled the shooter to the ground. He beat his hand into the concrete until he released the weapon.

Tom turned it on him. “Where are they taking her?”

The man stared at him, eyes wide. “I don’t know.” His English was passable, thank God.

“Tell me, or I’ll shoot you in the leg.” He didn’t have time to play games.

The man shook his head.

Tom pulled the trigger, shooting the man in the thigh. He made sure he missed the femoral artery, but it would still hurt like hell.

The officer screamed and clutched his bleeding leg.

“Tell me!” demanded Tom, aiming his gun at the other leg.

The man said something, but Tom couldn’t make it out. “What?”

“The warehouse.”

“Which warehouse? Where?”

The man shook his head, clutching his bleeding thigh.

“Show me.” He pulled the thug to his feet. The man yelped in agony. They limped through the diner. The manager stared at them, wide-eyed.

It wasn’t often a stranger got the better of the secret police.

“Your car,” Tom said to the manager. “Give me the keys.”

The man reached into his pocket and put a set of keys on the counter.

“Take them.” Tom dug the butt of his gun into the officer’s back. A short time later, the injured man was driving the manager’s van in the direction that the SUV had gone.

The warehouse was a good ten minutes out of town, in a semi-industrial area. There

was a distinct tang of fish in the air.

“Is that it?” he asked, as the police officer pointed to a flat, sprawling building surrounded by a razor wire fence. There were several vehicles parked outside, including the black SUV.

His heart leaped.

Bingo.

He ordered the policeman to pull over and turn off the engine. They were far enough away from the warehouse so as not to draw attention to themselves. The road was deserted, the only other traffic a stationary container truck several blocks ahead.

“Get out of the car,” Tom said.

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The officer did so.

“Turn around.”

The man shut his eyes and turned around. He was praying.

Tom marched up behind him and hit him over the head with the butt of his gun. The man fell like a sack of bricks. He'd be out for a while.

Five hours to the deadline.

Deployment would have already taken place at NATO Air Force bases in the Mediterranean. Tornado jet fighters would be fueled and prepared for takeoff. US and European frigates would be hovering in international waters, waiting to send teams of special forces ashore via boat.

If he failed in his attempt to rescue Hannah, the strikes would go ahead. The regime would retaliate, and thousands of innocent people would lose their lives.

Tom approached the warehouse, checking it out. The first thing he noticed were the cameras. Several of them, positioned around the exterior of the property. Next were the armed guards. Dressed in the feared black uniforms of the secret police, they were alert, well-trained and extremely dangerous. Those AK-47s meant business. He counted four patrolling the perimeter, two by the giant garage doors, and one at a side door, and he was guessing there'd be more inside.

Shit.



He got as close as he dared, taking stock of everything he could see. He didn't think Abdul Anwar was here yet. The SUV was the smartest vehicle, and there was no helicopter hiding behind the building. He had some time.

What he needed was help. There was no way he'd be able to break in, take out the guards and rescue Hannah by himself. No single soldier would be able to go against that mini army.

He walked back to the van, wracking his brains.

Communications were still down. That meant no phone or internet. No way of contacting his CO. He could get a boat to the mainland, hand over the location of the safe houses, mobilize a unit, then come back and get her. But he might be too late. She could be dead by then and that didn't bear thinking of.

Then he had a brainwave. What if he didn't have to go all the way to the mainland to relay the intel?

Sure, all the telephone frequencies were down, and the firewall was blocking all internet communication, but that didn't mean the marine frequencies were out. They used a different band than the normal telephone frequencies. Presumably the harbormaster still had contact with ocean-going vessels.

He stared at the container ships waiting out in the bay. How else could they know when to come in and dock?

He felt a surge of adrenaline. It was worth a shot.

He glanced at the unconscious man lying at the side of the road. He couldn't leave him here. If he regained consciousness, he'd go back to the warehouse to warn the others.

With a grunt, he lifted him up and put him in the back of the van. Using some duct tape he found in the glove compartment, he bound the man's wrists and ankles.

There. That would hold him for some time.

Tom checked his handgun. He had one round left. It was enough. Still wearing the army uniform, he looked like a Symanian officer on official business. Hopefully it would be enough to fool the harbormaster into letting him into the control center.

The harbormaster's building didn't take long to find. It was located at the entrance to the docks. A sign over the front door confirmed he was in the right place. Tom waited around the corner until a harbor worker came out. Then he grabbed the door and ducked inside.

The young man sitting at the reception desk looked up in surprise as a bulky Symanian army officer in an ill-fitting uniform stalked in.

Tom gave the man a hard look that said, "don't mess with me" and pointed up the stairs. The receptionist nodded mutely, deciding not to ask questions.

He took them two at a time, figuring that was most likely to be where the control tower was located. He was right. The entire top floor was one big control center. Floor-to-ceiling windows covered the seaward side of the room, while computer screens and overhead monitors flashed with images of the bay and the docks below.

There were three men in the room. They all turned as Tom walked in. He motioned to the two that were operating the computers to get out. They eyed the gun in his hand and scrambled for the door.

The harbormaster, a rugged man in a crisp uniform, studied him suspiciously. "What do you want?"

“I need to use the ship-to-shore radio.” Tom came closer. By the signals emanated from the various channels, the radio was transmitting just fine.

“Under whose authority?” The harbormaster wasn’t a fool. He could tell by Tom’s accent that he wasn’t Symanian.

“Mine.” Tom punched the man in the face. He collapsed where he was standing. Tom finished him off with a bump to the head, then turned his attention to the radio transmitter.

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All he had to do was signal the American frigate that would be waiting in international waters. He didn't bother to change the frequency as he knew the U.S. Navy would be monitoring them all.

It took several attempts before he got a response from the American assault ship, USS Liberty Spear, situated twenty miles offshore. At first the captain was wary, given that Tom was transmitting on a local Symanian frequency. Once Tom had identified himself and given his military ID number, the captain was all ears.

On the captain's directions, they switched to a more secure frequency. Tom relayed the coordinates of the safe houses to the captain of the warship. He didn't say what they were for, just to pass them on to Commander Larson at the U.S. Marine Corps headquarters in Virginia immediately. It was a matter of extreme urgency and would affect the outcome of the war.

"Do you need assistance?" inquired the captain, after he had done as requested.

Tom didn't hesitate. "An American citizen has been captured and is currently being held outside Hamesh. I'm going to attempt a rescue operation, but I'm acting alone. Backup would be appreciated."

More than they knew.

The captain said he'd send a team of operators to assist.

Relief flooded his body. They had the training and experience to deal with a hostage rescue.

The captain asked for a secure landing site, so he gave him a location farther up the beach, away from the marina and out of site of the main port. It was also closer to the industrial area where the warehouse was located.

ETA was forty-five minutes.

## CHAPTER 34

Hannah was ushered into an empty warehouse and made to sit on the cold concrete floor. One of her captors spat at her, while the other fastened her hands together in front of her and then to a railing attached to the wall. It was too high to sit comfortably, so she was forced to kneel.

The man had burst into the restroom while Tom had gone to check the boat. Poor Tom. She'd never forget the look on his face as they'd forced her into the SUV. She hoped he was okay. One on one, he had a fighting chance. But both men had been armed, and Tom wouldn't have surrendered. She knew that much about him.

Who'd given them away?

The fisherman? Someone at the diner? It was all so confusing.

She slumped against the wall, the ties cutting into her wrists. What did it matter? She had been captured—again—and this time it was for good.

If by some miracle Tom had survived, he'd be making his way to the mainland now. He had a duty to perform. He couldn't risk not getting the intel back in time.

She began to cry.

At least some good might still come out of this. If he got out of here in time, if he

relayed the intel, he could stop the airstrikes. Thousands of lives would be saved. He could put an end to the civil war.

He'd be a hero. He already was a hero.

Her hero.

Tears ran freely down her face. She couldn't stop them, didn't want to stop them. She cried for her own fate, for the torture that was surely to come, for Tom, and for the people of this country. She thought of his gentle hands and the passion they'd shared, and hot tears rolled down her cheeks. Never again would she feel his hands on her body or his lips on hers.

The worst part was she'd die without telling him how she felt. Tom would never know how much she loved him.

A guard shouted at her to shut up, then when she didn't, came over and kicked her in the stomach. She spluttered and coughed, gasping for air.

"Keep your mouth shut, pig woman," he sneered.

Her sobs turned to whimpers, and she began to pray for a swift end to the pain she knew was coming. When he got here.

She was a traitor, and they didn't treat traitors lightly in this country. Especially not ones who'd betrayed the regime.

Another guard came up to her. "You are a beautiful woman," he said in Arabic. His dark eyes roamed over her body.

"Leave me alone," she hissed in his native tongue.

His eyes widened. “Ah, you speak Arabic. Good. Then you’ll understand when I tell you what I’m going to do to you.”

She shivered.

“Nobody will care what I do to you. You are a spy. A pig westerner. You are worse than trash.”

In the distance, she heard a faint throb of a helicopter. Abdul Anwar. He was coming.

“Come near me and I’ll fight you.”

The guard threw back his head and laughed. “You can try, bitch.”

He grabbed her abaya and tore it off her. She cried out in surprise. Buttons went flying and bounced across the concrete floor.

Then he grabbed her tunic and ripped it off her shoulder. She lashed out with her legs, but he was too quick for her. He kicked her again, causing her to double over. Then he reached out and squeezed a breast, painfully.

She twisted to get away from him, but that only spurred him on. He gripped the other breast and pulled at her bra until that snapped, leaving a raw angry welt under her arms. She screamed and kicked out again, this time connecting with his shin.

“Bitch!” He struck her across the face, causing her head to swing back and hit the wall. The knock stunned her, and she hung limply by her wrists until the spinning stopped.

The whop-whop of rotor blades got louder, or was that the pain in her head?



She heard a male voice shout, “Leave her alone. Abdul Anwar said not to touch her. He wants to take her back to Syman for a public execution.”

The guard backed off, worried now.

She leered at him. Serve him right for messing with her. She hoped he got shot for his efforts.

The helicopter landed in the yard outside. It wouldn’t be long now.

Abdul Anwar entered the warehouse with an egotistical swagger that made her want to puke. After six months of hating her, and days searching for her, he was getting his revenge.

“Hannah Evans,” he drawled. “How nice to see you again. I’m so sorry it had to come to this.”

Her head still pounded on the side where she’d hit the wall, and she was sure her left eye was swelling from the guard’s smack.

She saw anger flash across the chief of State Security’s face.

“Who did this?” he barked. “I gave strict orders that she wasn’t to be touched.” He bent down and inspected her face. “That is my job.”

She cringed. She’d always known Anwar was a sadist, and now he was revealing his true colors.

“Get out,” he ordered the other men. They shuffled out in silence.

“Finally, we are alone,” murmured Anwar. “I can’t tell you how long I’ve looked

forward to this moment.”

She glared at him. “What are you going to do with me?”

He chuckled. It made her skin crawl. “I think you know the answer to that.”

She did.

“You haven’t given any of our secrets away yet, have you?” He was serious now.

Hannah toyed with the idea of baiting him. Making him worry would be her only revenge. Except if Tom did manage to get the intel out of the country and into the right hands, the international authorities would be on their way to the safe houses to arrest Prince Hakeem. He would have to stand trial for crimes against humanity, but even that was too good for him.

No, she’d have to pretend she hadn’t, take the secret with her to her grave.

Which wouldn’t be a long time in coming.

She shook her head.

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“Don’t lie to me,” he said, his eyes probing her.

“I’m not. I don’t know what you mean.”

“The document. We know you took it. We found it in the souk. That was a stupid thing to do.” He shook his head. “Tell me, what were you planning on doing with it?”

“I don’t know,” she sobbed.

“Did you tell your embassy friend?”

“No, I didn’t write anything down. I don’t remember the details.”

He studied her, darkly suspicious. “I think you’re lying.”

“I’m not. I swear, I don’t remember a thing.”

Pain exploded in her cheek as he backhanded her. She began to cry again.

“Ah, you are not so brave without Prince Hakeem here to support you.” He leaned in.

“You had no place in the royal compound. Westerner and infidel.”

She felt the hatred dripping off him.

He hit her again and she swung into the wall, the ties shredding the skin around her wrists. Lights flickered at the corners of her vision and for a moment, she thought she was going to black out.

“I knew you couldn’t be trusted. I told Hakeem as much, but he refused to listen.”

She could barely understand what he was saying. Her head pounded and there was ringing in her ears. He sounded muted, even though he was speaking loudly.

“Please—” she begged.

He laughed. “I like it when you beg.” He grabbed her hair and made her look at him. “This is only the beginning. You, my friend, will be on the international news. CNN. The BBC.” He smirked. “The west will know how we deal with traitors.”

## CHAPTER 35

Forty-five minutes later, Tom met the special forces operators on the beach.

“Phoenix Morgan,” said the team leader with a curt nod and a brief handshake. “Good to meet you.”

“Tom Wilde. Thanks for your assistance.”

“U.S. Marine?” he asked.

They’d been briefed, but only with what the captain knew, and that wasn’t much.

Tom filled him in.

“Yeah. The hostage is Hannah Evans. She worked at the royal compound for Prince Hakeem. As you can guess, she knows things that could be useful to us.”

Phoenix nodded. “Gotcha.”

“Where is she being held?” asked a guy called Viper, who Tom recognized from an op in Afghanistan several years back.

“Viper? That you?”

“Yeah, buddy.” They pumped hands. “Good to see you.”

Tom described the warehouse, including the cameras, the gates and fence, and the armed guards.

“How many?” Phoenix asked.

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“Six visible, but more inside. I also think they’re expecting a VIP, in which case, there’ll be secret police too.”

Phoenix’s mouth hardened into a thin line. He briefed his team. Eight highly-trained men, all kitted out with ammunition, grenades, flashbangs, body armor, and everything else a special forces operator would need for a mission of this kind. They were a lethal fighting force—exactly what he needed.

“Right, let’s go,” Phoenix said, when he was done.

Tom opened the back of the van and the team piled in. “Excuse the unconscious guy,” he said. “I used him to find out where the warehouse was.”

None of the hardened men batted an eyelid.

Phoenix sat up front beside him as they drove to the warehouse. The black SUV was still there, along with Anwar’s helicopter.

Tom ground his jaw.

“That’s the State Security chief, Abdul Anwar’s,” he told Phoenix. “He’s here to transport the prisoner back to Syman City where she’ll be tortured and executed. She knows too much to let live.”

“Then we don’t have much time.” Phoenix surveyed the structure and the security measures, taking it all in with a knowing eye.

They let the men out of the van and the team huddled together as they outlined their plan of attack.

“Your team take out the guards,” Phoenix was saying to Viper, who nodded. “We’ll enter the warehouse and neutralize the threat. Tom, you grab the hostage. We’ll go in fast, go in hard. Tom, are you able to drive through the front gate?”

He nodded.

It was a sound plan. Tom knew they’d practiced similar drills many times. Hostage rescue was what these guys did, be it on oilrigs, tankers or dry land. They were pros. He couldn’t have asked for a better team.

Within seconds, they were ready to go.

Tom got behind the wheel.

“Ready?” asked Phoenix. He had his seatbelt on and hands on the dash, braced for impact.

“Ready.”

Tom put his foot on the gas and picked up speed. He angled the van toward the gate and smashed right through, sending mangled wire and steel flying in all directions. Sparks from the electric fence spat at the darkening sky.

The soldiers jumped out of the back. The two guards manning the gate were dead before they could even reach for their weapons. Other police came running, but they too were mowed down by the American operators. Within minutes, those who weren’t dead or bleeding, surrendered by throwing down their weapons.

Tom stormed into the warehouse a step behind the second evacuation team, ready to take out anyone who objected. The first person he saw was Prince Hakeem's State Security chief standing near a crumpled body attached to a railing in the far corner. His heart nearly stopped.

Hannah!

Abdul Anwar reached for his gun.

Tom squeezed the trigger. Twice. Double tap. Abdul Anwar gazed at him in disbelief, before toppling to the ground, a neat hole in the center of his forehead, another in the chest.

"Nice shooting," said Phoenix, as Tom rushed forward.

His team had taken out the other guards. Cordite stained the air and three bodies, other than Anwar's, littered the warehouse floor.

Tom used his knife to cut Hannah free from the railing. She crumpled into his arms, barely conscious. Her blouse was ripped open, exposing her bare breasts, red with welts. Dark bruises were beginning to appear on her shins, and the torn skin on her wrists was leaking blood. Her hair was matted, she was developing a black eye, and there was a deep cut on her cheekbone that required stitches.

A strangled sob caught in his throat. "Hannah?"

She was unresponsive.

He gathered her up in his arms. "Hannah, can you hear me?"

Her eyelids flickered briefly, before closing again.



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Thank God. She was alive.

Gently, he picked her up and cradled her in his arms. "I'm taking you home," he said, and carried her out of the building.

Hannah flung her hands out and touched something smooth and leathery.

Where am I?

She felt like she was floating. There was a loud screech.

I'm in a car.

She tried to move, but everything hurt.

A voice said, "Keep still, Hannah. You're going to be fine. I've got you now. We're getting you out of here."

It was Tom's voice.

Her Tom.

He'd come for her.

Or perhaps he'd come to kill her? She didn't want to die.

"I didn't tell them anything," she tried to say, but she couldn't get the words out.

How had Tom found her? Her ribs ached, and it hurt to breathe.

Then she remembered.

Tom had shot Abdul Anwar. Hannah had a vision of him falling at her feet. She wanted to applaud, to tell Tom how grateful she was that he'd come for her, but she couldn't speak. There was a dull throbbing in her cheek, and she couldn't see out of one eye.

Then he was next to her. A reassuring arm around her shoulders. He smelled so good. She let her head drop against his shoulder.

I like it when you beg.

She could still hear Anwar's voice in her head. But he'd been shot. He wasn't a threat to her anymore.

"You got him," she whispered, and a warm hand smoothed her hair. Tom's hand.

"Yes, we got him. You're safe now," he murmured.

She relaxed. If she just had a little nap, things would be clearer when she woke up. She reached for Tom's hand and clung to it. The gentle rocking motion was making her drowsy.

She swayed to the left as the car turned a corner, and then everything faded to black.

## CHAPTER 36

The amphibious assault ship, USS Liberty Spear motored toward Port Zayed in Abu Dhabi at a steady eleven knots. The Gulf of Oman stretched impossibly blue ahead of

them.

Tom stood beside the captain on the bridge. He'd just got off the phone with Commander Larson, who was uncharacteristically complimentary about the retrieval of the safe house locations.

Thanks to Tom's hard work, the NATO strikes had been averted, and a U.S. Special Forces unit had been deployed to bring in Prince Hakeem. An international incident had been narrowly avoided, and his special ops team had emerged smelling like roses.

Phoenix, Viper and their unit had been deployed elsewhere as part of the joint task force, but he hadn't been told where.

Tom was the hero of the hour.

His place in the Marine Corps was securely cemented for the foreseeable future. In fact, he had just been promoted to Squadron Staff Sergeant, but all he felt was relief. Relief that the crisis had been averted, and that he was once again back on active duty—or would be after a short rest.

His biggest relief, however, was that Hannah was all right.

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She had two broken ribs, was dehydrated, and the cut in her cheek required stitches, but all in all had come off pretty lightly considering what could have happened.

He hadn't had a chance to talk to her yet. As soon as they'd arrived on board the warship, he'd been conferenced into a call with the Ministry of Defense, and she'd gone straight to the ship's medic to be stitched up.

He desperately needed to talk to her—in private. In an hour, they'd dock in Abu Dhabi and be transferred to a military flight back to the U.S. There were things he had to say.

“Excuse me,” he said to the captain before making his way to the clinic.

The clinic was empty of patients, save for the one bed that Hannah lay in. She looked pale and gaunt with a dressing over her left cheek. The blue gown she was wearing showed up her bruises. Abdul Anwar had really done a number on her.

He clenched his fists. A quick death was too good for that fucker.

A Navy medic checked her pulse and adjusted the drip that rehydrated her. She turned and spotted him, and her face broke into a smile.

He felt his stomach flutter.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better.” She patted the bed. “Sit down.”

He glanced at the nurse. “Do you mind giving us some privacy?” he asked.

He gave a curt nod and disappeared into the adjoining office.

Tom sat on the bed. “I’m so glad you’re all right. You had me worried there, for a moment.”

“I’m fine, thanks to you.” She paused. “I was told you had help.”

“Yeah, there were two SBS units onboard. They helped bust you out.”

The way she was looking at him. It made him catch his breath. Damn, there were so many things he wanted to say, he just didn’t know how.

“I can’t believe you came back.”

“I never left.” He took her hand. “I told you I’d get you out. I keep my promises.”

“But the intel?” Questions filled her gaze and he realized she hadn’t been told what had happened.

“I relayed it to the captain from the dock. The marine frequencies were working. The captain passed it on to my CO who contacted the State Department. It’s all good.”

“The strikes were called off?”

“Yes.” He squeezed her hand. “We did it.”

She smiled and leaned her head back on the pillow. “You did it, Tom.”

He opened his mouth, but she held up a hand. “Please don’t tell me you were just

doing your job. I don't think I could bear it."

He chuckled. "I wasn't going to. I came back because..." He hesitated. Words had never been his strong point. "I love you."

There. He'd said it. His heart was thumping like an Uzi, but he'd told her.

Her eyes fluttered. "Really?"

"Yes, really." He was getting braver now. "I'd never have left you there. Even if I'd had to come to the mainland to relay the message, I'd have found a way back to you."

"It's so good to hear you say that," she whispered, tears welling in her eyes. "I feel the same way. I have, ever since. . ." She laughed. "I don't know precisely when. Probably when you kissed me in the sandstorm."

He laughed, suddenly absurdly happy. She felt the same! "Do you think you can find room for a cranky U.S. Marine in your life?" He stroked her face, damaged but so beautiful. "Because I don't think I can leave you again."

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“Oh, Tom,” she whispered. “You don’t have to ask.”

“Is that a yes?” He couldn’t help grinning.

“Yes!” She laughed. “I would love a cranky U.S. Marine in my life.”

He turned serious. “You know I would still be going on ops, often very dangerous ones. Sometimes for weeks on end. Could you cope with that?”

Her eyes gleamed up at him. “I’ll take you any way I can get you.”

His heart surged. Right now, he felt like the luckiest man alive.

She reached for him and pulled him down towards her. “Kiss me,” she whispered.

“Your IV,” he said, moving it out the way.

“Don’t worry about that.”

Her lips found his and he pressed hard against her. He couldn’t believe she was all his. Their kiss deepened until a frantic beeping pulled them back to reality.

The medic came running.

“You’ve pulled out your drip,” he scolded.

Tom grinned. “Sorry, that was my fault.”

Hannah let go of his hand so the nurse could put it back in.

“To be continued,” she said with a laugh.

He couldn’t wait to take her in his arms and make her his. “You can count on it.”

## EPILOGUE

### Six Months Later

Hannah watched as Victoria Burton-Leigh held up her champagne glass and tapped it with a silver spoon. The guests quietened down.

“Can I have your attention, please?”

She waited until there was silence and then said, “This is a bittersweet day for me. As you know, it’s my last day at Elite Publicity.”

There was a sympathetic murmur. She held up a hand.

“However, it’s also an exciting day because I’m handing over the reins to my protégé, Hannah Evans, who most of you know by now. She’s been handling the running of the business for several weeks already.”

There were nods of approval.

“Hannah needs no introduction. She’s a wonderful person, she’s brilliant at her job, and I leave you all in her capable hands.”

There was a round of applause.



Hannah glanced at Tom, standing at the back and the gleam of pride in his gaze was all the affirmation she needed.

“So now if you’ll raise your glasses, I’d like to toast the end of an era, and the beginning of a new one. To Hannah and new beginnings.”

“To Hannah,” echoed the guests.

“Please, enjoy yourselves and thank you so much for coming.”

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Hannah turned to her former boss. “Victoria, thank you so much. That was a lovely speech.”

“You deserve it, Hannah. I don’t know what I would have done without you these last few months. You’ve brought in new business, you’ve taken us online, we now have more clients than I know what to do with. You’re just the person to continue my legacy.”

Hannah hugged her. “I wish you a wonderful retirement.”

The weeks after they’d got back from Syman hadn’t been easy. She’d had extensive debriefs by the Department of Defense and various other government organizations.

Tom had disappeared to Virginia where his unit was based, and with her living in D.C. she’d barely seen him. In an impulsive move, she’d relocated to Lorton, Virginia, an hour’s drive from the base.

It had taken her two weeks before she’d seen the vacancy at Elite Publicity. Victoria had interviewed her and hired her on the spot. She’d loved the fact Hannah had worked for a Middle Eastern Prince. Hannah hadn’t told her the whole story. She’d just said she’d had to leave quickly when the war broke out.

Nobody needed to know more than that, and it wasn’t a lie.

Victoria was in her sixties and wanted to travel with her husband of forty years. “We always said we would take a cruise one day,” she confided to Hannah. “And we don’t want to put it off much longer. We’re not spring chickens anymore.”

Tom had moved in with her, although he still had his flat in Arlington. If his training kept him at the base, he stayed there, but most of the time he drove back to be with her. His schedule was erratic. He never knew when he'd get a call, and when he did, he'd disappear for days at a time, sometimes weeks, but he always came back to her.

She knew his job was dangerous, but she put her fears aside and concentrated on making the most of their time together. She'd almost lost her life in Syman, and every moment was precious.

Tom put his arm around her. "Congratulations, darling," he said. "Your dream has finally come true."

"I can't believe it." She smiled at him. "Who would have thought things would work out like this?"

His smile faltered. "When I found you in that warehouse, I thought you were dead. My world came crashing down."

She took his hand. "But I'm alive, and you came for me."

A nod. "I said I would."

The love she felt for this man was so strong it took her breath away. He'd been reunited with his regiment. He'd even got a medal for his work in Syman, although he hardly ever looked at it.

"It wasn't about getting a medal," he'd told her once. "At first, I wanted to redeem myself, atone for what had happened in Afghanistan, but then it became about the war, and doing what we could to stop it before it escalated."

He still woke up in a sweat some nights, and she knew he'd been dreaming about Afghanistan, but the nightmares were becoming less and less frequent. She suspected

he'd made peace with it now, even begun forgiving himself for what had happened. He was healing.

Her injuries had been mostly cosmetic. Her rib still ached some nights when the temperature dropped below freezing, but otherwise she was perfectly healthy.

And she couldn't be happier.

"Cheers," he said, clinking glasses with her. "To your new beginning."

"Correction," she said, smiling into his eyes. "To our new beginning."

He broke into a grin. "I'll drink to that."