



Croatia Collateral (Brotherhood Protectors International #3)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Former US Delta Force Operative, Dax Franklin is surprised to be teamed with a female, Giva Haviv, a former Israeli Sayaret Matkal operative for his first assignment with the Brotherhood Protectors International. All becomes clear when he learns the mission is to disguise as an influential power couple who owns global enterprises and infiltrate a meeting of the wealthiest people in the world.

Chosen because Dax looks and sounds like Evan Maas and Giva bears a striking resemblance to Maass fiancée Sasha Royce, they have to fool the rest of the gathering long enough to find out what economic coup is about to take place and stop it before it ignites WWII.

In the ancient city of Dubrovnik, Croatia, amidst international intrigue where financial stakes and power are justifications to kill opponents, Dax and Giva must stay one step ahead of discovery or risk their lives and the safety of the millions worldwide.

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Chapter 1

Dax Franklin stepped into the bar in Zurich, Switzerland, and glanced around, searching for the familiar face of Ace Hammerson, former US Navy SEAL, more affectionately known as Hammer.

He'd worked with Hammer on a couple of joint missions between his Navy SEAL team and Dax's Marine Force Recon crew on the coast of Somalia. The man was brilliant, methodical and as tough as they came. When he'd called Dax out of the blue to offer him a job with the Brotherhood Protectors, Dax hadn't hesitated.

The brotherhood, established by former Navy SEAL Hank Patterson, had a reputation for hiring only the best of former military special operations types, and word had spread that they were getting jobs done, providing security, extracting hostages and uncovering human trafficking operations.

Dax had been honored that Hammer, head of the newest branch of the Brotherhood Protectors, had looked him up as a potential addition to his growing international team.

The timing couldn't be better. Dax had left the Marine Corps after the US government had done a shitty job of pulling the military out of Afghanistan. Dax had been working with Afghan informants. Left behind, they'd suffered when the Taliban took over the country.

Since leaving the military, he'd bounced around different jobs, trying his best to fit into the civilian world and failing miserably. He wasn't cut out to sell life insurance

to out-of-shape couch potatoes or to be a substitute teacher to a bunch of entitled high school kids who were disrespectful and lazy.

Dax hadn't trained hard and survived deadly combat situations to sit quietly behind a desk.

Hammer's call had been a godsend, along with an all-expenses-paid trip to Switzerland. How could he say no? At the very least, he could hear the man out and decide whether he wanted the job. All while surrounded by the beauty of Switzerland.

After thoroughly scanning the room's dark interior, Dax headed for the bar, slid onto one of the stools and ordered a local beer.

His first set of instructions had been to meet with Hammer at the Brotherhood Protectors International office in downtown Zurich.

Those instructions were superseded by a text message from Hammer's cell phone, changing the meeting location to the bar. He'd just landed in Zurich and turned on his cell phone when the message had come through. Because he was getting in so late, he was to drop his luggage at the hotel and meet Hammer at the bar.

Dax had taken a taxi from the airport to the hotel where he'd checked in. He'd taken the time to shower, shave and dress in clean black slacks and a black button-down shirt. He'd wanted to make a good impression on Hammer, figuring their jobs as protectors could mean escorting dignitaries or wealthy clients. Hammer knew Dax could apply camouflage; he didn't know Dax would wear decent civilian clothing to match whatever situation was required.

He'd known a lot of military guys who looked sharp in uniform but couldn't pair the colors in their civilian clothing.

The bartender delivered the beer and turned to fill an order for a waitress.

A waft of perfume reached him seconds before a woman in a red dress slid onto the barstool beside him.

Dax lifted his mug and tipped beer into his mouth as he studied the lady beside him out of the corner of his eye.

Black hair fell around her shoulders in inky black waves. The dress was an eye-catcher with thin straps and a plunging front neckline that dipped almost to her belly button. A long slit ran from her ankle to the top of her thigh, exposing a beautiful, toned leg with a well-defined calf and thigh.

Dax's sister would have called the dress go-to-hell red and would have asked the woman where she'd gotten it. He cringed at the thought of his little sister wearing something that revealing.

Not that Ginny couldn't have pulled it off, and she wasn't a little girl anymore, but he wanted to remember her as the tomboy with a single braid hanging down her back, wearing jeans and a faded T-shirt with her favorite band emblazoned across the front.

Ginny had driven him to the Washington Dulles International Airport the day before, kissed him on the cheek and wished him luck.

"Find a pretty girl, date and let yourself fall in love again. Lana would've wanted you to get on with your life." She'd patted his cheek. "Besides, I want nieces and nephews before I turn forty."

"I could say the same for you," Dax said. "When are you going to settle down, marry and have half a dozen children?"

Her lips twisted. “You know how I feel about all that.”

“Right. It’s not for you.” He shook his head. “How do you know until you try it?”

“I’m too set in my ways. I like that I don’t have to answer to anyone, and I can fly anywhere in the world at the drop of a hat. I was hoping you would have all the kids so I could love on them when I wanted and hand them back at the end of the day.”

The familiar tug at his heart was a painful reminder that a wife and kids hadn’t been in his cards. Oh, he’d had a wife.

Lana.

Beautiful, sweet, and gentle Lana had wanted at least four children. After several heartbreaking miscarriages, the doctor discovered she had endometrial cancer. It had spread fast into other organs and parts of her body.

She’d gone from the disappointment and grief of losing a baby to full-on treatment for cancer. In a few short months, she’d been gone.

Dax had deployed during Lana’s first miscarriage. When she’d gotten pregnant a second time, he’d been with her from day one through her second miscarriage, the cancer diagnosis and to her last breath.

His unit had deployed to Afghanistan a few weeks before Lana’s passing. Once Lana was gone, Dax needed to escape everything that had reminded him of her. He’d joined his unit in Afghanistan a month later. Work and a change in location had helped—until the draw-down.

Sick at heart over how the draw-down had been handled, he lost his love for military life.

“I’ll have a dirty martini, shaken, not stirred,” the woman in red said to the bartender in English, bringing Dax back to the present and a bar in Zurich. Though she spoke English, she had the accent of someone from England, not the US.

The bartender added ingredients to a metal cup, capped it and shook it for a full minute. He poured the contents into a martini glass, added an olive and placed the glass in front of the woman.

She lifted the glass to her bright red lips and tasted the concoction. With a brief smile and nod at the bartender, she laid the glass on the counter. “Perfect.” She turned to Dax, her lips spreading in a warm, welcoming smile. “I love a good martini, don’t you?”

He half-turned toward her, meeting her gaze. “I prefer a good beer,” he said, tipping his head toward the half-empty mug.

She lifted her glass to him. “To good drinks, whatever they might be.”

Reluctantly, he lifted his mug and held it up to her glass without saying anything.

She touched the rim of the martini glass to his mug and took a sip.

Dax did the same. He looked over his shoulder toward the door, wondering when Hammer would show. He hadn’t slept on the flight over, so he was tired and wasn’t in the mood for polite conversation, even if the woman was stunningly beautiful.

“Waiting for someone?” the woman asked.

“I am,” he responded.

“Oh, my apologies,” she said. “I won’t bother you.” She lifted her drink and sipped.

Dax glanced at the entrance again. Still, no sign of Hammer. He took another sip of his beer, an awkward silence falling between him and the woman beside him.

“Oh, dear,” she murmured and touched his arm. “I’m so sorry. I wouldn’t bother you, but I’ve lost my contact. At least, I think I might have.” She blinked several times. “Sometimes, it slips out of position on my eye. Would you mind looking to see if you can see it?” She turned to face him fully, her hand still on his arm. She tipped her head back and opened her eyes wide.

“Right or left?” he asked, wondering if he’d see anything in the dim lighting. He leaned closer.

“Left,” she said, batting her eyelids before opening them wide again.

“Hard to see in this light,” he said, staring down into her left eye.

“Would it help if I was closer?” she asked, leaning forward until her breasts brushed against his chest.

“I don’t see anything,” he said.

“Keep looking,” she said, her voice a low, insistent whisper. “At least pretend like you are. A couple of gentlemen in the corner to your right have been watching you since you arrived. They’re both still wearing their jackets, though it’s reasonably warm here. I saw a bulge in one man’s pocket. I would lay odds he’s packing.”

Dax froze. The words coming from the woman’s mouth were so incongruous he had to think twice about them before they sank in. When he started to turn his head to look at the corner to the right of him, her hand tightened on his arm.

“For the love of—” She reached out with her other hand and pinched his thigh. “Look

at me, not them. They'll know you're on to them."

"Look, lady," he said.

She blinked rapidly and laughed, the sound light and airy. "There it is. I knew you'd find it." The woman leaned into him. "They're getting up. Kiss me."

"I don't—" He didn't get any further.

She flung her arms around his neck and laid those perfect red lips on his.

His hands rose automatically to grasp her waist, intending to shove her back.

"You will come with us," a man said behind Dax.

The woman in red leaned back, her pretty dark brows forming a V over the bridge of her nose. "Do we know you?"

Dax spun on his barstool to face two men in baggy jackets.

"You do not need to know us," the bigger guy said.

To Dax, the accent sounded Russian.

Each man had a hand in his right pocket, pointing something at them.

By the size and shape, Dax would venture to guess they were pistols. "What do you want?" he asked.

"You two will come with us," Big Guy said.

Dax had no desire to be herded out the door at gunpoint. Neither did he want to start a fight in the confines of the bar.

“We should do as they say, darling,” the woman murmured. “I told you we shouldn’t have come without our bodyguards.”

He frowned at the woman. Was she working with the two armed men? It was too coincidental for her to show up and then have the two men move in and demand they go with them.

Either way, Dax couldn’t do anything sitting down. He eased off the barstool, setting the woman in red at arm’s length, freeing his hands and giving him room.

The bigger man stepped up behind him and poked him in the back with the hard barrel of a pistol in his pocket.

“Okay,” Dax raised his hands slightly. “No need to get trigger-happy. I’ll come. Just don’t hurt the lady.”

He moved slowly through the bar, searching for his best options and reviewing various scenarios. If the two gunmen got them outside, would more of their friends be waiting to assist? He’d be better off taking down these two and escaping through the rear exit than risking even greater odds should they have friends outside.

The woman in red stumbled.

Dax gripped her elbow to steady her.

She leaned close to him and murmured, “Follow my lead.”

The gunman behind her jabbed his jacket pocket into her back. “Let her go.”

The woman stepped away from Dax, backing into a chair behind her. She teetered, her hands flying into the air.

The man holding his gun on her reached out with his other hand.

In a flash of movement, the woman grabbed that hand and spun him around, shoving him into the other man.

As the two men staggered unsteadily, Dax kicked out, sweeping the big guy's legs from under him.

The two men crashed to the ground.

The woman tipped a table over on top of them, grabbed Dax's hand and yelled, "Run!"

While the two men struggled to untangle themselves, Dax and the woman ran out the rear exit into an alley behind the bar.

A long, black car stood to the right in the shadows of the building.

The woman opened the back door and dove into the vehicle.

Dax hesitated.

The red-dress woman called out, "Get in!"

Still, Dax hesitated. He didn't know this woman. She could be equally as dangerous as the two armed men.

She leaned out, cocking an eyebrow. "Are you armed?"

“No,” he said.

“Well, they are.” She ducked back inside. “Suit yourself.” Her hand reached out to close the door.

Behind him, Dax could hear the muffled sound of footsteps pounding toward him.

He yanked open the car door and slid into the back seat, closing the door as the rear door of the bar burst open.

The car lurched forward, going from zero to really fast in a second. At the first corner, the driver whipped the vehicle to the right as bullets shattered the rear window.

Dax shoved the woman down on the seat and covered her with his body.

Once they were around the side of a building, the gunfire ceased.

He sat up and looked through the shattered back window. “That was close.”

The woman in the red dress sat up straight and raised a handgun from the folds of her dress, pointing it at his chest. “He’s entirely too gullible,” she said.

The driver grunted and kept driving.

Dax frowned down at the gun pointing at his chest.

In quick movement he’d perfected with some of his Marine Force Recon buddies when they’d been bored between missions, he yanked the gun from her hand and turned it on her.

“I’m hungry, tired and don’t have the patience to put up with bullshit.” To the driver, he gave the street address of the Brotherhood Protectors International Headquarters. “Take us there, or I’ll shoot the pretty lady.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me,” he dared.

For a long moment, she glared at him. Finally, she shrugged an elegant shoulder. “It would be a shame to destroy this dress. Where are you taking me?”

“The real question is, where were you taking me ?” he asked.

She cocked an eyebrow. “Would you believe for a joy ride?”

“Try again.” His lips pressed into a thin line.

She crossed her arms over her full breasts peeking out of the plunging neckline. “You’ll know soon enough.”

It was his turn to glare at her. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing.” To the driver, she said, “Take him to where he wants to go.”

The driver nodded once and turned at the following street corner.

They completed the remainder of the ride in silence, Dax trying to decide if he was doing the right thing by taking her to the Brotherhood Protectors International headquarters building. He’d debated letting her go and keeping her gun. But what would stop her from trying to take him again, or some other poor fool?

He hoped Hammer would know what to do with the woman. Dax would at least like to know what her game was.

He kept his eye on her throughout the short drive. Staring at her wasn't a hardship. He thought it was too bad she'd turned out to be one of the bad guys. He might have enjoyed having a drink with her if she hadn't been trying to kill him.

The driver slowed the vehicle to a stop next to a curb and looked over his shoulder. "We have arrived."

One dark eyebrow winged upward on the woman's face. "What are you going to do with me?"

Using her words, he said, "You'll know soon enough." He nodded toward her door. "Get out."

"And if I don't?"

"You just said you like the red dress," he waved the gun at her. "Don't make me blow a hole in it."

"For the record, I really don't think you'd pull the trigger on a woman." She held up her hand. "But I'm not daring you to do it now." She pushed open her door and swung her legs out, planting her feet on the ground.

He slid across the seat, wrapped his arm around her neck and pointed the gun at her head. "Don't try anything stupid. My finger's on the trigger."

"I'm so scared," she said, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

She slipped from under his arm, got out of the vehicle with him behind her and

walked toward the structure like a model on a runway.

Dax didn't trust her for a second and remained on his toes, gun at the ready. Still, he could admire her narrow waist, the swell of her hips and the sexy leg flashing him through the slit in the dress.

Who was this woman?

Never having been to the building before, Dax walked up to the front door. It was locked without a light shining over the entrance or a doorbell to ring. How was he supposed to get inside?

A voice sounded from somewhere overhead. "Dax Franklin, you old son of a bitch, glad you found your way to the office." Dax recognized Ace Hammerson's voice. "What have you got? Or rather, who have you got?"

"I was hoping you could help me figure that out," Dax said.

The metal click of a lock sounded on the door in front of Dax.

"Come on in," Hammer said.

Dax nodded to the woman. "After you."

She opened the door and stepped inside a small foyer.

Once Dax was through the door and had closed it behind him, she strode down a hallway as if she owned the place.

Dax followed, his gaze narrowing.

The hallway had doors on either side, but the woman didn't stop until she reached the one at the end. With a flourish, she flung it open and stepped inside.

Ace Hammerson stood at the end of a long conference table with a beautiful black-haired, green-eyed woman at his side. Several other people were gathered around. Dax didn't know any of them.

Hammerson stepped forward. "I'm sorry for the last-minute change in our meeting location, but I'm glad you two made it here." He held out his hand. "You can put the gun away."

A barrel-chested older man with a shock of white hair held out a chair for the woman in red. "You clean up well," he said with a thick Russian accent.

"Thank you, Dmytro," she sank into the chair and looked to Ace Hammerson.

"Well?" Ace said.

She shook her head. "He's not the right man for the job."

Hammer frowned. "He's a dead ringer for Maas."

The woman ran her gaze over Dax, her eyes narrowing. "Agreed, but he doesn't have the swagger and is gullible."

Hammer sighed. "We don't have time to find a perfect match. Besides, from what I remember, Dax learns quickly. We can teach him what he needs to know."

Dax felt like a spectator at a tennis match, his gaze going from the woman in the red dress to his new boss, Hammer. The more they talked, the more confused Dax became.

Dax raised a hand. “Hold on a minute.” He waved the hand between the two talking. “You know each other?”

They turned to him and spoke as one, “Yes.”

Hammer picked up from there. “Dax, this is Giva Haviv, former Israeli Sayeret Matkal. She’ll be your partner for your first assignment.”

Dax stared at his new boss. “The fuck you say.”

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Chapter 2

Giva's gaze raked Dax, once again amazed at the resemblance. The Marine was a dead ringer, a perfect doppelganger of their target. She'd known who he was the moment he'd stepped into the bar. Though he looked like Maas, he was a little too much on the rugged side.

Maas was soft and accustomed to expensive tastes and women. Dax was too grounded, down-to-earth and comfortably casual in how he walked and talked.

Hammer went on with his description of what he had in mind for the mission. "Giva, like you, is a new member of the Brotherhood Protectors International team. We specifically brought you both on board for a project that will need your special operations training, combat skills and experience working undercover missions."

"She's Israeli Sayeret Matkal?" Dax ran a hand through his hair, the dark circles beneath his eyes making him look more mysterious than what Giva suspected was exhaustion from the long overnight flight. "Could someone please explain to me what the hell's going on? And who is Maas?"

Hammer glanced toward the Giva. "You didn't tell him anything on the way over?"

Giva's lips curled in a tight smile. "I thought it best to reveal everything once we arrived. I'll let you do the honors." She'd known Dax wouldn't have believed her if she'd tried to explain any of the plans her new boss had in mind.

Hammer grimaced and faced Dax. "You might want to take a seat."

Dax crossed his arms over his chest. “I’ll stand.”

Hammer drew in a deep breath and launched. “When Hank Patterson told us what was about to go down and what we needed to do, I knew immediately that you would be the right man for the job.” He nodded toward the older man with the white hair. “Dmytro, could you bring up the big screen?”

The older man leaned over the table where a keyboard and mouse lay and ran his fingers across the keys.

“Like I said,” Hammer continued, “we need a pair of operatives with combat training and undercover experience to infiltrate a secret meeting of some of the wealthiest people on the planet. The people whose money drives world economies and politics. To get into this meeting, our operative has to be one of the filthy rich people who use their wealth and power to effect political change and decisions across the globe.”

Dax’s brow furrowed. “And who have you targeted who fits that bill?”

Giva almost smiled. Here we go .

Hammer nodded at Dmytro.

When the older man clicked the mouse, half a dozen images of a couple appeared on the giant monitor at the far end of the conference table.

Dax squinted at the display, took several steps forward and froze.

Giva knew when he zeroed in on the woman in the red dress, a close copy of what she was currently wearing.

Dax looked from the photograph to Giva and back.

“Is that you?” he asked.

The other woman who’d been standing with Hammer stepped forward. “No. That woman is Sasha Royce.”

Hammer slid an arm around the woman. “Dax, this is Jasmine Nassar, my fiancée, also a former Sayeret Matkal from the Israeli Army. She’s responsible for bringing Giva on board.”

Giva gave Jaz a nod.

“When we learned we needed to infiltrate the Nexus Collective to find out what they were scheming, we examined the list of the six who’d received invitations to the upcoming gathering.” Hammer tipped his chin toward the display. “Of all the people listed, the man in these photo was the one person we had half a chance of sending.”

“Who’s the man?” Dax asked.

“Evan Maas,” Hammer said. “Born in Australia to a wealthy family, immigrated to Canada to attend university. With his high IQ, he ended up in Silicon Valley where he started a tech company that blew up overnight. He sold it for hundreds of millions at the same time he was starting other companies.”

Jasmine continued with the description of Evan Maas. “The man has a Midas touch. He made his first million before he turned thirty and his first billion by the time he turned forty. He proved he can make money, and now he wants to make his money change world politics.” She turned to Hammer with a gentle smile. “You were spot-on when you said Dax was a dead ringer.”

Hammer’s lip turned up on one corner. “And you were spot-on with Giva.”

She smiled at the other Israeli woman. “I knew the minute I saw the photos of Sasha Royce.”

“And I knew we had to test the theory,” Giva said.

Hammer gave Dax a crooked grin. “It was Giva’s idea to meet up with you at the bar instead of you coming straight here. Dmytro put the word out to the dark web that Evan Maas would meet his current woman, Sasha, at a bar in Zurich tonight incognito, without his usual bodyguards.”

“It paid off,” Giva said. “A couple of goons jumped us on our way out.”

Hammer’s eyes rounded. “Did they?”

Giva nodded. “We handled it. But your boy here was too easily led by the red dress. Got right into the car with a stranger.”

Dax glared at her. “You’d just taken down a gunman and helped me escape.”

Jasmine chuckled. “Sounds like Giva. We liked to call her Giva the Diva when we worked together in the Israeli Defense Force. She had a knack for creating drama.”

Giva shrugged. “Even if he wasn’t gullible, your man isn’t right for the assignment. He’s too rough around the edges, unrefined and gauche to be mistaken for Evan Maas.”

“Is that what the mission is?” Dax asked. “I’m to masquerade as this rich dude with Miss Haviv as my girlfriend?” He shook his head. “I know nothing about Maas, his holdings and his relationship with the other members of this so-called Nexus Collective.”

“We have a week to bring you up to speed,” Hammer said. “Our computer team?—”

“Code for hackers,” a young woman with purple hair and multiple piercings in her ears, who didn’t look like she was out of her teens, rose from a computer console. She tipped her head toward Dmytro. “The old man and I have pulled everything we can find about Maas, his holdings and his connections with the people invited to this meeting of the rich and powerful.”

“Rumor has it they’re tired of how governments are running their portions of the world and want to change it for the better,” Hammer said. “Not for the people of the world, but for their own interests, to include increasing their own coffers.”

“In effect,” Jasmine said, “pitting countries against each other to increase military and reconstruction spending.”

Dax frowned. “They can do that?”

“They’re the rich and powerful,” Giva said. “They have their government leaders in their back pockets, funding their re-elections or military coups.”

“All you two have to do is find out what they’re planning,” Hammer said. “Report back to us, and we’ll devise a plan to head it off before they start World War III.”

Dax snorted. “I thought I was coming to work as a bodyguard. You’re talking espionage, the underworld and deadly liaisons.”

Giva cocked one of her brows. “Does that frighten you, boy?”

His gaze met hers, his eyes narrowing. “If you’re not even a little scared, you’re a fool.” He turned to Hammer. “I’m in.”

Giva's eyes widened before she quickly contained her shock. "I'm not sure you can learn all you need to know in one week."

"Lady, don't underestimate me," he said, his lips thinning. "I'm a fucking sponge."

"Good," she said. "You'll need to be for us to pull it off."

Dax turned away from her to face Hammer. "What's your plan to keep Maas and his girlfriend away from the meeting?"

Hammer grinned. "We intercepted the invitation. We have it on good authority?—"

"Dark web," the purple-haired woman said.

Hammer nodded. "Maas is on a personal hiatus to one of his islands. Mega-star Sadie McClain and her husband are vacationing with Maas and his girlfriend with the express directive that they do so off-grid. No paparazzi, phones or internet for two whole weeks. So, we have one week of prep and one week of the meeting of the Nexus Collective to get the information we need."

"Why are you bringing me into this so late?" Dax asked. "

Hammer held his hands out, palms up. "We only got wind of this two days ago. Dmytro happened to be surfing the dark web when he found information on a meeting of the Nexus Collective." Hammer nodded toward Dmytro.

Dmytro's brow twisted. "Curious, I followed the thread down the rabbit hole." He shook his head. "The displaced Russian oligarchs were tired of having their assets frozen, and certain nation leaders weren't acting the way they thought they should to free their funds. The rumors had it they were planning something big that would impact the world. The phrase World War III was thrown around."

“Dmytro brought the information to me; I passed it to Patterson,” Hammer said. “We pieced together the names of oligarchs and some of the world’s wealthiest that were included in the discussion. That’s when we sat down and studied the list and came up with Maas as the youngest of the old guys—the one person among them we might be able to replicate and distract.”

Jasmine smiled. “Hank’s wife, Sadie McClain, jumped in with both feet, securing a commitment from Maas for an island vacation. Maas funded the production of one of her highest-grossing films. He’s been on set throughout the shoot, giving him and his girlfriend time to bond with Sadie. When she learned he was one of the Nexus Collective, she offered to help distract him and allow our team to infiltrate and learn.”

“We intercepted the invitation going out to Maas before he received it,” Dmytro said.

“In turn, we responded that Maas would attend with his girlfriend in tow,” Hammer said. “I had an idea who could fill in for Maas.”

“Me,” Dax stated.

“And I knew who looked close enough in appearance to Sasha to pull it off,” Jasmine said.

“We just had to bring our Evan and Sasha together and get their buy-in,” Hammer said.

“Now that we’re both here,” Dax said, “when do we start?”

“Tomorrow morning, bright and early,” Giva said.

“I’ll be ready,” Dax said.

“Good,” Giva said. “You need a lot of work.”

Dax’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not afraid of work.”

Giva nodded. “Good.” She pushed to her feet. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to get out of these heels.”

“And Dax,” Hammer said, “since we let it out that Maas was in Zurich, you’ll need to keep a low profile. Hide your face, don’t go into crowded places without some sort of disguise.”

Dax’s mouth twisted. “Anything else?”

“You’ll also need to get to know each other well,” Jasmine said.

“That’s right,” Hammer said. “Sasha and Maas are close and display a lot of PDA,” he nodded toward the big screen, “as you can tell by the photos.”

Giva frowned. “PDA?”

“Sorry, PDA is a military acronym.” Hammer’s lips twisted. “Public displays of affection. You’ll have to look like you’re a couple. You know, give the impression you like each other, not like you’d rather use each as target practice with daggers.”

Giva frowned at Dax. “You might be good at combat, but can you fake emotions? This job isn’t like pretending to be a drug dealer or a member of the Italian mafia. You’ll have to convince the five other wealthy men you’re grooming me to be the fifth Mrs. Maas.”

“He’s been married four times?” Dax asked.

“That’s right,” Hammer said. “You have homework to do. You’ll need to commit to memory the names of all his ex-wives and the children he spawned with each.”

“As well as the names and purposes of at least his current companies making him boatloads of money,” Giva said. “Add to that the names of the Nexus Collective and what they bring to the table, along with what politicians or country leaders they own.” She cocked a brow in his direction. “Are you up for that?”

“He’s a quick study,” Hammer said before Dax could answer. “He can start in the morning.”

“He’ll need a new wardrobe,” Giva glanced at Dax’s black button-down shirt and slacks that fit him well and made him appear a little dark and mysterious—but not what Maas would wear. “Do we have a budget? Maas only wears the very best. He loves to flaunt his wealth.”

“Hank assures me we can gear up with whatever we need to make it work,” Hammer said. “The magnitude of influence these men wield could be catastrophic.”

“Then we take our boy shopping tomorrow,” Giva said.

Dax’s brow dipped. “I can do my own shopping.”

“Maas and Sasha are known to spend time in Zurich,” Lucie called over her shoulder from the computer console she’d drifted back to. “I’ve cross-checked charges on his credit cards to the businesses where he spent the most money while in Zurich. Besides the Lamborghini dealer, there were several clothiers with big charges, both from men’s and women’s establishments.”

Giva frowned. “We can’t take any chances on picking the wrong outfits. Maas is very particular. The fashion magazines stalk him and Sasha. I insist on going with you.”

Dax nodded. "Okay."

Giva's frown deepened. "You capitulated too easily."

"You can come with me." He gave her a tight smile and added, "On one condition..."

Giva lifted her chin. "And that is?"

"I'm going with you when you suit up. I imagine Maas knows what he likes on his woman." His lips quirked upward. "Besides, that will give us time to practice our PDA. Unless you think pretending to be in love with me is too difficult."

Giva bristled. She'd more or less accused him of the inability to act like they were lovers. As soon as Dax had suggested they practice their PDA, Giva had tensed. In dread or anticipation?

She wouldn't give herself an answer to that. Dax was a handsome man. Maas was, too, being a near copy of Dax. But Maas didn't have that rugged nonchalance and subtle confidence of a Marine.

Hass gave the impression that he would demand respect rather than earn it.

Giva appreciated a man who wore his self-confidence like another layer of skin, naturally.

Hammer said. "We're here to drill you both on the information you'll need to know. We have a few days before the meeting commences. Let's make the most of that time. Any questions?"

Dax nodded. "Where are they meeting? Here in Zurich?"

Hammer shook his head. He opened his mouth to formulate his answer,

Giva beat him to the punch. “Dubrovnik, Croatia.”

Dax met Giva’s gaze. “Why Dubrovnik?”

She shrugged. “You’ll have to ask the three main leaders of this summit.”

“The top two are the ones to look out for,” Lucie called out. “Vitaly Rabinovich and Yuri Kagalovsky. Both Russian. Made their money the old-fashioned way by threatening the politicians or funding their leaders’ special projects, including the Russian mokroye delo or ‘wet work.’”

Dax’s brow creased. “Isn’t that when they threaten to do harm or kill family members if their target doesn’t commit suicide?”

“That’s right,” Lucie said without looking up from her monitor. “There’s also Marco Galeotti, a shipping magnate with real estate all over the world and links to the Italian Mafia.”

“The point is, besides those three heading this meeting, there will be a number of wealthy people there who are equally dangerous,” Hammer said.

“And if our true identities are discovered, they’ll kill us?” Dax concluded.

Hammer nodded. “You don’t have to take the assignment. I can find someone else; it’ll just take longer. We might miss the opportunity to discover what they’re up to and if the rest of the world should be concerned.”

“And what we can do about it,” Jasmine said. “If anything.”

“What I’m hearing is that you want Ms. Haviv and I to get in, listen and get out with a clear idea of what kind of scheme or schemes they’re cooking up.”

Hammer nodded. “We’ll send bodyguards with you and Ms. Haviv. It fits with Maas and his woman. The man makes enough money, he could purchase Zurich’s entire city center. He’d have an entire entourage of security personnel. Since we’re not fully staffed, Hank’s sending some of the protectors from the Montana and Yellowstone offices. They should be here late tomorrow.”

“I take it the bodyguards will be checked at the meeting doors, along with significant others,” Dax said. His gaze met Giva’s.

She gave him a brief nod. “You’d be on your own for the actual meeting. They’ll consider me arm candy. While you’re inside with the men, I could circulate with the women and listen to the bodyguards talk in case they have been clued in.”

“If any of the others bring their women,” Hammer said. “Your bodyguards might also mingle with the bodyguards of the other oligarchs,” Hammer said. “They’ll be on full alert. If things go south, they will do their best to get you and Ms. Haviv out of there. It’s all up in the air until Maas gets the text with the instructions. We’ll have a jet boat in the Dubrovnik harbor, and vehicles staged outside the walls of Old Town.”

“Will Hank and Sadie be able to keep Maas and Sasha occupied for the duration of the meeting?” Dax asked.

Hammer nodded. “Hank said, if he had to, he’d drug the pair to keep them on the island. He also plans to sabotage the internet to keep them from attempting to get in touch with outside interests.”

“It’s hard to keep anyone from finding out anything through the internet these days,” Dax said.

Hammer's lips pressed together. "Thus, the need to kill all access to phones and internet on the island."

"What you need is a limited-range EMP generator," Dax said.

A grin spread across Hammer's face. "Knowing Hank and his tech guy, Swede, I wouldn't put it past them to invent one for the occasion."

All the talk had begun to bore Giva and make her anxious to get moving again. "So, Mr. Franklin, are you still in? Or is it too dangerous for your liking?"

Dax faced Giva. "You aren't getting rid of me that easily. The mission is more of a challenge than I expected, which makes it even better than I imagined." He held out his hand to Hammer. "I'm in."

Hammer shook his hand and nodded toward Giva. "Looks like you've got yourself a partner."

Her jaw tightened as she met and held Dax's gaze. "For the record, I prefer to work alone. Unfortunately, even if I tried, I could never pass for Maas. Just don't get in my way."

Dax held out his hand. "I'm sure we'll work well together."

Giva placed her hand in his, liking how coarse and strong it was. She let him draw her to her feet.

Before she was completely balanced on her heels, Dax gave her hand a quick yank.

She teetered on her heels and then crashed into his chest.

Dax's arms came up around her, steadying her. Then he bent and pressed his lips to hers in a hard, fast kiss that was short but intense.

When Dax raised his head, Giva's mind was strangely muddled. Her blood coursed through her veins so fast she thought she might black out.

His hand cupped her elbow and stared into her eyes, a warm smile spreading across his face. "Are you all right, darlin'?" he said softly.

His low, sexy tone made Giva's pulse race and her core flare with heat.

For a moment, she forgot that she was a tough, former Sayeret Matkal who could shoot with more accuracy than the majority of the men on her team before she was discharged from the IDF. Hell, she forgot to breathe.

Her reaction to Dax and his kiss shocked her to her very core.

He released her and took a step back.

For a moment, Giva swayed. Then sanity rushed back in with a vengeance. Her hand shot out, aiming for the man's smirk.

He caught her wrist before her palm could connect with his cheek. A dark eyebrow rose. "Is this how you treat your lover?" he murmured. Louder, he said, "We'll have to practice a lot. You need to work on your kissing skills if anyone is to believe we're lovers."

The temptation to slap him again and the control it took to hold her hand fisted at her side was almost a physical pain. She lifted her chin. "You call that a kiss? I've kissed strangers with more feeling and conviction than that."

“Care to put your mouth where your money is?” Dax asked.

Hammer chuckled. “You two are going to be perfect together. I was just reading somewhere that Maas and Sasha have a fiery relationship.” He slipped an arm around Jasmine’s waist. “We couldn’t have picked a better match.”

Jasmine smiled, her gaze on Dax and Giva. “Agreed. Now, you two should get some rest.

“Hank and Sadie are due to meet up with the real Maas and Sasha as we speak,” Hammer said. “Once they make it to the island and Hank puts measures in place, he’ll contact us on his satellite phone. Until then, you’re to stay in your hotel, keeping your heads down.”

“We arranged for you to share a suite under the names Sandra and Edward Hughes,” Dmytro said.

Hammer nodded. “When we get the all-clear from Hank, you can begin shopping under your fake names while word spreads that Evan Maas is in Zurich with his girlfriend. You’ll have the opportunity to play your parts in public before you travel to Croatia.”

Jasmine’s brow dipped. “Anywhere other than here in the Brotherhood Protectors Office, you need to project yourselves as Evan Maas and Sasha Royce. You never know who will be watching.”

“True,” Hammer said. “While you’re roaming through the streets of Zurich, you’ll have bodyguards surrounding you, just like the real Evan Maas. A chartered plane will take you to Dubrovnik at the end of the week to the scheduled meeting of the Nexus Collective. You’ll need to be ready.”

Dax nodded. “I will be.”

“As will I,” Giva concurred. When she’d first agreed to help Jasmine and Ace Hammerson, she’d thought the mission a slam dunk, as the Americans would say.

Her gaze swept over her soon-to-be faux-lover, Dax Franklin, a knot of dread warring with a thrill of anticipation.

Giva had been prepared for the man’s appearance. She hadn’t been ready for his warm, sexy voice and full, insistent kiss. Even though it had been fake—a part of acting the part of Evan Maas—it had affected her.

More than she cared to admit.

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Chapter 3

Fearghas Gordon, a Scotsman and former SAS, and Peter Atkins, another former SAS operative from England, accompanied Dax and Giva to the hotel as their bodyguards.

Dmytro drove the car, seeming to enjoy playing the part of chauffeur to the fake Evan Maas and Sasha Royce. He even wore a flat wool caddy hat to blend into the part.

Dax doubted flat caddy hats were popular anymore, making Dmytro's cap seem appropriate for his age and personality.

Giva sat in the back seat of the vehicle with Fearghas on one side, Dax on the other and Peter riding shotgun.

At every right turn, her thigh leaned into Dax's. At every left turn, his leaned into hers. Each time they touched, heat raced through Dax, pooling in his groin.

Why?

The woman was aggravating, condescending and full of herself. She had little respect for him and less desire than he had to spend time in each other's company. How could they make their masquerade work if they couldn't get along or even be civil to each other?

The kiss.

Dax had kissed her in front of the others to prove that he could play the part of an infatuated lover, even if he couldn't stand the lady he was supposed to be in love with.

But that kiss...

The kiss had shaken him to his very core. His very hot, pulsing, suddenly needy core.

And she'd kissed him back.

Granted, she'd also tried to slap his face.

Dax's lips twitched on the corners as he told himself that she wouldn't have swung at him if she hadn't been as affected by that kiss as he had been.

At least, he assumed that was the case.

Then again, maybe she hadn't liked the kiss and had only responded the way she had to prove she could act the part despite her disdain for him.

He frowned.

If she hadn't liked the kiss, he needed to up his game.

Challenge accepted.

The hotel wasn't far from the Brotherhood Protectors Office building. Before Dax realized it, Dmytro pulled the long car up to the curb and waved for them to exit.

He moved quickly, hopping out of the vehicle before he embarrassed himself by laying a hand on that beautiful thigh peeking through the slit in the skirt of the red

dress.

He admonished himself for being attracted to the woman who would be his partner in a very dangerous game. It wasn't like Dax could ignore her. They'd have to be close and pretend to be in love...or at least in lust.

The lust part wouldn't be a hardship. Giva was beautiful, with a body that didn't quit.

Dax held open the back door for Giva.

Fearghas exited the other side.

Giva ignored the door Dax held and slid across the seat and out the door where Fearghas stood. "Thank you," she said to the tall Scotsman.

She walked with Fearghas around the car, gave Dax a glance down the length of her nose, and hooked her hand through the crook of Dax's elbow. "Shall we?"

"We shall." Dax laid his hand over the one curled around his elbow and led her into the lobby, past reception and straight to the elevator bank.

Hammer took care of the registration and gave Dax the electronic key to the room. They didn't have to stop at the reception desk or speak to anyone on the way.

Once inside the elevator car, Dax selected the fifth floor.

With the two bodyguards, Dax and Giva, the elevator car seemed small and tight as they stood in silence, waiting for the doors to open on their floor. They couldn't speak openly in case the elevator was wired with a camera.

The bell dinged, and the doors slid open.

Fearghas and Peter exited first, taking their bodyguard duties seriously.

Armed with the key to the suite, Fearghas strode ahead.

Peter stood to the side and waited for Dax and Giva to step out in front of him. He would guard their six.

Dax had worked with teams enough to trust his team had his back. These men would not be members of the Brotherhood Protectors if former Navy SEALs Ace Hammer and Hank Patterson didn't trust them absolutely.

Fearghas let himself into the suite Dax and Giva were to occupy while they remained in the hallway. Several minutes passed before Fearghas reappeared in the doorway. "Clear." He stood back, allowing Giva and Dax to enter.

Giva stepped across the threshold. "Oh, good, they delivered my things from the office."

Dax nodded toward the Army green duffel bag. "And mine."

Once Dax cleared the door, Fearghas stepped back out into the hallway. "If you need us for anything, we have the room beside this one." He tipped his head to the left. "Yell, call or text if you need us. One of us will be on duty through the night."

"Thanks," Dax said and closed the door.

When he turned, he found Giva rolling a suitcase through the shared living area toward the bedroom on the right.

"Are we done for the night?" Dax shot at her retreating form.

Still moving toward the bedroom, she said, “After traveling through the night, you could use some rest. I’m not sure what you’ll retain at this point.”

Dax bristled. “I have a mind like a steel trap, regardless of how much sleep I’ve gotten.”

Giva snorted. “Right. Morning will be here soon enough.” She pushed the case into the bedroom, turned to face him and gave him a brief, tight smile. “Goodnight, Evan.”

It took him a second to realize she’d called him by his undercover persona. Quick to respond, he said, “Don’t you think we should practice the PDA side of this relationship, Sasha?”

Her brow dipped, and her lips pressed into a flat line. “No.” She closed the door firmly between them.

Dax chuckled. “Scared?” he called out.

“Not in the least,” she said through the door panel. “I don’t need the practice.”

“Maybe I do,” he goaded. “Shouldn’t we practice together to give a more authentic performance?”

For a long moment, silence reigned. Then the door swung open, and Giva strode across the sitting room like a model on a runway, coming to a stop directly in front of Dax.

He stood his ground, though the aggressive way she approached him led him to believe she might be on a mission to either slap him again or sink a knife into his gut.

“You need practice?” she asked.

His pulse raced through his veins.

The fiery gleam in Giva’s eyes radiated danger and... passion.

Dax’s groin responded to both, but he couldn’t let her know. “ I know how to kiss and make it look natural.” He raised a hand and ran one of his fingers along the smooth, soft skin of her bare arm. “To convince the casual observers, we need to practice together .”

“Then practice this.” She wrapped her fingers around the back of his neck and pulled him down to press her lips to his.

Dax’s arms came up around her waist, his hands pressing into the small of her back.

Her fingers wove into his hair, urging him closer as she opened to him.

With one hand pressing her against him, he raised the other to grab a handful of her hair. He swept his tongue past her teeth to tangle with hers, caressing it in languorous thrusts.

The more he kissed her, the more he wanted to.

No.

He wanted more. To get closer, to feel her skin against his.

Her calf wrapped around his thigh, and her breasts pressed against his chest.

The hand he held at the small of her back slid lower to cup her ass, and the kiss

intensified until he finally had to lift his head to take a breath.

Her leg skimmed over his as she lowered her foot to the floor. She looked up into his face, a devilish smile curling the corners of her lips. “How’s that for convincing?” she whispered.

Then she lowered her arms from around his neck to press against his chest.

Giva stepped back. “Rehearsal’s over. Good night.” With those parting words, she spun on her heel and returned to her room, her hips swaying in that damned red dress.

Dax tugged at the collar of his shirt, then adjusted his trousers to ease his cock straining against the fabric.

He’d hoped to teach her he could easily convince their dangerous audience they were truly Evan Maas and his sexy girlfriend, Sasha Royce.

Instead, Giva had schooled him in his own lesson. Where he’d lost himself in the kiss, she’d made him feel like the kiss was real and that she’d lost control as much as he had. But she hadn’t lost control. She’d been in complete control the entire time and had walked away as if the kiss meant nothing but a great job acting.

Dax ran a hand through his hair. He would have to take a page from Giva’s book and keep it professional. They were headed into treacherous territory. If they were caught, they could be murdered on the spot.

He hefted his duffel bag onto his shoulder and strode into the other bedroom, closing the door behind him. What he needed was a reset. A cold shower, sleep and time to process what he’d walked into when he’d gone into the bar, expecting to meet with Ace Hammerson.

He dropped his bag on the floor, opened it and dug out a clean T-shirt and a pair of gym shorts, figuring he could wear them to sleep in when he usually slept nude. No need to freak out his partner on this mission.

Keep it professional.

He stripped out of the clothes he'd worn, thinking to make a good impression on his new boss, only to meet with his potential new partner instead. They were off-the-rack items he'd picked up in a department store, but he thought he'd looked semi-decent in them.

Shopping wasn't something he enjoyed. He knew his size and usually spent less than fifteen minutes choosing items. Because he'd moved around so much, he limited his wardrobe to what would fit in his duffel bag.

From the sound of it, he and Giva would spend an inordinate amount of time selecting clothing based on the styles and brands Evan Maas preferred.

Just the thought of being confined inside a store, trying on item after item, made Dax want to hit the pavement outside and run ten miles.

Having Giva with him the entire time might make the effort more bearable. It would also give them more time to get to know each other, not that they would be able to speak freely in front of clerks or concierges. But he'd learned there was more to knowing someone than only words could reveal.

Still rock-hard from that kiss, he adjusted the water temperature in the shower to lukewarm and stepped beneath the spray. He'd hoped the shower would relax his libido, but the water skimming over his skin reminded him of her hands sliding across the back of his neck and weaving into his hair.

He could imagine what those hands would feel like moving further south.

With a groan, he turned the handle on the faucet, adjusting the water temperature to colder.

He forced himself to stand in the chilly spray until his body and mind cooperated.

His skin was covered in goosebumps when he finally shut off the water. He quickly toweled dry, pulled on his shorts and strode into the bedroom.

The muffled sounds of movement came from the sitting room.

Curious, Dax opened the bedroom door to find Giva seated on the sofa, drinking from a teacup.

She turned toward him, her eyes widening briefly. “Hungry?” she asked, her voice sounding a little strained.

His stomach rumbled. “Actually, yes.”

She motioned toward a tray set on a small table in the corner. “Jasmine had it sent up. She thought your stomach might still be on US time.”

“That was nice of her.” He pulled his T-shirt over his head and crossed the floor to the table. Beneath a metal cover, he found a platter full of meats, cheeses and crackers. Beside the platter was a carafe of hot water and a selection of different flavors of tea.

“If tea isn’t what you want, you’ll find beer and wine in the refrigerator,” Giva said.

Dax grabbed a beer from the small refrigerator, twisted off the top and scooped up the

platter of food. He carried them to the coffee table in front of the sofa and set the platter down. "Mind if I join you?"

She tipped her head toward the other end of the sofa. "Please."

He sat on the cushion, selected a couple of pieces of cheese and meats and popped them into his mouth.

Giva had changed out of the red dress into a baggy T-shirt and leggings. Her luxurious black hair was secured in a messy bun on top of her head, and her face was scrubbed clean of all makeup. She sat with one leg tucked beneath her, sipping her tea.

If Dax had thought she was beautiful before, this different side of her was even more appealing.

"So," he said, "what's your story?"

Giva's dark eyebrows wrinkled. "What do you mean?"

"Everyone has a story." He waved a hand. "Where did you grow up? Do you have siblings? Why did you join the military? Why did you leave the military? You know, the usual casual conversation. We're going to be living in close quarters for the next week or two. We might as well know more about each other."

She shook her head. "I don't think that's necessary." As if to end the subject, she took another sip of her tea.

"Okay, I'll go first to break the ice." Dax swallowed more of his beer. "My father was a Marine. I was a military brat. We moved around a lot, so I can't say I grew up in any one place. I have a sister, Virginia, but she's always been Ginny to me. I

joined the military because it was something the men in my family did—my father, his father and his father’s father back several generations. I left the military after the US pulled troops out of Afghanistan.” He lifted his chin. “Your turn.”

Again, she shook her head, staring down into her teacup.

For a long moment, Dax thought she’d refuse to go along with his attempt to get to know each other. “Never mind,” he said, picking out a couple more pieces of cheese and popping them into his mouth for something to fill the awkward silence.

“I grew up in a town south of Tel Aviv with my parents and three siblings, two brothers and a sister. My father was a corporate executive responsible for the company’s global trade. My mother raised us. We went to private schools. I was the oldest daughter. My brother was older than me. Because of his dealings with multiple countries, my father insisted we learn to speak more than one language, starting early in our childhood. I learned English, Russian and Italian.”

“That should come in handy in Dubrovnik,” Dax said.

Giva nodded. “Another reason Jasmine thought of me, besides my resemblance to Sasha Royce.”

“You went to private schools,” Dax prompted. “How did you end up in the military as a Sayeret Matkal?”

“My father wanted his children to go to university, like he and my mother had. He sent my brother to England and me to the US.” She glanced up with a crooked smile. “While my brother went to Oxford, I went to Nebraska. He thought I had a bit of a rebellious tendency, and the Midwest would be someplace I couldn’t get into trouble.”

Dax chuckled. “And did you?”

She nodded. “I’d only been there a year, just getting past my freshman partying ways when I got a call from my aunt who lived in Tel Aviv.” Her glance dropped to the contents of her teacup. “My brother was home from Oxford for a short break. I’d remained in Nebraska, opting out of the return. Hezbollah had launched missiles north toward Tel Aviv.” She looked up, her dark eyes even darker. “The shelling destroyed the entire block where my family lived.”

Dax immediately felt terrible for digging into her background when it obviously caused her distress. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Giva shrugged. “It’s past. I’ve had years to come to terms with the loss and make peace with myself. But I wasn’t at peace back then. I was angry. I went from being an entitled, spoiled girl with no appreciation for the family I had to being alone. I returned to Israel, joined the military and pushed myself hard to make it into the Sayeret Matkal. I wanted a chance to fight back. I wanted the satisfaction of revenge on those responsible for the deaths of my family.”

“And did you get it?” he asked softly.

She shook her head. “I found a family among my brothers and sisters of the Sayeret Matkal. We fought Hezbollah and Hamas, never seeming to make a difference. I saw the faces of the innocents in the aftermath of the shelling. They reminded me of my younger siblings. They hadn’t asked for the war. Yet they were the ones to suffer the most.”

Dax nodded, still haunted by the faces of the children crying for their mothers, injured, bloodied and homeless next to the rubble that had been their homes.

“I lost several of my new-found family members in skirmishes. When my dearest

friend, Jasmine, was driven out of the military on false charges, I lost my stomach for the military and for a war that would never end. I decided it was time to leave as well.”

“I get it,” Dax said. “I felt like we rarely made a difference. I tried being a mercenary for a while, but it wasn’t much better. I was glad when I got the call to join the Brotherhood Protectors. I’d heard from other guys I’d fought with who’d joined Hank Patterson’s organization. It seemed more of a fit.” He shrugged. “And here I am.”

Giva drew in a deep breath. “I bounced around doing odd jobs as an interpreter, a waitress and even as a translator for an advertising company. Then Jasmine called.” She gave a brief smile. “It was good to hear from my old friend. Even better to know she had work she thought I might like better than translating advertisements. I had nothing holding me back. No family, no husband or children. So, here I am.”

“Never married?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I avoided long-term relationships. I loved my family in the special forces, but I couldn’t commit to any one of them. Not after I’d lost friends in battles. I just couldn’t. What about you? Married? Divorced? Kids?”

“Widowed,” he said. “No children.”

Her brow creased. “I’m sorry.”

He echoed her words. “It’s past. Like you, I’ve had years to come to terms with the loss.”

“Yet, you never remarried?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No. As you’re aware, losing someone you love?—”

“—hurts too much,” she finished. “If you don’t love?—”

“—you won’t hurt,” he said, his gaze meeting hers. For a long moment, silence stretched between them as Dax realized they had more in common than he’d originally imagined.

Finally, he forced a laugh. “Look at us bonding over tea, crackers and cheese. It’s good to know we won’t make the mistake of falling in love with each other.”

She nodded. “Not a chance.”

He drank the last of his beer and set the bottle on the table. “Thanks for humoring me. It helps to know more about your partner when you’re going into a tough mission. Especially this one. We won’t be complete strangers trying to pull off being intimate lovers.” He pushed to his feet. “I need rest if we’re shopping tomorrow.”

“Me, too,” she said, setting her teacup on the end table.

Dax held out his hand.

She placed her palm in his and let him pull her to her feet. They stood close enough he could feel the warmth of her body.

They’d shared a moment, talking to each other. The urge to take her into his arms was so overwhelming he gave into it and tugged her hand gently.

She leaned against him, her arms encircling his middle.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and held her close. Nothing sexual. No intention of taking it further. Just one human holding another.

Giva pressed her cheek to his chest and remained there, making no attempt to push back or put distance between them.

Not until he felt dampness on his T-shirt did Dax realize Giva was crying.

He leaned his head back and touched a finger beneath her chin, tipping her face upward.

Her cheeks were soaked, and tears continued to flow. "I'm sorry," she choked out. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I never cry."

"It's okay," he brushed his thumb across her cheek. "It'll be our secret."

"I didn't cry when I got the call from my aunt. I was in shock. I didn't believe they were really gone."

He tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear.

Giva laid her cheek against his chest again, her arms tightening around his waist. "I didn't cry at their funeral. I was too numb. Then I was in the military, and soldiers don't cry." She drew in a shaky breath. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "I cried enough for both of us when my wife died."

He held her for another couple of minutes before she drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Giva straightened, letting her arms drop to her sides.

Dax released his hold on her, simultaneously taking a step back. "You okay?"

She nodded, scraping her hands over her face. “Actually, I feel much better. Like a weight has lifted from my chest.”

Dax smiled gently. “Anytime you need a shoulder to cry on, or a chest, you can call on me.”

Her lips twisted wryly. “Thanks. Although you might wish you hadn’t made that offer.”

“Never,” he said. “Now, wash your face and get some rest. I need you in top form to dress me like a billionaire. Never having been one, I wouldn’t know where to start.”

She laughed and graced him with her first genuine smile. “You’re on. Goodnight, Dax.”

“Evan,” he corrected. “Goodnight, Sasha.”

He stood in the sitting room until she’d gone to her bedroom and closed the door.

As he retreated to his room, everything they’d spoken of replayed in his mind. Neither one of them had dared to love again, unwilling to risk the pain of loss ever again. In the process, they hadn’t allowed themselves to be truly happy or experience the joy love could bring.

What was the quote by Lord Alfred Tennyson?

’Tis was better to have loved and lost then never to have loved at all...

Coming to that realization on the veritable eve of embarking on a dangerous mission wasn’t the best timing for Dax.

The thought of loving someone again, like he'd loved Lana, nearly brought him to his knees. Could he? Would he feel guilty allowing himself to move on? Would he be disrespecting the memory of his wife?

The warmth of Giva's body pressing against his lingered, making him remember what had been so great about having someone in his life. Not just the sex. It was knowing they were there for each other, sharing their hopes and dreams along with their failures and pain. He missed that.

He'd do best to table that realization and keep his heart closed to love, as he had for so long. At least until they made it out of Dubrovnik.

Alive.

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Chapter 4

Giva slept better than she had in years. No nightmares of crying children in ragged clothing, no funerals with five caskets lined up. No faces of the friends she'd held in her arms as they'd bled out. No heavy feelings of guilt or regret weighing on her chest, making it hard to breathe.

Just a deep, cleansing sleep that left her feeling groggy the next morning with the hint of a headache she suspected was from having cried so hard.

When she dragged herself into the bathroom and got a look at her face in the mirror, she grimaced. Red-rimmed eyes, puffy bags beneath. Not the face of a woman living life to the fullest as the girlfriend and lover of one of the wealthiest men in the world.

Since leaving the military, she'd learned that makeup could hide a lot of sins of age and neglect. Now, she could include the ravages of succumbing to the weakness of tears.

Giva could kick herself for losing control of her emotions so completely—and she did it in front of her new partner for the mission ahead of them. Tears made her appear to be a pathetic excuse for a battle buddy.

Hadn't she learned during Tironut, her IDF basic training, that soldiers don't cry? She'd never shed a tear, even as she'd held a fellow soldier as he'd bled out.

With a twist of the faucet handle, she ran cold water into the sink and splashed her face. She hoped the chilly liquid would reduce the damage of the tears she'd soaked

Dax's shirt with the night before.

She'd have to be doubly badass from now until the completion of the mission to regain any semblance of respect from the man who needed her as an asset, not a liability. They were going up against some of the most dangerous men in the world.

She dried her face, sighed at her reflection and went to work on hiding the blemishes beneath a carefully crafted layer of makeup.

When she emerged from her bedroom, she looked better and forced an air of confident nonchalance.

The scent of coffee filled her nostrils, leading her to the source—a tray full of breakfast choices and two carafes of steaming dark brew.

She poured a mug of Turkish coffee and took her first sip.

“Ah, you're awake.” Dax emerged from his bedroom, fully clothed in the black trousers and shirt he'd worn the night before. He appeared well-rested and ready to start the day.

Which was more than Giva could say about herself. Dressed in a cream-colored pantsuit, she'd slicked her hair against her scalp and secured it in a ponytail that hung down her back in a neat braid.

Although fully dressed, she needed her first cup of coffee before she was ready. Especially since they were headed for a day of shopping.

She was good at choosing fashionable clothing and liked to dress up occasionally. She viewed shopping as a necessary evil. The sooner they got started, the sooner they'd get done. Then, the real work began. They had only a couple of days to learn

all there was to know about Evan and Sasha to make their performance convincing.

“I spoke with Fearghas and Peter earlier,” Dax said. “They had a peaceful night, alternating who stood guard outside our door every six hours, so they got some sleep. No excitement, which is always good. Maybe word that E.M. is in town hasn’t made all the rounds yet. And it might take them a minute to make the connection between E.M. and Edward Hughes.”

Giva sipped and nodded. “Good. I’m not ready to jump into his girlfriend’s stilettos until after I’ve had at least one cup of coffee.”

“You should also load up on protein while we wait for the stores to open,” Dax said. “I have a feeling we’re going to need our strength to make it through the day. Did I mention that I don’t like to shop for clothes?”

“That makes two of us. I’ll do my best to keep it as short as possible.” She snorted. “No guarantees. Some of the staff members at upscale clothiers have a knack for dragging it out as long as they can to wear down the buyer into purchasing multiple items just to get out of the door.”

Dax’s lips pressed tightly together. “Great. Something to look forward to.”

Giva grinned over the top of her mug. “You’ll live.”

“I’d rather face a horde of Taliban soldiers than spend more than thirty minutes in a store,” Dax muttered.

“Suck it up, Marine,” Giva said in her best drill instructor voice, ruining the effect when her lips quirked upward and stood.

“I was just about to pour my second cup of coffee,” Dax said.

“Too late for that. The stores open in twenty minutes.” Giva glanced at her cell phone and squared her shoulders. Not only had she slept well, but the coffee was also kicking in. “We need to get moving.”

“We have to wait for the all-clear from Hank and Sadie. If they don’t get E.M. and his girl off-grid, this operation ends before it begins.”

A knock sounded on the door to the suite.

Giva’s gaze met Dax’s.

“I’ll get it,” he said and hurried to the door, checking through the peephole before releasing the deadbolt and swinging it open.

Ace Hammerson strode in, followed by Jasmine and Fearghas.

Peter remained in the hall as Fearghas closed the door.

“I got a text from Hank on my way here. He’s going to call any minute.” As if on cue, his cell phone chirped. Hammer glanced down. “That’s him. Fearghas?”

Fearghas had his cell phone out and ready. He punched a button, and his phone emitted a white noise that sounded like heavy rain. He adjusted the volume louder and then nodded to Hammer.

Hammer received the call and placed it on speaker.

Everyone gathered closer to hear over the sound of the rain.

“Hammer here. You’re on speaker.”

“Good,” Hank Patterson’s voice came across as staticky but clear enough. “Our guests are secure. With the help of a little chemistry, we were able to borrow his cell phone and forward all calls to the number you provided before we disabled the device. Swede also disabled the internet service for the island. I’m communicating with you on a satellite phone. Are the doppelgangers ready for insertion?”

Dax and Giva spoke as one. “We are.”

“Are the bodyguards on board?” Hank asked.

“They are,” Hammer responded. “Fearghas and Atkins will be there.”

“Dmytro flying them in?”

Hammer nodded. “He is.”

“Then this mission is a go,” Hank said. “If things go sideways, get out. If you need anything, Swede knows how to contact us. I’m not sure how long our guests will tolerate being off-grid. Sadie has them intrigued with the possibility of producing another film at our island location. It might keep him occupied for a few days. Not much longer. Hopefully, you can get what you need quickly and get out. Good luck.”

“Out here,” Hammer said.

“Out here,” Hank echoed.

When the call ended, Hammer glanced from Dax to Giva and back. “You heard the boss. The mission is a go. You can start making public appearances as E.M. and his girl. Dmytro will sneak you out of Zurich in his plane and smuggle you into Dubrovnik before any of the Nexus Collective know you’ve arrived. That way, you won’t have to explain why you didn’t arrive on your private jet.”

Hammer glanced down at his watch. “You have today to gear up and study everything about Maas, his holdings and relationships with the other guests of the invitation-only meeting.”

Dax nodded. “Roger.”

“We’ll gather all the weapons and electronics you might need.” Hammer’s mouth twisted. “They will probably make you check all weapons at the door, but it might help to have them available in Dubrovnik.”

“When does our plane leave?” Giva asked.

“The meeting is scheduled for nine o’clock at night the day after tomorrow. You’ll fly out before dawn that morning, land at Split, Croatia, and board a helicopter that will take you directly to the Heliodrom in Dubrovnik. You should be there by early afternoon with enough time to get to your lodgings and perform reconnaissance.”

“Where will the meeting take place?” Dax asked.

“We don’t know yet.” Hammer dug in his pants pocket and pulled out a cell phone. “As Hank said, they were able to forward the man’s calls....” he held up the phone, “to this phone.” He handed the phone to Dax.

“What do I do if someone calls him?” Dax asked.

“Let it go to voicemail,” Hammer answered. “I turned off the ringer and set it to vibrate. The invitation Swede intercepted on the dark web indicated that directions to the meeting location will be conveyed via text message at eight o’clock Croatian time. You’ll have one hour to get there. We suspect it will be in the old city.”

Giva nodded. “The Old Town is surrounded by a high wall. Inside those walls is the

city. It has hidden passages and underground dungeons that have been converted into meeting rooms where cell phones and internet WIFI will be useless.”

“Right,” Hammer said. “They won’t want any outsiders to listen in on their plans or have tracking devices expose the location.”

“Thus, the need to have human ears on the inside,” Dax concluded.

“And a trail of breadcrumbs,” Giva said with a grimace.

Hammer turned to Giva and Fearghas. “Dax will enter the meeting alone. The rest of you will get as close as possible without alerting whatever sentries they’ll have positioned around Old Town.”

“We’ll need to move out if we’re to get suitable attire and still have time left to study our parts,” Giva said.

“Go,” Hammer said. “We’ll meet back at headquarters this afternoon to finalize plans.”

Fearghas turned off the white noise and left the room, followed by Hammer.

“Ready?” Dax asked Giva.

She nodded. “We don’t have much time. Hopefully, we will find everything we need at one location.” She gathered a purse and strode for the door

Dax beat her to it and held it open.

Giva prided herself on her independence and ability to take care of herself. Sometimes, that made her feel less than feminine. Not that she’d ever cared. Having

Dax open doors for her went against her stance on equality between the sexes. But she liked that it showed he had good manners and was considerate.

Yeah, she was fully capable of opening her own doors, but she liked that he'd done it for her and that she hadn't had to ask.

With Fearghas and Peter on either side of them, they left the building, climbed into the waiting vehicle and said hello to Dmytro, their driver.

Minutes later, the four of them exited the car and entered a high-end men's clothing store.

While Giva and an attendant combed through expensive trousers, shirts and undergarments, Dax stripped in the dressing room and tried on whatever they brought him.

One by one, he stepped out of the room for Giva's approval. He started with the trousers, coming out wearing only a pair of beautifully tailored black slacks, no shirt and bare feet.

Giva found the man attractive, fully clothed. Seeing him half naked like she had the previous night had her blood burning through her veins.

She gulped, hoping to swallow the rising tide of desire rushing to the surface. Now wasn't the time to lose focus. They were short on time and had much to do in preparation.

They settled on two pairs of dark trousers and a pair of khaki pants. When he matched shirts with the trousers, she stood and helped him with the buttons at the cuffs. Jolts of electricity ripped through her whenever her skin brushed against his.

Giva retreated to the viewing chair and let him secure his own buttons before she made a fool of herself in front of him.

After selecting trousers, three button-down long-sleeve dress shirts and a blazer, she added a couple of polo shirts and a single necktie. Before they were done, she insisted on a black leather belt, black leather shoes and a pair of casual deck shoes. She wasn't sure how long he'd be meeting with the Nexus Collective and didn't want to scramble to find additional clothes.

She paid extra to have the seamstress on staff make a few alterations while they waited.

"On our way in, I noticed a ladies' boutique next door." Dax gave her a pointed look. "Your turn."

"I have enough outfits that will fit the bill," Giva protested.

He shook his head. "Are they new or hand-me-downs?"

She wanted to tell him they were fine but knew he would see through her words. "Not new."

"Would your person be caught dead in second-hand clothes?" Dax asked.

"Oh, hell no," Giva sighed.

"We have to wait for the seamstress to finish my alterations," he pointed out. "Besides, you promised to try on clothes if I did."

"Fine," she said less graciously. "We'll go next door."

Dax reached the front entrance of the men's clothing store, passed through the door, and held it for Giva.

She held her head high, very Sasha-like and walked through with confidence and an air of entitlement she'd seen on Sasha's face in the photographs.

Fearghas and Peter stood guard on either side of the entrance, wearing sunglasses and black jackets. They didn't blend into their surroundings at all. Which was exactly what they'd aimed for. Visual deterrence was half the battle of protecting someone.

Giva entered the ladies' clothing store and headed straight for the trousers, blouses and matching blazers.

Dax stopped in front of a mannequin wearing a shiny royal blue, silky sheath.

"Sasha, sweetheart, you'd look amazing in this."

"I don't need a dress," Giva grumbled. After selecting a handful of pants, blouses and light-weight sweaters, she marched into the changing room.

An attendant valiantly tried to catch up to the woman on a mission and finally did when Giva needed to go into one of the changing rooms.

The woman took the items from Giva, hung them inside the spacious room, and smiled. "If you need a different size, I can get that for you," she offered in heavily accented English. "Your husband can sit outside the door."

Giva bit down on her tongue to keep from saying he's not my husband. "Thank you."

She closed the door, stripped and pulled on cream-colored trousers, and paired them with a black, sleeveless silk shell. After a quick glance in the mirror, she stepped out

of the stall.

Dax sat in a white leather chair directly across from the room where she'd changed.

"Do you approve?" she asked, though she didn't need his approval for anything. Her clothes. Her choice.

A grin spread across his face. "Absolutely."

"Good." She spun and would have walked back into the dressing room.

"Wait," Dax said.

He wasn't in the chair when she turned a frown toward him. He'd disappeared.

"D—" she started, remembered and amended, "Evan?"

"I'm right here, Sweetcheeks," his voice sounded from around a corner. He appeared carrying a narrow, red leather belt. "Try this, he said, holding out the belt. "You need a pop of color."

Her frown did nothing to deter him from advancing on her. Before she could anticipate what he was about to do, he slid the belt through the loops on the front of the trousers. His arms encircled her, his fingers feeling their way to each loop, slipping the belt through until he arrived back at the front. He buckled the belt, stood back and nodded. "Better. Look." He gripped her hips and turned her to face the mirror.

Giva could barely breathe with his hands resting on her hips.

"What do you think?" he asked, smiling over her shoulder into the mirror.

Think? How could she think when he stood so close she could smell his aftershave and feel the warmth of his body against her back? “It’s amazing,” she said breathlessly.

“It reminds me of the red dress and how hot you were in it.” He winked, released his hold on her and moved back. “Go on. Next outfit.”

Giva dove into the changing room and leaned her back against the door, forcing air in and out of her lungs.

The man had only slipped a belt around her waist. He hadn’t kissed her or touched her breasts. Yet, her entire body had lit up like a smelting furnace.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror, appalled at the flush of bright pink in her cheeks. “What is wrong with you?” she murmured.

“Everything all right in there?” Dax asked.

“Yes. Everything’s fine,” she squeaked, cursing inwardly.

He’s just a man.

Giva paced the two steps across the tiny space, spun and paced back.

A ruggedly handsome man.

But only a man. One I have to work with.

She clenched her hands into fists and raised her face to the ceiling.

Don’t complicate this.

“Do you need help with a zipper or buttons?” Dax asked, his voice close, as if right outside the door.

“No. I can manage. I’ll be right out.” Giva quickly unbuckled the red belt. Her hands shook as she pulled it out of the loops Dax had found one at a time, his chest pressed to hers, his hands brushing against her as they worked their way around.

Get a grip!

She whipped the belt out and dropped it like a hot potato, then shimmied out of the trousers and into the black high-waisted slacks. She pulled on a black turtleneck sweater, tucked the hem into her waistband then shrugged into a black and white herringbone jacket. As she stared at the combination in the mirror, she shook her head.

Giva retrieved the thin red belt from the floor and threaded it through the loops, hating that Dax had been right about a pop of color but not willing to let him put it on her for the second time.

It wasn’t that she didn’t trust him.

She didn’t trust herself. If she was honest with herself...she’d liked it when he’d slipped the belt on far too much.

She stepped out of the dressing room.

Dax leaned against the wall beside the door. When she came out, he straightened and turned to look at her latest outfit. A smile slid across his face. “Nice. That one could be dual purpose.”

She nodded and faced the three-sided mirror, pushing the sleeves up on the jacket and

shoving her hands in the pockets. “Paparazzi-worthy.”

In the next moment, she shrugged out of the jacket and pulled off the belt. “Suitable for night ops,” she whispered.

His lips quirked upward on the corners.

His approval made her chest warm. Not that she needed his approval. But it was nice that he recognized her effort to dress according to the mission.

She paid for the outfits, including the thin red belt.

Dax carried her bags back to the men’s store, where they’d completed the alterations and had their purchases bagged and ready to go.

Giva texted Dmytro and Fearghas while Dax gathered his bags.

When they exited the store, the long black vehicle had pulled up to the curb.

To get to the car, they had to walk through a gathering of reporters with cameras and microphones.

“Mr. Maas, how long will you be in Zurich?” one man asked.

Fearghas stepped between the reporter and Dax, hurrying him toward the vehicle's open door.

“Ms. Royce, is it true that your lover paid a million dollars for you to travel to space on the next launch of his commercial spacecraft?”

Giva smiled and refused to respond, linking her hand through Dax’s elbow.

When they reached the vehicle, he handed her in first and then slipped in beside her.

Fearghas rounded the rear of the car to the other door and got in on Giva's other side.

With cameras aimed at the windows, reporters walked alongside the vehicle as Dmytro eased away from the curb.

Dax stared out at the clamoring throng. "I think the word has spread."

"Gird your loins, people," Fearghas said.

Giva's hand found Dax's.

He squeezed gently and didn't let go as they slid through the streets of Zurich.

I'm an independent woman, Giva reminded herself.

But it felt good when someone had her back.

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Chapter 5

Dax sat across the narrow aisle from Giva. Though the distance was short enough he could have reached for her hand, he didn't. It was one thing to touch, kiss and hold her in public, where people expected Evan Maas and Sasha Royce to demonstrate their love or lust for each other.

It was another thing entirely when they were only with their small team of Brotherhood Protectors, each knowing this mission was only a charade necessary to get them inside the meeting of the wealthy and powerful.

Giva was a member of the team, just like Dax, Fearghas, Peter and Dmytro. They were professionals on a mission.

Not a couple on their way to an all-inclusive adult resort to float in a pool and drink Mai Tais.

At that moment, a couples' retreat sounded amazing.

Instead, they were heading into the lions' den of world players who wouldn't hesitate to kill anyone who got in the way of their goals.

The more Dax had learned about the Nexus Collective, the more he realized just how dangerous the mission would be.

"Want to go over the players again?" Giva asked into her headset.

“Sure,” Dax replied. “You can start.”

“Dieter Strüngmann, German, owns one of the largest Global transportation empires. A shutdown on any front could impact the world economy.”

“He’s self-made, started out in the mailroom of a trucking company, and worked his way up,” Dax added. “Bought the company, invested in shipping and air cargo movement.”

“Divorced twice. One ex-wife moved to Mexico and was killed by a Mexican cartel. The other ex-wife crashed on the autobahn.” Giva leaned her head back against the headrest and continued. “Two children, grown. His daughter lives in an undisclosed location, rumored to be in the Canary Islands. He’s grooming his son, Fredrich, to take over the business.”

“Hammer said that Swede ran a search on Fredrich’s current whereabouts,” Dax said. “He’s back at their corporate headquarters in Munich and isn’t expected to attend this meeting of the minds.”

“Your turn,” Giva said.

“Vitaly Rabinovich,” Dax said. “Russian Oligarch. In exchange for his support of the President of Russia, he received huge contracts that made him a wealthy man. It’s believed the President of Russia charged him to use his tech company to employ the most skilled hackers to break into energy grids of countries all over the world. All the president has to do is point his finger, and Rabinovich can crash grids in countries like the UK, France, Canada and the US.”

“Except he’s lost favor with the President because he let one of his other ventures get out of hand,” Giva said. “A bio lab in Siberia that was cooking up weaponized viruses. It was shut down, but no one knows if the viruses were destroyed.”

Dax hadn't liked the sound of that one.

"Let's hope he didn't bring a virus with him to Dubrovnik," Giva said.

"No kidding," Dax agreed. "From the sound of it, those viruses would make the pandemic of 2020 look like a case of the sniffles."

"Marco Galeotti," Giva prompted.

"Italian," Dax said. "Shipping magnate with real estate all over the world and links to the Italian mafia. There's another Russian. What was his name? Yuri?"

"Yuri Kagalovsky," Giva offered.

"Oh yeah. I knew that." Dax scrubbed a hand over his face. "Another oligarch. He controls forty-five percent of Russian oil exports and weapons production."

"Which brings me to my favorite, Hochi Yamaguchi." Giva's lips pressed into a thin line. "She's a piece of work. All proper Japanese businesswoman on the surface. Rumor has it she killed her father to take over his business and his connections with Yakuza."

Dax nodded. "Japan's version of mafia. Which brings us to Evan Maas," he said.

Giva leaned her head toward him. "For the next couple of days, that will be you."

"He certainly meets the global wealth criteria as one of the wealthiest men in the world." Dax frowned. "But why him? From all the data Swede presented, there wasn't anything connecting him to mafia organizations or cartels."

"He's been vocal about wanting to affect change in areas historically mired in strife.

He has been known to go after what he wants no matter what it takes,” Giva said. “His timing is impeccable. He swoops in and snaps up corporations in countries that have suffered economic collapse or destruction of infrastructure. As the dust settles, he sends in building contractors and buys up real estate and failing corporations for pennies on the dollar. Then he turns them around and sells them at huge profits.”

“What do they all have in common?”

“A lot of money,” Giva answered.

“And the desire to make more,” Dax said. “And at what cost? The invitation Swede intercepted gave the general location, Dubrovnik, Croatia, and the time when the specific location would be sent.” His brow creased. “And that one other phrase that has everyone worried.”

“It is time,” Giva said softly.

“Time for what?” Dax asked, not expecting an answer. That was why they’d embarked on this dangerous mission. Something was about to happen, care of the Nexus Collective. It would be up to Dax, Giva, Fearghas, Peter and Dmytro to identify it and de-escalate.

He opened the electronic tablet they’d loaded with the images of the players in the game and studied the many photos of each to better recognize them at any angle.

Fearghas made his way from the cockpit to where Giva and Dax were seated and plugged in his headset to be heard over the roar of the engine. “We land in Split in ten minutes.” He looked from Giva to Dax and back. “You know the drill.”

Giva nodded. “We leave the aircraft and climb into the waiting vehicle. It drives through a hanger and out the other side.”

Dax picked up the plan from there. “We won’t be with it at that point. Inside the hanger, we all bail, and five other people leave inside the vehicle.”

Peter leaned in. “Fearghas and I will slip into maintenance uniforms, open the hanger doors and drag a helicopter onto the tarmac.

“I’ll be in the pilot’s seat,” Dmytro said into the headset. “Giva and Dax will be keeping low in the rear.”

Peter nodded. “The Scotsman and I will climb aboard, and we’ll take off to Dubrovnik.”

Dax glanced toward Giva. “While in the air, Giva and I will put on disguises so that when we arrive in Dubrovnik, no one will suspect we’re Evan Maas and Sasha Royce.”

“Which will give the four of us time to look around Old Town while we’re waiting for the text containing the location,” Giva added.

“Meanwhile, Dmytro will continue to our hotel and establish computer access, tracking, and communications.” Fearghas clapped his hands together. “Everybody ready?”

Dax, Giva and Peter nodded.

“Ready,” Dmytro said through the headset. “Fasten your seatbelts, we’re about to land.”

The plane circled and then descended, touching down lightly on the tarmac at the Split airport.

As planned, Dmytro taxied to the designated hangar on the general aviation side of the facility, brought the plane to a stop and shut down the engine.

A dark limousine drove up to the plane.

Fearghas opened the door and lowered the steps.

Dax climbed out first, turned, helped Giva to the ground and then into the back seat of the SUV.

Fearghas and Peter climbed in with them and sat across from the pair.

Dmytro slipped into the front passenger seat.

The vehicle drove across the tarmac into a hangar. As soon as the doors closed behind them,

Dax and Giva climbed out of the limo and into the waiting helicopter.

Fearghas and Peter pulled on maintenance coveralls and caps.

Dmytro stepped up into the pilot's seat of the helicopter, fit his headset over his ears and a pair of sunglasses over his eyes.

Five other people dove into the limousine, and it rolled out the other side of the hangar onto the road leading out of the airport and southeast toward Split and Dubrovnik.

They waited ten minutes. Anyone who might be following Evan Maas and Sasha Royce should've followed the limousine and not hung around the airport.

At exactly ten minutes, Fearghas and Peter opened the hangar doors. A maintenance man pulled the chopper out of the hanger attached to the back of a cart.

Once he'd unhooked the helicopter from the cart, he moved the cart out of the way.

Fearghas climbed into the copilot's seat while Peter slipped into the back with Dax and Giva.

Moments later, Dmytro had clearance and lifted off.

Dax and Giva stayed down, giving them enough time to put distance between them and the airport.

"You can sit up now," Fearghas said. "We'll land in twenty minutes."

Giva pulled a blond wig out of the backpack she'd brought with her. She pulled her hair up into a ponytail and wrapped it around several times, pinning it down. Then she slipped the wig over her head, tugging it into place and anchoring it with hairpins.

Dax reached over and tucked several loose strands of dark hair into the wig cap. His knuckles brushed against the softness of her cheek, sending a spark of electricity zinging through him.

Giva's eyes flared, and her lips parted slightly. Then she clamped her mouth closed, shrugged into a dark, bulky jacket two sizes too big for her and fit a pair of sunglasses over her eyes. She kicked out of her high heels and slid her feet into running shoes.

Based on her initial reaction, Giva must have felt that same spark. If they weren't on their way to a dangerous mission, Dax would like to have explored that response further.

But they had a job to do that didn't involve making love with his partner. Pulling his head back into the game, he slipped out of the blazer he'd worn on the airplane and into a hooded sweatshirt jacket. A fake mustache, a flat hat like those worn by golf caddies and sunglasses completed his disguise.

Fearghas and Peter stripped out of their maintenance coveralls. They would leave the helicopter like two businessmen, carrying a suitcase full of Evan and Sasha's clothing and another with the equipment Dmytro needed to assist with the operation.

As Dmytro brought the aircraft to a gentle landing at the Heliodrom helicopter pad, Dax and Giva slipped off their headsets and tucked earbuds into their ears.

"Comm check," Fearghas said into Dax's ear.

"Evan here," Dax responded.

"Sasha here." Giva gave the man a thumbs-up.

"This is where we split up. We'll meet you back at the hotel in three hours," Fearghas said. "You can maintain communications with us through the radios."

Dax and Giva were the first out of the chopper.

A dark car and a scooter were parked near the landing pad.

"I thought we were getting a motorcycle," Dax murmured into the radio headset.

"Too flashy," Dmytro said. "You're tourists."

"I'll drive," Giva said, slinging a leg over the seat of the scooter.

Dax frowned because he figured she'd expect him to when, in fact, he was happy to let her drive. That way, he could hold on around her middle all the way. Besides, she seemed to know more about Dubrovnik than he did.

He slid on behind her, his thighs sandwiching hers, his arms wrapping around her waist.

No, he didn't mind letting her drive at all.

While Dmytro, Fearghas and Peter loaded the suitcases into the vehicle, Dax and Giva drove away, heading for Old Town.

The others would deliver the suitcases to the hotel. Dmytro would set up the ops center. Fearghas and Peter would change into tourist clothes and merge into the throngs of people visiting Old Town. They'd divided the city into quarters. Fearghas and Peter would split and each take a quarter section.

Dax and Giva would stay together and cover the other half as best they could.

They were looking for escape routes and potential entry points to underground spaces. Mostly, they were looking for people. They'd be studying the faces of the people they passed, looking for the Nexus Collective and anyone who appeared to be a sentry or bodyguard.

Dax and Giva could have stayed at the hotel, advertising themselves as Evan and Sasha. After much discussion with the team, they had opted to do their own reconnaissance to be more prepared when the text came through with the directions to the location.

The plan was to look around for a few hours. When the time drew near, they'd leave Old Town and drive back to the scooter rental place where the vehicle they'd sent

from Split would meet them. They'd drop the scooter, change in the vehicle and arrive at the hotel as Evan and Sasha.

For the moment, they were just a couple of tourists, going to see a UNESCO world heritage site.

Giva drove the scooter like someone who'd driven a scooter or motorcycle before, zipping in and out of standstill traffic, arriving at the walls of Old Town in less than twenty minutes.

They parked the scooter and grabbed a brochure as they entered the city through Pile gate and passed Onofrio's Fountain.

Giva led the way to a set of stairs leading up to the wall that encircled the city. From there, they could look down into the city and get their bearings.

They climbed the Min?eta Tower, the highest point, and stared out over the walled city full of tourists and vendors.

When they finally stopped, Dax stood beside Giva. "You've been here before?"

She nodded, her lips curling on the corners. "I have. I came with my family when I was a teen. We spent three days exploring the city. My father loved history and took us to what we called old places. We loved it, though. My parents would get frustrated when they lost track of us."

"I can imagine. This city is bigger than I'd imagined, with many places for a child to get lost."

Giva nodded. "We'd get caught up exploring and wander off. We always had a designated place to go if we got separated. Here in Dubrovnik, it was right here at the

Min?eta Tower. You could see it from most vantage points within Old Town.”

Dax stared down into the city, overwhelmed by the number of tourists crowding the streets and walking along the tops of the walls.

“If you had to place sentries around the city, where would you position them?” Giva asked.

“I’d start with the entrances. If I had the ability to put up cameras, I’d do it there. Otherwise, boots on the ground nearby and some on the walls above at points they can see down streets, not just looking out across the rooftops.”

Giva nodded. “The walls surrounding Old Town would have some good vantage points.” She tipped her chin toward a corner below where they stood. “See the man below us?”

Dax nodded. He’d noticed the man dressed in a black jacket and sunglasses. He stood with his hands in his pocket, staring intently down at the streets below. “Probably a sentry.” Dax shifted his gaze to take in more of the wall further away. “And the man at the next corner and the one I saw hovering over the entrance we came through. I bet there are more on the far side of the wall.” All three men he’d spotted wore black jackets and sunglasses.

Giva nodded and pushed away from the edge of the wall, lifting her cell phone to snap a picture of Dax.

He shook his head, his lips twisted. “We’re supposed to be tourists. Do a selfie.”

She came to stand beside him and held out her phone, aiming it at her and Dax. She snapped the photo and brought it up on the display.

Dax would have liked it better if she wasn't wearing the wig and neither of them had on sunglasses. But they were together, and it was a great background picture.

Giva grimaced at the picture. "We should come back to Dubrovnik when we're not on a mission. I don't like myself as a blond."

Dax chuckled. "So, you want to come back and get a picture of you without the wig?"

She shrugged. "I'm a trained combatant, but deep down, there's a woman who likes pretty things and likes looking good."

"You look amazing as a blonde and with your black hair." He leaned close and kissed her. "I like that you're tough as nails on the outside and soft and feminine on the inside. Beautiful inside and out."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned up to kiss him back.

His arms wound around her and crushed her to him, deepening the kiss.

"We're inside the walls." Fearghas's voice filled Dax's ears, startling him out of the kiss. "Evan and Sasha, comm check."

Giva jerked away, blinking. "Sasha here."

"Evan here," Dax followed quickly.

"Location?" Fearghas asked.

"Highest point on the outer wall. Min?eta Tower," Dax responded, his arms falling to his sides.

“Heading into our sectors,” Fearghas said. “Any sightings?”

“Three men on the walls so far. Black jackets, sunglasses. One of them was positioned over the entrance closest to the harbor.”

“Saw that one,” Peter’s voice sounded in Dax’s ear. “Can you see much from where you are?”

“A lot of rooftops,” Giva said. “As you move along the wall, you can get some views of streets leading into the city center. Not enough.”

“Roger,” Fearghas said. “Heading in. Will report what I find.”

“Same,” Peter said.

“Descending into the city now.” Dax met Giva’s gaze.

She gave a brief nod. Together, they left the tower, taking the staircase down to the wall.

Dax reached for Giva’s hand and held it as they walked past the man who’d been standing below them. Dax noted the dark earpieces he wore, matching the sunglasses.

The man spoke in a low tone that barely carried to Dax’s ears.

Giva leaned close to Dax and kissed his cheek, whispering into his ear, “Russian.”

He smiled at her and slipped his arm around her waist like any other tourist couple, maybe even on their honeymoon. What would it be like to be on a honeymoon with Giva?

Probably not a dull moment.

They found the stairs leading down into Old Town and wound their way through the streets. They did their best to avoid the really crowded areas, knowing it would be almost impossible to spot sentries among so many people. They weaved through the passages, some leading down many stairs to emerge onto Stradun, the main road leading from Pile Gate to the Ploče Gate.

They walked quickly on the less crowded streets, moving from west to east.

When they reached the Dominican Monastery, they spotted another man in a black jacket and sunglasses leaning against the front of the monastery, smoking a cigarette.

“Got another at the Dominican Monastery,” Dax said into the radio.

“Spotted one at the base of the Jesuit Stairs,” Peter said softly. “And one at the top of the stairs in front of Saint Ignatius Church.”

“I’m not seeing much on the southwest quadrant,” Fearghas said.

“Another guy in Gundulič’s Square near the statue of the man the square is named after,” Peter said.

“Seems to be more in your area, Peter,” Fearghas said.

“Agreed,” Peter said.

“Any clusters of them in any one place?” Fearghas asked.

“Not so far,” was Peter’s response. “Wait. I think I just saw someone who looks a lot like the guy with the mustache and goatee beard.”

“Marco Galeotti,” Dax said.

“That’s right,” Peter said. “He’s got a couple of big guys with him who I assume are his bodyguards. They’re heading back toward the Saint Ignatius. I’m following. They passed the church and headed down the Jesuit Stairs. The sentries are watching them.”

“Stay with them. Try not to be too obvious,” Fearghas said. “I’m heading your way.”

“Heading that way,” Giva said and turned south, Dax at her side.

“They’ve stopped at a bistro,” Peter said. “Marco is settling in for a cup of coffee.”

“Probably waiting for the text with the location,” Dax said. He glanced down at his watch. “Sasha and I have to head back and make an appearance at the hotel.”

“I’ll catch up with you before you head out for the rendezvous,” Fearghas said.

“Peter, stay with Marco in case we lose track of Evan later.”

“Roger. I could use a coffee,” Peter said.

“Ready to head back?” Dax asked Giva.

She frowned. “I’d like to see Marco and get at least one face committed to memory.”

“We’re cutting it close on time, and we still have to walk all the way back across Old Town.” Still, he hesitated for only a moment longer and then said into his radio. “I want to see Marco. We’ll swing by the bistro on our way out.”

“That’s not really on your way out,” Fearghas pointed out.

“No, but I’d feel better knowing at least one face going into the meeting,” Dax said.

“Make that two faces,” Peter said. “The German, Dieter Strüngmann, just pulled up a chair to Marco’s table.”

“Headed your way,” Dax said.

He and Giva hurried toward the Jesuit Stairs, passing Saint Blaise’s Church along the way.

As they neared the stairs, Dax spotted the bistro with its array of outdoor seating.

Peter sat on one end of the row of tables and chairs, ordering coffee from a waitress.

At the other end of the seating area were two men, one with dark hair graying at the temples, a mustache and a goatee beard. The other man had dirty blond hair and blue eyes. Standing nearby were four men not doing a very good job at blending in. The bodyguards.

Dax slowed as they neared the two men. He didn’t look directly at them but studied them in his peripheral vision, glad they’d made the detour to get a good look at the two men.

Evan Maas would know them and act like he’d met them before.

Knowing they had to get back to the hotel, Dax didn’t stop. He kept walking, Giva’s hand held tightly in his.

She stayed with him, not trying to slow him down. They hurried toward Pile Gate and out of Old Town.

“You drive,” Giva said as they reached the scooter.

Dax flung his leg over the seat, started the engine and waited as Giva climbed on behind him. He pulled into the stalled traffic and weaved between vehicles, heading toward the scooter rental place.

Dax’s thoughts were on the road, careful not to get run over by impatient drivers. They were running short on time. He wanted to be settled into the hotel when the text with the instructions came through on the cell phone.

He hoped he’d learned enough about the men he’d meet with to make a convincing Evan Maas. Otherwise, the meeting would be over before it got started. And, if they were as brutal as the dark web indicated, Dax would just have to find a way out as quickly as possible.

They’d gone several blocks when Giva leaned close and said into his ear. “We have a tail.”

Dax checked the little mirror on his left handlebar. A motorcycle with a man wearing a black jacket and sunglasses followed them through the traffic.

Dax cut in front of a car and turned right onto a side street.

The man on the motorcycle did the same as the traffic finally started moving. The driver he cut off honked.

At the next corner, Dax turned left. While the other motorcycle was out of sight, Dax pulled into an alley and hid behind a building.

Giva hopped off the back of the scooter, ran to the corner and peered around the structure.

Dax stayed with the scooter with the motor running.

A few moments later, Giva returned. “He kept going a few blocks.” She climbed onto the back.

Dax turned the scooter around and drove back the way they’d come, doubling back on several roads until he was moving in the right direction toward the scooter rental shop.

The man on the motorcycle was nowhere to be seen when they made the switch from scooter to car, the driver heading for the hotel.

“Do you think they knew who we were?” Giva asked.

“Maybe not. They might have picked up on the fact we were scoping Old Town and sent a man after us to see where we’d go.” At least, he hoped that was the extent of their tail. He didn’t want to walk into the meeting with his cover already blown.

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Chapter 6

In the backseat of the car, Giva pulled off the wig, jammed it into her backpack, unwound her dark hair and finger-combed it into some sense of order. She shrugged out of the dark jacket and applied a coat of bright red lipstick. The blouse she'd worn under the jacket was a designer label Sasha was known to wear.

While she replaced her running shoes with the stilettos, she watched Dax out of the corner of her eye.

He slipped his jacket off his shoulders and ditched the hat and sunglasses. The tightness around his mouth was the only visible sign of tension. His sky-blue polo shirt complimented his dark hair and dark eyes. Yes, he looked a lot like Evan Maas, only better. His shoulders were broader, and his waist trimmer.

She straightened and stuffed her running shoes into the backpack. "Worried about the man on the motorcycle?"

Dax shook his head. "A little. I'm more concerned about the upcoming meeting. We don't know what role Evan Maas is supposed to be playing in this little get-together."

"Let the others do the talking," Giva said. "I wish I could be with you. I don't like that you'll be in there on your own with no backup."

"Tell me about it." Dax shook his head. "I'll be all right. I just have to keep my head on straight and stay one step ahead."

She snorted and snapped her fingers. “That should be a... how do you say...piece of cake.”

He barked out a short laugh. “Doubt it.”

Giva frowned. “I wonder who sponsored the sentries and who initiated the meeting? Do you think it was one of the Russians? The oligarchs are probably the most desperate. Having lost favor with their president, their companies aren’t getting the exclusive contracts like they had in the past.”

“I don’t know,” Dax said. “The US elections are this year. The man predicted to win is threatening to raise tariffs on imports. They might be scrambling to get something going before the new administration gets in place and starts making changes that will impact their cash flow.”

“Then why Evan Maas?” Giva asked. “He’s a naturalized citizen of the US.”

“With investments in foreign companies that could be impacted by the tariffs.” Dax’s brow furrowed. “Although, he’s been focused on space more than anything lately. The man has almost 7000 satellites in orbit.”

Giva stared out the vehicle’s window. “Is anyone monitoring what he’s sending into space?”

“Supposedly, NASA and US Space Command are tracking what goes up from the US. But they don’t necessarily know what’s launched from other countries.”

“And Maas has corporations in other countries,” Giva said. “He could have duplicate manufacturing complexes cranking out rockets and technology to send to space.”

Dax nodded. “I’d bet our computer gurus with the Brotherhood Protectors are looking

at all angles on the internet and via the dark web. If they find anything of interest, they'll let us know."

"Hopefully, before you go into the meeting." Giva glanced at her watch. "That's not long from now."

"I should get that text soon." He looked up. "Here's the hotel. Are you ready, Sasha?"

Giva nodded. "Ready."

"Evan and Sasha have arrived."

"Roger," Dmytro's voice sounded in Giva's ear. "Systems are in place. Bodyguard on his way."

Giva wished Peter hadn't stayed behind to track where the German and Italian went. Though she knew it was the right thing to do, she didn't like that only one bodyguard would escort Dax into Old Town. Her hands clenched into fists. She wouldn't let Dax go into the old city with only one bodyguard. They didn't know who was a true friend or foe to Evan Maas.

There was too much they didn't know. Which was the reason they were there, to begin with.

When the vehicle pulled up to the swanky hotel entrance, Dax remained seated until the hotel valet opened the back door of the SUV.

Dax slid out and turned to hold out his hand for Giva.

She laid her hand in his, swung her stilettoed feet out first and stepped out as gracefully as she could, laughing up at Dax as if he'd just shared a funny story or

joke.

He tugged her into his arms and kissed her soundly.

The feel of his lips on hers sent a ripple of desire throughout her body, making her want him to skip the meeting and spend the evening and night with her.

Dax slid an arm around her waist and walked with her into the hotel. He was met by a hotel representative who quickly guided him through check-in and handed him a keycard to a private penthouse suite.

Dax thanked the hotel clerk and guided Giva toward the elevator.

She leaned close, smiling up at him like a lover on her way to their room to spend time rumpling sheets on the king-sized bed.

The nearer they came to the time she and Dax would have to part ways, the less she liked the idea. He'd be entirely alone, with no way to communicate with his team outside the heavy stone of whatever thick-walled room the host had in mind.

For all she knew, they could be luring Evan Maas into a dungeon to torture him and force him to transfer all his assets into their bank accounts. Then they couldn't turn him loose to rat them out. Instead, they'd murder him and stash his body in the catacombs beneath Old Town.

Her fake smile faltered as they entered the elevator.

Dax ran his key over the card reader inside the elevator and then touched the button for the penthouse suite.

The elevator whisked them up to the top floor and opened into a short hallway with

only a couple of doors and one marked EXIT.

Giva led the way to the room number assigned.

Dax used his key card to unlock the door and pushed through to enter the spacious penthouse suite. “Only the best for Evan Maas.”

Giva snorted, dropped her backpack on the sofa, and wandered around the suite.

It consisted of a sitting area with a posh sofa, gilded end tables and a glass coffee table. The bar in the corner wasn’t the typical minibar Dax was used to. Crystal decanters filled with amber liquid stood beside matching crystal tumblers and wine glasses. Bottles of wine were set into the latticed cubby behind the bar.

“Look at this view,” Giva called out from the other room, which was divided only by a wall, with no doors on either end.

Dax stepped into the bedroom with its floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Old Town and the Fortress. The harbor beyond was lit with a gorgeous sunset, coloring the water and casting shadows over the city.

A king-sized bed stood against the wall he’d walked around. Whoever slept there would have that view going to sleep and waking in the morning.

Giva touched a button on the wall, and a motor hummed softly, lowering shades over the windows, blocking the view out as well as the view in.

“This would be a great place to stay...” Dax started.

“If we weren’t here for a purpose,” Giva finished. She turned toward the bed, a smile tilting the corners of her mouth, one eyebrow lifting into the swath of hair dipping

over her forehead. “Care to test the mattress?”

His cock jerked to attention at the thought of getting naked with Giva and testing the firmness of the mattress. He even glanced at his watch, wondering if they had time.

A sound from the other room brought him back to reality.

He hurried into the sitting room to find Dmytro, dressed as one of the wait staff, pushing a cart into the room. “A light snack for Mr. Maas and Ms. Royce, care of hotel management.” He rolled the cart into the room, letting the door close behind him.

Once he was fully inside, he pulled out a foot-long black wand, clicked a button on the side and walked around the room, waving the wand over light fixtures, end tables, televisions and mirrors.

When he’d completed a full sweep of the room, he nodded. “No bugs detected,” Dmytro said with his heavy Ukrainian accent.

He slid the wand into his uniform pocket and pulled the metal cover off the plate on the cart. “Thought you would like a bite to eat while I prepare Evan for his meeting. You should receive the message soon and need to be ready.”

“Prepare me?” Dax asked, reaching for a cracker and a square of cheese from the charcuterie board Dmytro had brought for them.

“We must assume the location will be somewhere they’ve blocked all tracking devices and radio waves. They won’t want anyone leading others in or allowing anyone to listen to their plans.”

Dax nodded. “I expected as much.”

Dmytro continued. “You must not carry anything that will set off a metal detector, including weapons, radio headsets, voice recorders or tracking disks. Still, we need a way to track you, should we want to find you, should you not emerge in a timely manner.”

“If we can’t rely on electronics, it sounds like I need to leave a trail of breadcrumbs.” Dax chuckled. “My luck, some dog would follow, eating them as I go.”

Dmytro gave a brief nod. “I have something better.” He held up one of the shoes Dax had purchased in his shopping expedition with Giva.

“You want me to leave a trail of shoes?” he asked.

Dmytro laughed. “No. Your shoe will help us find you. Put it on.”

Frowning, Dax slipped out of the boots he was wearing and pulled on the shoe. “I don’t understand how this will lead you to me. I thought they would be looking for tracking devices. Wouldn’t they find one if it’s inserted in the shoe?”

“They would. But there aren’t any tracking devices in your shoe...that they can detect.” He tipped his head. “Walk a few steps, bearing down on the heel every other time.”

Dax walked across the carpeted floor, bearing down on the shoe every other step. When he turned, he didn’t see anything but the carpet as it had been before he walked across it.”

Dmytro stood near the door to the suite, his hand on the light switch. “Watch.” He flipped the switch, plunging the room into darkness. Then, a click sounded, and the glow of a blacklight lit the room in an eerie purple glow.

Dmytro carried a flashlight with a black light bulb toward them, shining it on the carpet.

As he neared, the faint outline of a shoe heel glowed in the darkness.

“What is it?” Dax asked.

“Invisible ink.” Dmytro walked back to the door and flipped the light switch. With the room lit with the overhead lights, he turned off the blacklight and flipped the switch again.

The carpet remained black, with no sign of the heel print.

Again, Dmytro turned on the overhead lights, laid the flashlight on the cart and crossed to where Dax and Giva stood. “I drilled a hole into the sole of the shoe and inserted a packet of invisible ink.”

Dax removed the shoe and looked at the heel. He couldn’t see where the hole had been drilled unless he studied it carefully. Dmytro had sealed it carefully and blended the color to match.

Dmytro took the shoe and turned it over. “I drilled little holes in the heel to allow the ink to flow through when you press hard on the heel. It is not perfect, but it will work if you use it wisely and don’t run out of ink before you get to where you are going.” He handed the shoe back to Dax.

Dax grinned. “Where did Hammer find you?”

“Who says he found me ?” the older man said, his face poker-straight. “I have set up operations in the room a floor below yours. I will not be with the others when you go to the designated location. I will be in contact with everyone, except you, of course.”

“Thanks for looking out for me.” Dax shook his head as he stared down at the shoe Dmytro had rigged with invisible ink. “Take care of the others.”

“ Konechno.” Of course. Dmytro’s brow dipped low. “The word on the dark web is that they are planning something that could spark World War III. My family is in Switzerland, alive and well. I would prefer they stay that way. I would prefer a world where I can enjoy grandchildren someday.” He held out his hand. “ Udachi .”

Dax recognized the Russian words for of course and good luck . As part of his training in Marine Force Recon, he had been required to learn another language, preferably in the area of operations they’d most likely serve. He’d learned enough Pashto and Arabic to get by in the Middle East. Because he had an aptitude for absorbing languages quickly, he’d studied Russian as well.

He didn’t consider himself an expert linguist by any means, but he’d learned enough Russian he could read most messages and make out a lot of the words in the Russian movies he’d checked out of the library at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC), located Monterey, California.

On vacation in Czechia after leaving the Marine Corps, he’d been surprised he’d retained as much as he had when he ran into a man from the Ukraine and had a long discussion about US versus European football.

Dax gripped Dmytro’s hand. “ Spasibo.”

Dmytro’s eyes lit up for a moment, his grip tightening around Dax’s. “You will do well.” Dmytro left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

Giva picked up a piece of cheese. “Do you speak Russian?”

Dax shrugged. “I learned a little.”

“It will be useful with the oligarchs. Evan Maas speaks Russian,” Giva said. “How’s your German and Japanese?” She popped the piece of cheese into her mouth.

“I can understand a lot of German. I’m not familiar with Japanese.” He frowned. “Please don’t tell me Evan Maas speaks Japanese.”

Giva grinned. “Not that I know of. Though it would’ve been nice to understand whatever Yamaguchi says. I believe all the members of the Nexus Collective have a good understanding of English.”

“Hopefully, they’ll conduct the meeting in English, or I’ll struggle to gather all the relevant information.” He shook his head.

“Your language training was another consideration for bringing you on board for this assignment,” Giva said.

“Which languages do you speak?” Dax asked.

Giva nodded. “Hebrew, English, French, Spanish and Russian.”

Dax gave her a twisted smile. “I feel like a slacker.”

“In Israel, we learn languages at a younger age,” she said. “It makes a difference.”

“I learned when I was in my twenties.” He nodded. “I can understand how it could be easier when you’re a child.” He glanced across at Giva. “I know Fearghas will follow me wherever the directions say. And, if we head into Old Town, Peter will be there as well.” He pressed his lips together for a moment. “What about you? Will you stay with Dmytro and monitor communications.”

Her brow furrowed. “No.”

“I’ll go where you go.” She waved a hand. “Undercover, of course, but I’ll follow you until I can’t.”

Dax’s frown deepened. “I’d rather you stayed with Dmytro.”

Her dark brows descended. “Not happening.”

“You’ll be safer with Dmytro than wandering through the streets of Dubrovnik.”

“I don’t care about being safe. We need to be as close as possible in case you need us.”

Dax shook his head. “If they capture you, they’ll use you as leverage against me.”

“Then you must not consider my safety in that scenario. I choose to stay involved. If my involvement places my life in danger, that is my choice and my problem, not yours.” She stepped up to him. “Your job is to determine what they have planned, get out and let the rest of us know what it is so we can stop it. What happens to me is not important.”

Dax raised a hand and cupped her cheek. “But that’s the problem. What happens to you is important. You are important.” He leaned closer, lowering his head toward hers, his lips hovering so close he could kiss her.

“You can’t be concerned about one person. If what they are planning will annihilate thousands or millions, what happens to me is inconsequential.” She covered his hand resting on her cheek and turned to kiss his palm. “Your mission is critical. Don’t lose focus.”

“Sweetheart,” he whispered, “it’s too late. I’ve completely lost focus. It’s all on you.”

She stared up into his eyes, her brow knitted. “Then get it back. Do I have to spit in your face or kick you in the crotch to bring you back to reality?” The crease in her brow deepened. “I will, if that’s what it takes.”

Dax chuckled. “No, that won’t be necessary. I need to be able to walk out of this room when the time comes. I’ll do my job. You don’t have to worry about that. I just don’t want you to be collateral damage if shit hits the fan.”

“I can take care of myself.” She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. “Can you?”

He nodded and then shook his head. “Not where you’re concerned. I can’t seem to push you out of my thoughts. Not for a second.”

Giva bit her lip and stared up into Dax’s eyes. “You have to let me go. What you’re doing is what counts.”

He bent and brushed his lips across hers. “I know. But what does it hurt to kiss you one last time?”

She sighed. “Not a damn thing.” Giva reached up, wrapped her hand around the back of his neck and pulled him closer, pressing her body against his.

Their lips met in a soul-defining kiss that robbed Dax of his breath. He didn’t care. Didn’t need to breathe. Not as long as he held Giva in his arms. She was everything he hadn’t known he needed in a woman.

If things went south on this mission, he’d never see her again. Hell, the Nexus Collective might make an example out of him. They might use him as a poster child for what happens when an outsider infiltrates their happy little group. And if that wasn’t harsh enough, they might capture Giva and threaten to harm her to get Dax to

talk.

“Please, stay with Dmytro,” Dax begged.

“I can’t promise that,” she said, applying pressure to the back of his neck, urging him to kiss her again.

He held back, staring down into her eyes. “Why didn’t I meet you sooner?” he said, stroking her cheek with his fingers. “We could’ve ignored any efforts by the Brotherhood Protectors to operate this mission.”

“We can’t back out now,” Giva whispered, her gaze locked on his.

“No,” he said, his heart plummeting into the pit of his belly. “We can’t.”

Giva drew in a deep breath, leaned up on her toes and kissed his lips in a light sweep of her mouth.

Dax drew her into his arms and held her close.

Giva’s body melted into his as she wrapped her arms around his neck and one of her calves around the back of his thigh.

She felt warm, alive and excited in Dax’s arms as his mouth claimed hers in a kiss that said everything he was afraid to say. They’d been strangers until two days before. He only knew the basics about her. It didn’t matter.

Dax didn’t want the kiss to end.

He pressed his hips against hers, his cock straining against the fly of his trousers.

If only they were on vacation, not on a mission.

He'd take her into his arms and not let go for a long time. Past morning, past a weekend and into the rest of his life.

When he had to break free and breathe, he leaned back, staring down into her passion-filled eyes and wished he could stay.

The cell phone in his pocket vibrated, jerking him back to the present.

Giva must have felt the vibration. She backed away, her arms falling to her sides, her gaze strained.

Dax's gut clenched as he stared at the text message across his phone screen.

Finally, the wait was over.

"It's time," Dax whispered. "I have to go."

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Chapter 7

Giva's heart raced, pounding against her ribs as she watched Dax read the text. "What does it say?"

"Hold on," Dax said. "Let me warn Dmytro."

She held her breath as he texted Dmytro.

When he finally glanced up, he said. "I'm to meet them at the base of the Jesuit stairs at nine o'clock. The challenge is fall down seven times, the response, stand up eight ."

His words were like a punch to Giva's gut. "That's a Japanese proverb," she said. "My father used to tell me that when I failed at something. It means to keep trying."

Dax's cell phone dinged again. He read the message aloud. "Apparently, the German and the Italian just got their notice. Peter is following them."

"Why are they moving if you're to meet at the Jesuit stairs," Giva asked. "They're already there."

"I don't know," Dax said. "Maybe whoever is calling the shots doesn't want everyone to show up at the same place. That would make it too easy to take out the group all at once."

Another text pinged Dax's cell phone. He frowned down at the screen. His brow

cleared. “Fearghas just made it back to the hotel. He’ll meet me in the lobby.”

Dax shrugged into his jacket and pulled on the other shoe that matched the one Dmytro had altered with the packet of invisible ink.

Giva quickly stripped out of her clothes and dressed in all black, including black running shoes. She dragged her hair up onto the crown of her head, slipped a knit beanie cap over it and pulled the cap down, covering every black strand. She had just finished dressing when Dax headed for the door.

“Wait,” she said.

He paused as she dug in her backpack and removed a narrow sheath containing a slim black knife.

“Take this,” she said.

Dax shook his head. “They’ll strip me of all metal.”

“It’s not metal,” she insisted. “It’s a hard plastic knife. It won’t set off the metal detectors. I’ve carried it through many airports and never got stopped.” She pressed it into his hand. “Strap it to your calf.”

“What if they frisk me?” he asked.

She shrugged. “So, they take a plastic knife. I can buy another.”

His fingers closed around it and her hand, pulling her close enough to brush his lips across hers in a gentle kiss. Then he bent to strap the sheath to his ankle and covered it with his pant leg. When he straightened, he pulled her into his arms. “Thank you. Please be safe.”

She smiled at him. “You, too. And Dax... you’ve got this.”

“Let’s hope these people are slightly blind and a bit deaf.” He winked and reached for the doorknob. “I’d tell you not to follow me, but I know that’s a waste of words.” He gave her a crooked grin. “At least don’t let them see you following me.”

She nodded, a smile spreading across her face. “I’ll be in stealth mode.” Yes, the smile was forced, but she didn’t want Dax to be worried about her when he had bigger problems.

Like making the other five of the Nexus Collective believe he was really Evan Maas.

Giva wanted to clutch his arm and tell him not to go. It was ridiculous to think he could pass himself off as Evan Maas. What if Evan was expected to know something critical about this meeting? If they asked Dax about that something and he gave them a blank stare, it would be over.

Then what?

Would they kill Dax?

Giva’s heart pinched hard in her chest. She couldn’t let that happen. She really liked the man.

But how would she stop them from killing the man who had melted her bones in a single kiss?

Only Dax could go into the meeting. If it was in dark catacombs beneath Old Town, and Dax got into trouble would his team find him in time to rescue the former Marine?

Well, hell. They were about to find out.

“Hey.” Dax cupped her cheek and gave her a crooked smile. “I’ve been in tighter situations. I’ll be all right.”

Tears welled in Giva’s eyes. “Promise?”

“Promise.” He brushed an escaped tear from her cheek. “Soldiers don’t cry.”

“That’s bullshit,” she said and sniffed. “Don’t do anything stupid. No heroics. Just get in and get back out with the information we need.”

“I’ll do my best,” he said and brushed his lips across hers. He met her gaze, his face so close to hers, that she could see tiny gold flecks in his deep brown irises. “And the same goes for you. No heroics.”

“I’ll only do what it takes,” she said.

His frown deepened. “That doesn’t reassure me one bit.”

“I’ll be all right,” she said.

“I have to go,” Dax said.

“Then go.”

He chuckled. “I’d rather stay with you and test that mattress. Can I get a rain check?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “You just have to make it through the next few hours, get the data and get out.” Giva clapped her hands. “You can do it.”

“With incentive.” Dax grinned. “You must’ve been a cheerleader or a motivational speaker in your past life.”

She snorted. “More like a drill instructor. I didn’t know real motivation until a drill instructor stood in front of me on my first day of boot camp. He yelled at me for a full five minutes, that felt more like a lifetime. It motivated me to follow rules and get tough, so I wouldn’t have that DI up in my face ever again.”

“I know what you mean. I felt the same on my first day of Marine Corps boot camp. The point is, we lived through it and were stronger for it.” He chuckled her beneath her chin. “Stay strong. I have a rain check I plan to claim when this is done.”

“You’re on,” Giva said and stood back as he left the room alone. She’d follow, but not so close anyone would notice and only after she loaded her backpack with the items she needed—the blacklight flashlight, for one. Dmytro hadn’t forgotten it. He’d left it on purpose. For her. She slipped her radio earbuds into her ears to keep in touch with Fearghas and Peter.

She pulled a sheath of three black, metal throwing knives from her backpack, lifted her pantleg and strapped the sheath to her ankle as Dax had done with the plastic blade.

She’d used the plastic knife on a couple of occasions. It had proved to be as sharp as the metal one. But she preferred metal for throwing.

Then she dug out the other sheath of three black, metal throwing knives out of her backpack and strapped the second sheath to her left forearm.

Giva strapped on a shoulder holster and tucked her Glock 19 semi-automatic pistol in place. After pocketing three additional magazines full of bullets, she checked the meager contents of her backpack.

The flashlight, a small toolkit suitable for picking locks, unscrewing hinges, cutting wire or removing surveillance cameras, a miniature can of black spray paint, a small roll of duct tape, and some zip ties didn't seem like enough of an arsenal to stop World War III.

It would have to be enough.

She shrugged into her black leather jacket, slipped her arms through the straps of the backpack and glanced out the window.

Dax and Fearghas were just leaving the hotel on foot.

If she hurried, she could catch up with them before they entered Old Town.

As if Fearghas knew she was thinking about them, he spoke into her earbuds, "Comm check, Sasha."

"Sasha, here. On my way down now. Don't wait on me. I'll catch up."

"Roger," Fearghas said. "Comm check, Peter."

No response.

"Comm check, Peter," Fearghas repeated.

Again, nothing.

Not a good sign.

Giva's lips pressed into a tight line. She hoped Peter wasn't answering because he was afraid he'd draw attention to himself when trying to follow the German and

Italian without being noticed.

Giva left the room and took the elevator down to the second floor and the staircase to the ground level, emerging from one of the side entrances, avoiding the main lobby and other people.

She took off at a quick walk, her hands tucked into her pockets. Straining to catch a glimpse of Dax and Fearghas ahead, she hurried down the street, weaving between pedestrians and people going in the opposite direction to get home.

Not until she was close to Pile Gate did, she finally catch up enough to see them enter Old Town.

Knowing how narrow and twisting the streets were, Giva couldn't let the two men get too far ahead, or she'd risk losing them in the still-crowded streets.

She entered through the massive gate built in the fifteenth century just in time to see Dax and Fearghas pass between two buildings on the right.

Giva hurried after them, head down, not wanting to draw any attention to herself. All the while, she remained aware of everything around her.

Though night had fallen, Old Town was still alive and bustling with people looking for places to eat or to enjoy a drink with friends.

Dax strode quickly through the streets, not slowing until they neared the Jesuit Stairs.

Giva weaved between people, thankful that the men she was following stood head and shoulders above so many others in the crowd.

When they came to a halt at the bottom of the Jesuit Stairs, Giva stopped a block and

a half short of their location and took out her cell phone.

She leaned against a stone pillar and pretended to be interested in her emails and texts. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the young people walking arm in arm, laughing about something...or nothing. Filled with the joy of youth and the world they all shared.

The scene was such a dichotomy of how things were and how they could change so quickly. The teens went on about life with no expectation that their lives could soon be changed or ended, depending on the plans the Nexus Collective had in mind.

Two men appeared wearing black jackets. Large men with broad shoulders and dark hair like those they'd seen on the wall earlier. Because it was dark outside, with only the streetlights shining at every corner, the men weren't wearing the sunglasses they'd worn earlier that day.

Fearghas spoke softly, "Game on."

Giva could hear the faint sound of one of the men quoting the challenge, "Fall down seven times."

Dax's faint response filtered through Fearghas's mic, "Stand up eight."

The man who'd issued the challenge said, "Alone."

Dax turned to Fearghas. "You may return to the hotel."

Fearghas nodded.

Dax took off between the two men in black jackets. Fearghas walked away in the opposite direction. He passed her and turned at the next street, supposedly heading

for Pile Gate and their hotel.

As soon as he was out of sight of the men escorting Dax, Fearghas spoke. “Evan is with his escort.”

“Roger,” Dmytro’s voice filled Giva’s ears. “Sasha?”

“Witnessed the pickup,” Giva said. “Will follow at a distance.” She pushed away from the wall and, as casually as she could, walked down the street in the direction the two men were taking Dax.

Two blocks ahead, they turned down a narrow street.

Once they rounded the corner, out of her line of sight, her heartbeat kicked up, and her pace increased to just short of jogging. When she reached the corner, her heart lodged in her throat. She didn’t see any of the three large men.

They had disappeared.

“I lost them,” Giva reported.

“I lost the German and the Italian,” Peter said into Giva’s earbuds. “They rounded a corner and just disappeared.”

“Same,” Giva said, looking around for any sign of the three men or any other sentries standing guard in front of a door or from a perch overhead. Her gaze swept the rooftops for people and the eaves for cameras. When she saw neither, she swung her backpack from her shoulders, found the flashlight and switched it on, shining it toward the stone walkway.

Nothing.

She walked further along the narrow alley, shining the light at the ground and then her breath lodged in her throat.

A faint glow appeared on one of the stones. A few feet further, another glowing smear appeared.

Giva released the breath she'd held and followed. The trail continued another ten yards, where the glowing smears abruptly ended in front of a stone wall. She walked to the end of the structure, where it abutted against another building made of stone and wood.

Footsteps echoed on the stone walls nearby.

Giva turned off the flashlight, ducked her head and walked away from the sound of footsteps.

Though she kept moving in the opposite direction, the footsteps grew louder.

Her pulse raced as she increased her pace.

The footsteps behind her quickened.

Giva turned a corner and sprinted to the next alley, turned right and slammed into a wall of a man's chest.

When hands came out to grab her, she went into a defensive crouch, blocked his attempt to grab her and shoved her palm into his face, hitting his nose.

The man grunted and swung a meaty arm.

She ducked and threw herself around him.

A foot jutted out, catching her ankle.

Giva pitched forward and staggered a few steps before she regained her balance.

Not soon enough.

Arms wrapped around her like iron bands and clamped her against a wall of a chest.

A cloth was pressed over her nose and mouth.

She tried not to breathe but eventually had to.

When she inhaled, her vision blurred and faded to black.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:19 am

Chapter 8

Dax walked with the two men down the street from the Jesuit Stairs, turned onto a less traveled street and then into a narrow alley between ancient stone structures. According to Dmytro's instructions, he pressed his heel into the stone every other step, praying the invisible ink was leaching through the holes in his heel as designed.

Armed only with the plastic blade, Dax went through several scenarios in his mind of how he could fight his way free of the two bruisers chosen to escort him to the meeting of the Nexus Collective.

At six feet two inches, he didn't consider himself a small man. His two escorts made him feel considerably insignificant. But size wasn't always what mattered. Cunning, skill and quick responses made all the difference.

When the two men stopped in front of what appeared to be a solid stone wall, Dax tensed, ready to defend himself.

Had this all been a ruse to get Evan away from his bodyguards so they could rough him up and demand a ransom for his safe release?

If that were the case, Dax might be screwed. He wasn't Evan. Nor was he rich like Evan. If they demanded a ransom, they'd be sorely disappointed by the meager amount he had in his savings account. It was a lot for a guy who'd been in the military most of his adult life, but nothing compared to the billions Evan Maas had accumulated.

As the man on his right raised his hand, Dax bent his knees slightly, assuming a ready stance.

The big guy's hand reached for what looked like an antique iron light fixture. He pulled down sharply.

Dax expected the fixture to break away from the wall, but it didn't. It acted like a lever.

Once the man released the lamp, it sprang back in place. The stone wall swung inward, faster than Dax would have thought possible. The two men gripped his arms and hurried him through the opening.

No sooner had they cleared the opening, than the stone wall moved back into place as if set on a timer. Had they been standing in the way, the huge stone door would have swept them back out into the street. Had anyone been following them, they might not have gotten to the alley in time to see the wall open or close.

One of his escorts clicked on a flashlight.

Dax didn't have time nor enough light in the right direction to search the walls around him for a lever that would reopen that door.

The two men ushered him, single file—one in front of him, the other behind—through a narrow stone passage, barely large enough for one man to traverse. As it was, all three men had to duck slightly as they moved through the structure or risk scraping their heads on the stones above.

The passage sloped downward. When they came to a T-junction, the man in the lead turned right.

Dax tried to guess what structures might be above where they were. After a left turn at a four-way intersection and another right turn at a T-junction, he wasn't sure. Maybe they were heading back toward the Saint Ignatius Church.

He'd memorized the turns. Should he need to find his way back to the stone doorway, it would behoove him to know which way to turn. Especially if he was running blind. Without a source of light, he'd be feeling his way along the walls, praying he didn't miss one of the turns.

The longer they walked, the more turns he had to commit to memory. Where the hell were they taking him? He was beginning to think they were taking him outside the walled city.

A moment later, the man leading the way came to an abrupt stop.

Dax nearly ran into him. Stopping short, he tried to see around the big guy and what his flashlight was aimed toward. A heavy metal door stood before them, appearing as old as the fortress and as impenetrable as the stone walls.

The man aimed the light at a dark metal plate on the wall beside the door. He slid the plate upward, exposing a keypad and keyed in five numbers.

Dax committed the numbers to memory as the door swung inward, revealing yet another passage lined with stone walls, ceiling and floor.

He followed the lead escort around two more corners, arriving at another door like the first. Again, he slid a metal plate upward to expose the keypad and entered the same set of numbers.

The door opened, not into another passage but into a room the size of a gymnasium with high ceilings and the same stone walls. Modern lights illuminated the space,

shining down on modern furnishings.

In the middle of the room stood a massive black table with what appeared to be a raised relief world map taking up the center. Every continent was represented, with current borders and major cities marked.

Several people stood around the table, staring at the map.

Dax recognized the five people he'd spent the last twenty-four hours studying both their appearances and their backgrounds.

The man closest to him with dark hair, a receding hairline, a barrel chest and a persistent sneer was Vitaly Rabinovich, the Russian Oligarch who had controlled most of the chemical and biological labs in Russia as well as the army of hackers stealing intellectual property, blueprints and formulas from countries around the world. The dark web had rumored his hackers had hacked into the energy grids of some of the most powerful nations. It might only be a matter of time before they infected those grids with viruses that could bring entire nations to their knees.

Yuri Kagalovsky stood beside Rabinovich, the other Russian Oligarch of the Nexus Collective who controlled forty-five percent of Russian oil exports and weapons production. A few inches shorter and slightly younger than his sixty-two-year-old counterpart, Kagalovsky was said to have lost favor with the Russian president. His control of the Russian oil exports and his own factories' weapons production could be taken away at any time.

He had yet to be visited by the president's emissaries to be encouraged to commit suicide or watch his family murdered before he would be murdered.

The tall German, Dieter Strüngmann, with the dirty-blond hair and blue eyes, stood on the other side of the table beside Marco Galeotti, dressed in a tailored business

suit, his graying sideburns and temples giving the man a distinguished look that photographed well.

The smallest member of the Nexus Collective—and the only female—Hochi Yamaguchi, stood at the head of the long table, wearing a sleek gray pantsuit with a white silk blouse. Her ink-black hair was pulled back from her face and secured in a simple ponytail, hanging precisely down the center of her back.

As Dax approached the table, his escorts stepped back, awaiting their next orders.

“Vitaly, your escorts may leave the room,” Yamaguchi said. She spoke in English, and her command of the language was excellent.

Dax let go of the breath he hadn’t known he was holding, wondering what language would be spoken in the meeting.

Rabinovich told the escorts to leave in Russian.

Though his grasp of the language was rusty, Dax understood the words.

The burly Russian escorts left the room through another door, closing it behind them, leaving the Nexus Collective alone.

Dax’s pulse sped up as he stared around the room at the others, glad they’d sent Rabinovich’s men out. If his charade was discovered, he could handle the people who remained in the room.

“Now that we are all here,” Hochi Yamaguchi said, “let us not waste valuable time.”

Rabinovich frowned at the woman. “Why were we called here now? We weren’t supposed to meet for three more weeks.”

Yamaguchi dipped her head slightly, her demeanor quiet, respectful but firm. “We cannot wait any longer. News of our meeting has leaked to the dark web. If we wait much longer, we will be discovered and potentially shut down.”

“We have a plan. Have the specifics of that plan surfaced?” Rabinovich asked.

Yamaguchi shook her head. “Not yet, but that could be soon.”

“I do not see a need to deviate from the plan based on rumors,” Strüngmann said, puffing out his chest.

“Timing is key to the success of this operation.” Yamaguchi tipped her chin toward Dax. “Evan Maas San, do you want to remind everyone of the steps we’ll take to test before we initiate?”

Dax waved a hand toward her. “You’re doing fine. Please, continue.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed for a moment, and then she nodded. “Preparations are complete. The command center has been constructed and outfitted according to the specifications Evan Maas San required. We need to test the device before we go full-scale. Once the initial test is completed, we will evaluate and adjust.”

“That part of the plan hasn’t changed, Rabinovich said irritably. “But we were scheduled to test in three weeks.”

“As I mentioned,” Yamaguchi spoke slowly as if addressing a difficult child. “Enough information about our plan has leaked, making people curious. We do not want international authorities involved.”

“No, we do not want authorities involved,” Kagalovsky said.

Yamaguchi nodded. “We need to test the device on a small target. If it is successful, we must follow through quickly with the planned target before anyone starts looking for the source.”

“Maas assured us he could focus blame on any country he chooses and that the destruction the device inflicts cannot be accurately traced back to its origin,” the German said. “Why hurry?”

“The timing is right,” Yamaguchi repeated. “There are demonstrations and protests erupting in the country that will take the blame. A significant number of ships and a huge quantity of products are poised to leave our target country within the next thirty-six hours.”

Dax let the others do the talking, taking in what they were saying. So far, Yamaguchi wasn’t telling him enough of what he needed to know. Target country? Blame country? Test target? Where were they planning to strike? And what device were they using to inflict damage in their strikes? Someone needed to be more specific.

And just as concerning was Yamaguchi’s comment about the command center being constructed according to Evan Maas’s requirements. They’d expect him to know what the hell was going on and how it would happen.

The only thing he’d gathered thus far was that the other members of the Nexus Collective weren’t happy about the schedule moving up.

With his thick eyebrows and deep scowl, Rabinovich could scare a weaker man or woman. Although he spoke English, his thick Russian accent was difficult to understand. “There will always be strife in Taiwan, especially in regard to the mother country’s desire to reclaim that territory. Three weeks will not make a difference.”

Finally, Dax had a country name.

Taiwan was the country they planned on taking the blame for the strike? How could they? They weren't much more than a big island with little in the way of a military.

"It is imperative we move now, before we miss the chance to inflict as much damage as we can at this moment." Yamaguchi shook a clenched fist. "We might not have as good an opportunity as now to take out as many ships and infrastructure and bring exports to a halt in Shanghai, one of the busiest ports in all of China."

Dax's gut clenched.

China?

They were planning a strike on China? Talk about poking the bear.

The Japanese woman lifted her chin and swept her gaze from one man to the next. "You have had ample opportunity to prepare for this event. Either you are ready to take full advantage, or you will fall behind and other corporations will move in and reap the benefits before we can. Are you prepared?"

"We've begun movement of our ships and air transport," Dieter Strüngmann said. "But we need the additional three weeks to complete our staging."

"It will take some time for the events to unfold and for news of the attack to leak out of China," Yamaguchi said. "Do you have enough assets in place for a reasonable start? To get your foot in the door of those who will need your products or services?"

Strüngmann's brow dipped. "Barely."

"Barely will be better than most," Yamaguchi said. "When we began these talks, I had my factories stockpile an increased number of critical electronic components, knowing there will be a huge demand for them after Evan Maas San's targeted EMP

strike renders those in that specific area completely unusable. We are ready.”

Dax fought to retain his poker face when inside he was dumbstruck.

EMP? Holy fucking hell!

Kagalovsky nodded and said in his thick Russian accent, “I, too am ready. Several months ago, my corporation increased the number of firearms we normally produce and added the production of weaponized drones. We anticipate Taiwan will need all the firepower they can gather to go against China.”

“Taiwan will not stop the behemoth,” Kagalovsky said.

“No,” Marco Galeotti agreed. “Other countries will likely join forces to protect Taiwan from China’s retaliation, increasing the need for the products and services we can provide.” As he spoke, his hands moved to emphasize his words, spoken with a thick Italian accent. “I am prepared to meet some of those needs.”

“Then we are all in agreement to move forward?” Yamaguchi’s gaze moved from person to person, pausing long enough for each to nod.

Dax forced himself to nod, though he wanted to scream, Are you fucking out of your minds?

Yamaguchi gave a final nod. “Then let us begin. Follow me, and I will show you what your investment has accomplished.” She led the way out of the giant room into a well-lit passage, talking as she moved.

“As we discussed all those months ago, we needed a place where our construction efforts wouldn’t draw attention and had sufficient access to import the necessary components we would need without interference from overzealous border agents.

Evan Maas San had such a place, here in Dubrovnik and graciously offered it for our use.”

“Could you not have offered a place with taller passages?” Rabinovich muttered in Russian from his position behind Dax.

Kagalovsky snorted behind Rabinovich. “ Da .”

“As this is the first time most of you have seen what some of your investments have achieved, do not be concerned about the age of your immediate surroundings. The thick stone walls and building foundations serve a purpose,” Yamaguchi said from the front of the single-file line. “It is difficult for tracking and communications devices to penetrate effectively.” The Japanese woman stopped in front of another door. Like the other doors Dax had encountered, this one appeared as old as the walls surrounding it, but it also contained a similar back metal plate that slid upward to reveal another keypad. Yamaguchi keyed in the same five-digit code the escort had used. “Evan Maas San can better explain all of this.”

“I have complete faith in you,” Dax said.

As the door swung open, the woman turned to nod acknowledgement. “Your confidence in my abilities allowed me to work autonomously to complete the renovation of the space and the installation of the computer components and satellite access equipment in less time than was originally allotted.”

“I had no doubt you were the right person to oversee the project,” Dax said, figuring Maas would have supplied some words of approval to the woman he’d put in charge of such a time-sensitive and top-secret task.

She bowed her head, accepting his praise.

“I do not understand why you did not have my computer experts involved,” Rabinovich grouched.

“Because they are hackers,” Strüingmann supplied. “You trust them to hack into foreign countries’ data and grids, but would you trust them to keep your secrets? They are nothing more than hired criminals. I would not trust them with my bank account. Certainly not with my life.”

Rabinovich’s face flushed an angry red.

“Gentlemen,” Yamaguchi said. “Please.” Her softly spoken command for attention drew the two men’s focus back to her. She entered another room with stone floors, walls and ceilings like the other huge one. This one was smaller with three other doors as if the room was the hub, and the doors would lead into other passageways like spokes of a wheel.

Dax wondered how Maas had acquired what seemed to be the entire subterranean level of Old Town Dubrovnik without securing ownership of the buildings above. The man was one of the wealthiest men on the planet, but surely a place as historically significant as Dubrovnik couldn’t be bought.

Then again, if the price was right and the country needed the money, what would it hurt to sell the cellar to a crazy rich man?

Yamaguchi turned to the door on the right, keyed the code into the keypad and led them down yet another passage. Thankfully, this one was shorter than some of the others.

Dax would soon lose track of the number of passages and the turns they’d made. He hoped they would arrive at the operation center Yamaguchi had alluded to.

She stopped at another door. Here, she slid the black plate upward, keyed in the code and paused to look back at Dax. “Do you want to do the honors?” She stood back.

Beside the keypad was what appeared to be an iris or retinal scanner. His heart skipped several beats before the beats came back with a thunderous vengeance. He waved his hand. “Not necessary. This is all your work. You do the honors.”

For a moment, her eyes narrowed as she stared at him, a slight pucker in her brow.

Dax held his breath. If she insisted on him performing a scan of his eye, the game would be over.

“Very well,” she said finally, turning, leaning her face close to the scanner and staring into it. A lock clicked, and the door swung open into a brightly-lit, modern room where the stone walls had been painted bright white and modern tables had been installed.

The wall to the left was covered in large display monitors. Four stations were set up in front of the wall, with monitors, computers, keyboards and modems. Two men sat in front of two of the computer stations. On the right was a raised area, that overlooked the floor below. A plexiglass wall separated this area from the rest. From what Dax could make out, it had an array of monitors and two computer stations.

“As you directed,” Yamaguchi said, “we installed the stations we needed with redundancy for each. The wall on our left is comprised of four sets of displays. The first two tap into webcams scattered across the port of Shanghai and the surrounding city.”

Dax studied the images of the massive port operations conducted on a daily basis from Shanghai. Targeting it with an electromagnetic pulse would devastate their operation and cause mass chaos among the people who lived there.

Trains, buses and automobiles would cease to work. Electric grids would be disabled for who knows how long it would take to repair. Twenty-five million people would be without power. A hit like that could take years to recover from. The number of displaced persons would be impossible to manage. Millions would die before they could get enough help.

“The next two sets of displays tap into webcams from various large ports across China, Japan, Taiwan, India, the US and European nations,” Yamaguchi said, her gaze on the monitors. “We can also bring up images from satellites focusing on military installations around the world.”

The monitors flicked from one site to another, pausing only a few seconds before going to the next. Dax recognized London and Houston among the ports flashing by. Then, the boneyard at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona. A naval port flying a Russian flag, a military installation in a desert location. Dax couldn't tell if it was in the Middle East, but that would be his guess.

Yamaguchi turned to the plexiglass room on the right. “In the operation center, we have two stations. The primary and a backup. These stations are connected to an array of satellites positioned worldwide, thanks to Evan Maas San.” She dipped her head in deference toward Dax. “Each of the satellites is equipped with the ability to emit electromagnetic pulses that can target precise locations down to a one-mile radius.”

“That does not sound very specific,” Strüngmann said in his stilted English. “I thought you could be more exact on target acquisition.”

All gazes turned to Dax. He'd read a little bout EMPs but didn't possess the extent of knowledge Evan Maas must have. They waited for him to explain something he wasn't familiar with. “I've experimented with a smaller version of the device,” he said, pulling bullshit out of his ass. “No matter how much I adjust, the pulse spreads wider than my target. Shanghai is a massive target. The energy necessary to cripple

such a large city will affect a large swath I can't accurately predict."

Rabinovich's bushy eyebrows descended. "Could it spread worldwide?"

Dax backpaddled. "No. No. The device will only impact the area around Shanghai."

"The test will help you to see and understand," Yamaguchi said.

"Where is the test site," Galeotti asked.

Yamaguchi met Dax's gaze. "It's a small town on the coast of China in the Guandong Province. It has a limited port operation. There are a number of other small cities nearby. We have positioned webcams in the target city and those surrounding it. The test pulse will help us determine how accurate and specific the effects will be."

Strüngmann held up his hands. "This is the first test you have run with this device? How do you know it will not impact the entire world?" He shook his head. "I want increased business, not a blitzkrieg."

Dax held up his hands, guessing at what Maas would have done up to this point. "It will be the first test on a target this size. My team has performed hundreds of tests on smaller locations, expanding to a drug cartel's compound in Columbia, an isolated resort on the coast of Mexico and a terrorists' training compound in Pakistan. Each test helped us calculate the amount of energy needed for the target size."

"The point is," Yamaguchi said, "targeted EMPs work. We only have to test on a larger target before we direct it toward Shanghai." She nodded toward Dax. "We can begin now."

Well, damn.

Dax scrambled through his brain for some way to stall, a way that would allow him to leave the command center and report what he'd learned.

With all the Nexus Collective members staring at him, he was trapped.

If he tried to make a run for it, he wouldn't get past the door fast enough. Yamaguchi or Rabinovich would have the Russian guards on him in a heartbeat.

He clapped his hands together. "Okay, then. Let's get started."

Yamaguchi waved a hand toward the plexiglass-enclosed room.

"You've done an excellent job so far," Dax said. "You should have the pleasure of firing the test pulse."

The woman's brow creased. "You know I can not. The device can only be accessed by the man who created it. You are the only one who can access the controls you had shipped here. The biometric scanner will respond to your fingerprint and your iris alone."

He forced a smile. "Just as I planned and programmed." Dax shot a glance toward the others. "No one but me can set off that EMP."

So, now they would expect him to do just that.

Holy hell.

The door they'd entered through suddenly slid open. One of the burly escorts stepped through and spoke in Russian to Rabinovich. His words were too fast for Dax to catch all of them. The few words he did get were...prisoner, woman and what should he do.

Rabinovich turned to Yamaguchi. “My men captured a woman looking around the exterior entrance and brought her into the compound.”

Red stained Yamaguchi’s stoic face, and her eyes flashed. Instead of yelling at the Russians, she folded her hands together. “Bring her to me.”

Galeotti threw up a hand. “You cannot allow her inside the command center. She will see what we have done.”

The only emotion the Japanese woman displayed was a slight tightening of her mouth. “It does not matter what she sees. She will never leave.”

Dax froze, his heart sinking to the pit of his belly as his two escorts appeared with a kicking, struggling person held between them. They were flanked by two more Russian guards.

“Let me go, you muscle-bound meatheads! I told you. I was looking for my fiancée, and he will be very angry at the way you’re treating me.”

“Let her go,” Yamaguchi said.

A quick command from Rabinovich and the two men released their hold.

The woman dropped to her knees and nearly crashed face-first on the ground. One of the Russians placed a hand on her shoulder, steadied her and then yanked the bag from her head. Dark hair tumbled down around her shoulders.

She looked up at Dax and glared. “Evan Maas, you rat bastard, are you cheating on me?”

Chapter 9

Giva was still kicking herself for being so stupid as to be caught by a couple of Russian weightlifters. She should have been paying more attention to her surroundings than to the footprints illuminated by the black light.

Once she was inside the compound, it was too late for regrets. She had to come up with a reason to be snooping around. When she'd seen Dax standing next to the Japanese woman, she'd said the first thought that had come to her.

"Of all the women you could have, and you choose some old Asian lady?" She pushed to her feet and held out her wrists bound with zip ties. "Look, I don't care who you leave me for. Tell them to untie these plastic thingies, and I'll be on my way. I shouldn't have come to this dusty old town anyway. I wanted to go to Monaco. But nooo . You had to come to Croatia." She thrust her hands toward his face. "Get these off me now."

"Let her go," Dax said to Rabinovich. "She's not a threat."

One of the Russian heavies held up two sets of throwing knives.

Rabinovich cocked an eyebrow. "If she is not a threat, why is she armed?"

Giva snorted. "They were a gift from Evan."

"That's right," Dax said. "She can never be too prepared for an attack. You don't know how many times someone has tried to kidnap her to hold her for ransom."

Giva lifted her chin defiantly. “Evan taught me how to throw knives, and he put me through self-defense training.”

Dax pursed his lips and shook his head at Giva. “All of which has proven a waste of money and time. You couldn’t even defend yourself against a couple of Russians?”

“I wouldn’t have had to if you’d taken me with you,” she said, pouting like a true spoiled brat.

“I told you to stay at the hotel.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “How did you lose the bodyguards?”

She snorted. “They were playing cards outside my door. I slipped out onto the balcony and climbed down the fire escape ladder. Bet you didn’t know there was one, did you?”

“No, I didn’t. I’ll have to fire the bodyguards.” Dax turned to Yamaguchi. “This is Sasha, my girlfriend.”

“Fiancée,” Giva corrected as the man who’d taken her knives selected one and sliced through the zip tie. “You promised we’d get married soon. That’s a proposal if I ever heard one.”

A muscle in Yamaguchi’s jaw twitched, and her lips pressed tightly together. “You were to come alone.”

“I did,” Dax said. “I gave Sasha specific orders to stay at the hotel while I conducted business.”

Yamaguchi met and held Dax’s gaze. “We cannot allow her to leave.”

“Then she’ll stay with me,” he said.

“You don’t understand,” Yamaguchi said. “She can never leave. She knows too much and now has seen too much.”

“Seen what?” Giva continued to play the part of the entitled girlfriend of one of the wealthiest men on the planet. “A bunch of TV screens showing boring documentaries? What are you afraid of? That I’ll tell someone that you’re brainwashing Russians with documentaries?” She snorted. “Please. I’ve been inside the home of the kingpin of a major Colombian drug cartel. This is nothing.”

Dax met Yamaguchi’s glare with one of his own. “She stays, and no one hurts her or I’m out, and I take my toys with me.”

“Or you can let me go, and he can stay for your boring indoctrination.” She ran her gaze over the Japanese woman from head to toe and lifted a corner of her lip in disdain. “I have nothing to be jealous of here. I can clearly see you’re not Evan’s type.”

Yamaguchi’s eyes narrowed to slits. She glanced at her watch and back to Evan. “Run the test, and we will discuss your mistress later.”

“We discuss now,” Dax said, “or I won’t run the test or the final EMP targeting Shanghai.”

Holy smokes. Giva clamped her mouth shut to keep her jaw from dropping.

Targeting Shanghai, a city of twenty-five million people, with an electromagnetic pulse would be catastrophic. With no electricity, no transportation other than bicycles and no way to evacuate that many people, it wouldn’t be long before chaos ensued.

“ Signore Maas is a businessman and has made more money than any of us. He wouldn’t jeopardize the operation because of a woman,” Galeotti said. “Let her stay.”

Yamaguchi shifted her glare to Giva. “She stays down here.”

“I’m as serious as a heart attack,” Dax warned the Russians. “You hurt her, and this operation is over.”

Yamaguchi led the way up the steps to the room overlooking the lower floor.

Dax followed.

Giva was there, but she couldn’t help him in the room above. She gauged her chances with the people remaining on the floor with her. She wasn’t worried about the oligarchs. Though the Italian and German might put up more of a fight, it was the four Russian bodyguards she’d be hard-pressed to neutralize. They’d already proved much stronger than her. But she wouldn’t be surprised this time. She’d be ready.

She paced the room, her gaze going to Dax, wondering what the Japanese woman expected him to do. What test was he supposed to run? Would it require a password only Maas would know? They’d know for certain he was a phony when he couldn’t access whatever system they were running.

Dax sat at a workstation with a computer.

Giva couldn’t see what he was doing with his hands, but he leaned forward, placing his eye close to what appeared to be a biometric scanner. Either a retinal or iris scanner, neither of which would work with Dax’s eye.

After a moment, he leaned back and said something to Yamaguchi.

Her eyes narrowed, and she nodded her head toward the scanner as if telling him to try again.

Dax leaned toward the scanner for a long moment.

Giva tensed, prepared to start fighting her way out of the room.

When the biometric scanner failed to allow him into the system, Yamaguchi would realize Dax was not Evan Maas. Their charade would end, but they would still need to get the hell out of the dungeon and report what they'd found. Then, they'd have to figure out how to stop the Nexus Collective from implementing their plan.

Or, in a different scenario, Giva and Dax could shut it down before leaving the dungeon. If Maas was the only one who could set off the pulse, Hank Patterson would have to detain the man indefinitely. At least until they determined how to disarm whatever device Maas had built that could deliver targeted EMPs.

After his second attempt at the biometric scanner, Dax pushed to his feet and faced Yamaguchi, his expression angry as he said something to the woman. He waved his hand at the computer monitors and swung it again, knocking the biometric scanner against the wall.

Giva couldn't hear what he was saying. The plexiglass muffled his words.

Yamaguchi lifted her chin, her eyes narrowing to slits.

Dax pushed through the door, still ranting. "Whatever you've done to the system will take time to repair and secure another biometric scanner. I'll need at least a couple of days to run diagnostics and determine where the fault lies. Until then, the test will remain on hold." He strode toward Giva. "Come, Sasha, we're done here for now. We'll return in the morning to sort through hardware and software to locate and fix

the bugs.” He shook his head. “I should’ve been here to oversee the final installation.”

He hooked Giva’s elbow and started for the exit.

“Do not allow him to leave,” Yamaguchi called out from the doorway of the plexiglass room.

The four Russian guards blocked the exit.

Dax spun. “Excuse me? Who made you in charge of this effort?”

“Evan Maas San tasked me with the construction of the command center.” She descended, one step at a time. “A fact he would remember clearly.”

“I’m a very busy man, managing multiple corporations that span the globe. When I give orders, I expect them to be carried out. You have failed to carry out my instructions. The system is not ready. It won’t even boot.”

“It was as you had it delivered. We installed precisely according to your direction,” Yamaguchi said, her chin held high. “The system will only come up when the biometric scanner finds a match with Evan Maas’s eye.”

She gave a brief nod to the men behind Dax and Giva.

The four Russians stepped forward and reached for Dax and Giva.

Giva tensed at the same time as Dax and spun, sweeping her leg out, knocking one of the Russians’ feet out from under him.

He staggered into the man beside him, grabbed the front of his jacket and dragged

him down with him.

Dax attacked, knocking one of the men backward and sending him crashing into the wall. He performed a sidekick, hitting the second man in the chest.

While Giva's two Russians were untangling themselves, she turned to help Dax.

Dax threw a punch, making contact with the man's cheek.

The Russian barely blinked before jabbing a fist into Dax's ribs.

Before the man could cock his arm for another punch, Giva combined her hands and swung her bunched fists at Dax's attacker, catching him hard on the chin. He staggered backward.

Giva followed, kicking the man in the knee and then in the gut.

He captured her heel and yanked hard, pulling her off her feet.

Giva landed hard on her backside; the wind knocked from her lungs. The guard who'd caught her foot threw himself at her.

Giva rolled to the side at the last moment.

The man hit the ground and quickly came up on his hands and knees.

Giva shot to her feet, darting out of his reach.

Dax slammed one of the Russian guards into the two oligarchs, sending all three to the ground.

With the other man out cold, he ran for the keypad next to the door, pushed the metal plate upward and keyed in the numbers he'd seen the guard use. The lock clicked, and the door swung toward them.

"Let's go," he called out to Giva.

"A little busy here," she said, straining to get air into her lungs as one of the Russians grabbed her in a headlock.

She let her body go completely slack, forcing her captor to either drop her or take on her full weight. His arm loosened enough; Giva ducked out of the crook of his elbow, landed her elbow into his gut and slipped behind him. She planted a hard kick into the center of his back, sending him flying forward.

That's what you get for trying to choke me.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spied movement near the slowly opening door.

Dax's gaze was on her, so he didn't see the man in the doorway.

"Look out!" Giva yelled.

Before Dax could fully turn, a man stepped through and pressed a handheld device into Dax's chest.

Dax grunted and dropped to the ground.

A stun gun.

Giva started toward Dax but didn't get far.

The Russian she'd swept off his feet wrapped his arms around her from behind and lifted her off the ground.

No matter how much she twisted, turned and kicked, she couldn't break free of the steel bands of the arms the big man had clamped around her.

As the man who'd stunned Dax strode toward Giva, her heart sank into her shoes. He and Dax could have been twins.

Evan Maas was in the building.

He stepped to the side of her flailing legs and pressed the stun gun against her arm.

A bolt of electricity burned through her, turning her muscles to mush. Her entire body went limp.

The Russian lowered her to the floor beside Dax, pulled out zip ties and secured her hands behind her back. Not that she could move them or inflict any harm.

Then he secured Dax's wrists behind his back.

Giva lay her cheek against the cold stone floor, her eyes open as their cover was blown wide open.

"What the hell is going on?" Evan demanded. "Who called this meeting ahead of our proposed schedule? And who the hell are these two?" He waved a hand toward Giva and Dax.

Yamaguchi stared at Evan Maas. "Who the hell are you?"

"You know me, Hochi," Evan said. "I helped you gain control of your father's

holdings after you had him assassinated.”

Her brow furrowed. “If you are Evan Maas, who is that man?” She pointed at Dax’s inert body next to Giva’s. “And is that woman, not your fiancée, Sasha?”

“Sasha is on a shopping trip with her sister in Paris. I have no idea who those two are. How much do they know?”

Yamaguchi’s lips thinned. “Everything. We thought he was you.”

Evan shoved a hand through his dark hair. “My cell phone had been compromised. Once I realized it, I went through my messages and found one from you, reminding me of an invitation I never received. When I tried to contact you, your secretary said you were in Croatia. I flew out here at once.”

Giva tried to will her body to move. Now would be a good time to leave. Five minutes ago would have been better. Before the real Evan Maas had shown up.

Evan walked up to where Dax lay on the floor. “You thought this man was me?” He shook his head. “He looks nothing like me at all.”

Giva wanted to tell the man he was full of shit but kept her mouth shut. The less they said, the better.

“Who do you work for?” Evan demanded.

Dax said nothing.

Evan cocked his leg and swung hard toward Dax’s ribs.

Dax rolled away, catching only a whiff of Evan’s shoe against his side. He inched his

way around, positioning his feet between himself and Evan.

“What do you want done with them?” Yamaguchi asked.

Evan spit on the floor near Dax. “I’d have you kill them, but I want to know who they are and who sent them to take my place before we dispose of their bodies.”

“Grab the girl,” Maas said.

The effects of the stun gun were wearing off. She could move all her fingers and toes and was working on her arms and legs when two of the Russian guards bent over her and hoisted her onto her feet.

Maas grabbed her hair, yanked her head back, and stared down into her eyes. “What’s your name?”

Giva bit down on her tongue, her gaze holding his steadily. She didn’t answer.

Maas slapped her hard.

Her head jerked to the right, her face stinging. She blinked several times and then turned to face the man again, her face poker straight.

“What is your name, woman?” Maas said through gritted teeth.

When she refused to speak, he slapped her again, nearly knocking her off her feet.

“Leave her alone,” Dax said.

“I will when I get answers,” Maas said. “Either she tells me who you are, or I keep hitting her.” He raised his hand. “Unless you want to spare her and tell me what I

want to know.”

Dax’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t say anything.

Maas hit Giva with enough force to break her lip. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. Still, she remained silent.

“We don’t have time for this,” Yamaguchi hissed. “We need to test the device.”

“We had a plan,” Maas said. “Why are we deviating?”

Yamaguchi lifted her chin toward Dax and Giva. “Word is getting out. How else would these two have known about our group and the meeting?” She glared at Dax.

Maas nodded. “I want answers before we dispose of them.”

“If they were able to discover we had something in the works, how many others know?” Yamaguchi said. “We must initiate our plan now. Once it’s underway, we can dismantle or destroy this operations center and all proof of our involvement, including these two conspirators.”

Maas nodded, his gaze on Dax. “Is everything ready according to my precise instructions?”

Yamaguchi nodded and then shook her head. “Everything was ready until the imposter attempted to gain entry using the biometric scanner.”

“You can’t unleash an EMP on Shanghai,” Dax said.

Giva swallowed hard. She still couldn’t believe they planned on hitting Shanghai with an EMP.

“There are twenty-five million people who live there,” Dax said. “Shutting off power and transportation to that many people at once would be catastrophic. People will die.”

“Precisely,” Maas said. “There are too many people in China as it is. Losing twenty-five million is a drop in the bucket of the over 1.4 billion who live there. That kind of jolt to their population and economy will provide opportunity for so many other corporations across the globe.”

“It’s murder,” Dax said.

“And unleashing a virus on the world wasn’t murder?” Maas demanded. He turned to Yamaguchi. “Let’s get this ball rolling.” To Rabinovich he said, “Get these two out of here. Take them to the dungeon.”

Giva would have snorted softly. Like all the rooms in the dark basement of Old Town, Dubrovnik wasn’t part of a dungeon? She almost asked what could be worse but thought better of it. By the look on Maas’s face, he had worse in his dungeon of horrors.

As if he’d read her mind, Maas gave a maniacal smile. “I had it outfitted with traditional shackles and torture devices used back when they built this city. After we take care of business, we’ll work them over. I’m betting if I use those torture devices on the girl, my imposter will squeal like a stuck pig. I want to know who sent them.” His eyes narrowed. “Just don’t let them go or let them out of your sight.”

Rabinovich gave orders in Russian.

One guard took her ankles, and the other slipped his hands beneath her shoulders. Evan keyed the code into the pad, making the door swing open.

The other two guards carried Dax out first.

As they passed Evan, the wealthy, crazy man, shook his head. “He looks nothing like me.”

“I beg to differ,” Yamaguchi said as she stepped up beside him. “The resemblance is uncanny.”

Maas snorted disdainfully. “You were too easily fooled.” He handed his stun gun to the Russian leading the guards. “Use this if needed.”

Rabinovich translated.

The lead man nodded and tucked the stun gun in his jacket pocket.

Maas turned back to Yamaguchi. “Now show me what he damaged, and I’ll tell you if I can fix it.”

As Giva was carried through the door, she could hear Maas and Yamaguchi discussing the biometric scanner.

“It’s a special brand,” Maas said. “If it’s broken, I can have another flown in overnight.”

“We can’t wait that long,” Yamaguchi argued. “There must be another way to work around it.”

The door closed before Giva could hear Maas’s response.

They had to get free of the Russian guards and stop Maas from carrying out their plan. The Chinese government couldn’t ignore an attack that impacted that many

people and such a major port. They would look for the culprit and rain fire down on them.

Giva counted the number of guards positioned outside the door leading into the command center and along the passage to Maas's dungeon.

Two guards stood on either side of the door. Each man held a military-grade rifle with a thirty-round magazine.

They had to get free first and then leave the subterranean maze of Old Town to report back to the team. Maybe Dmytro had a way of blocking the computer commands that would activate whatever device Maas had created to deliver such a devastating attack.

Her stomach roiled at the thought of such a massive attack. Though it wouldn't kill people directly, the instant cessation of all electronics could and would kill people. Ships would become dead in the water, possibly crashing into each other. Cranes might drop shipping containers and crush people standing below them.

Airplanes in the vicinity would lose all electronics and struggle to make safe landings if they could land at all. People in apartments would lose heating or air-conditioning as well as the ability to prepare and store food. Vehicles would be stranded in the streets. Delivery trucks would cease to work and block roads. Phones, television and radios wouldn't work.

Twenty-five million people could be stranded with no way to secure food and water. Evacuation would have to be on foot.

Twenty-five million people.

Giva had to find a way to stop the Nexus Collective from carrying out their plan.

When they'd left the command center, the guard in charge led the four carrying Dax and Giva. They made an immediate right turn, walked to the next intersection of passages and turned left. Another guard stood at that corner, holding a submachine gun.

Now was not the time to make a break for it. Giva remained still, focusing on how far they'd come, how many turns they'd made, where guards were located, and the weapons they wielded.

The lead man came to a halt in front of a door with thick iron bars and an ancient lock. One of the Russians lifted a ring of metal skeleton keys from a hook on the wall, fit a key into the lock and twisted.

The lock clicked easily enough for an old lock and an equally old key, and the metal barred door swung inward.

So far, the guards had worked under the orders of their Russian leader, Rabinovich. He'd translated every order into Russian. It would be reasonable to think they couldn't speak much, if any English. And maybe Rabinovich wanted it that way to keep them from learning or understanding what was going on beyond what they needed to know.

Dax had to be planning to make a break for it. If they were dumped into the dungeon and the door locked, they'd be helpless to get word to anyone who had half a chance of stopping what the Nexus Collective had planned.

Giva couldn't let that happen without a fight. Before they carried Dax through the door, she sang a verse from one of her father's favorite songs, "It's now or never."

In front of her, Giva saw Dax buck and twist.

Giva did the same, jerking her ankles out of the Russian's grip. Her feet dropped to the ground.

The man holding her under her armpits tipped forward with her full weight. She bent her knees, bringing him further forward and then pushed to the ground, slamming her head into his chin.

He lost his hold under her arms.

Giva dropped to the ground. With her arms secured behind her, she couldn't break her fall. Her shoulder hit the stone floor, pain shooting through her, but she couldn't let it stop her. She rolled to the side, pulled her feet beneath her and pushed to her feet.

Scuffling and grunting sounds came from behind her. Giva bunched her muscles, ready to make a dive past the Russian she'd hit in the chin. She'd only moved a step when something pressed into her back and a bolt of electricity shot through her.

Giva dropped to the floor, unable to move, her muscles completely useless.

She was dragged into Maas's dungeon and unceremoniously dropped beside Dax's still body.

A moment later, the click of a key turning in the lock made Giva's heart sink. She'd failed.

Now, twenty-five million people would suffer the consequences.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:19 am

Chapter 10

Dax cursed himself for not getting free of the two men holding him soon enough to put distance between himself and their leader.

If not for that damned stun gun, Dax and Giva might have had a chance to warn the world of what was about to happen.

Now, they were unmoving blobs, lying on the stone floor of an ancient dungeon, the only light shining from the flashlight one of the guards held in the passage outside the dungeon.

Granted, the effects of the stun gun wouldn't last for long. His toes tingled, and he could already move his fingertips.

"Hey," he managed to push air past his vocal cords in more of a grunt than a word. With his face and chest pressed to the cold stone, he was lucky to get that much out.

"Mmm," was her response.

It was enough to give him hope. At least she hadn't cracked her skull on the stone floor when they'd dropped her.

He tried to move his feet. Okay...his toes.

Yes, he could move his toes, and he was able to curl his fingers into a loose fist.

More and more functionality returned with each passing minute. It just didn't seem fast enough. Not when they needed to stop the Nexus Collective from executing their plan before so many people were left stranded and starving.

If Shanghai was hit, the Chinese might attempt to handle the disaster on their own. They'd rather allow millions to die than accept help from other countries. They'd done it before during the Chinese Famine between 1959 and 1961. Forty-three million Chinese had died of starvation. It would be harder to hide such an event with modern technology and satellite imagery. But people would suffer and die before they could receive help, no matter who provided it.

"I can move my legs," Giva said.

Dax flexed his knee. "Me, too." He bent his knee, twisted his torso and rolled onto his side. Muscle control was quickly returning. Having his wrists secured behind his back made it difficult to sit up, but he finally managed.

Movement behind him indicated Giva was regaining muscle control.

Dax butt-crawled toward the sound until his thigh connected with some part of her body. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," she said. "I could really use the knives they took."

He glanced toward the door with the faint glow of a flashlight. "Will a plastic one help?" he whispered.

"They didn't confiscate it?" she said, matching his lowered voice.

"Can you reach it?" he asked.

“I think so.” She bumped into him several times, scooting and twisting until her hands skimmed across his ankle, feeling for the sheath.

The touch of her fingertips against his skin reminded him of the bed in their hotel room that had yet to have its sheets rumpled.

Dax leaned toward her, his mouth close to her shoulder as he said, “Hurry it up, Sweet Cheeks. We have a raincheck to cash in on.”

Her fingers fumbled, and the sound of lightweight plastic clattered against the stone.

He chuckled in an attempt to calm frayed nerves. “Need a hand?”

“Very funny. As a matter of fact, I could use two. Unbound hands,” she emphasized.

“Turn your back to me.”

He scooted around until his back was to hers.

Her fingers felt for his, found the zip tie and maneuvered the plastic knife into the narrow gap.

“Hold it steady. I’ll move,” he said.

She held the knife still while he moved his wrists up and down, pressing the zip tie into the blade.

Moments later, the zip tie snapped.

Dax spun, felt for her hands, took the knife and sliced through her zip tie.

He pushed to his feet, swayed momentarily, then helped Giva stand.

So, they were unbound. Unfortunately, they were still locked in a dungeon with a guard outside the door. Was there one guard or two?

Dax inched his way across the dark floor, following the glow of the flashlight bouncing off the passage wall across from the iron bar door.

The Russian guard leaned against the wall beside the door, swinging the flashlight up and down, shining it against the wall in front of him, apparently bored.

Every so often, he swung the light left then right, illuminating the passage.

From what Dax could see, a guard was on either side of the door. Only one held a flashlight. The other held a little device in his hand.

The damned stun gun.

They'd been told not to let the prisoners out of their sight.

Dax backed away from the door and pulled Giva close, his hands encircling the back of her neck. He could barely see her in what little light filtered through from the flashlight in the passage. "I need you to go to the other end of the dungeon, scream and drop to the ground. Play dead."

She nodded, leaned up and pressed a kiss to his lips. "The man on the left has the stun gun."

Dax nodded, crushed her to him and kissed her long and hard. "Be ready." He released her and moved to stand to the side of the door, out of sight if the guards peered in.

Giva moved to the far end of the dungeon, dropped to her knees and let out an ear-

piercing scream that echoed off the walls.

She dropped to the ground and lay at an odd angle as if she'd been murdered.

The Russian guards turned toward the door made of metal bars and shined the light into the chamber.

The beam swept across the interior, back and forth, until it landed on Giva where she lay still as death.

For a moment, the guards stared. The one said something in Russian. From what Dax could understand, he asked the other what they should do.

The other man waved the flashlight toward the passage, saying something about going back to get help.

“Nyet ,” was his partner's quick response. They'd been told to keep an eye on the prisoners and not let them go. He was worried they would be punished if the prisoners were injured or escaped.

The flashlight beam returned to the chamber and swept the space, looking for the other prisoner.

As the beam neared the position Dax had taken, he flattened himself to the wall, staying out of the light.

The two discussed sending one of them back for help again and finally decided they had to handle it themselves.

The man holding the flashlight took the keys off the hook on the wall and handed them to the one with the stun gun. He pulled a pistol out of his jacket pocket and

aimed it toward the dungeon.

The guard with the key shifted the stun gun into his other hand and slipped the key into the lock.

He turned it, urging the man with the flashlight and pistol to cover him as he pushed the door inward.

Dax waited for the man with the stun gun to step through the doorway.

The flashlight swept across the floor again, landing on Giva, who remained motionless.

Stun Gun Guy stepped into the chamber, his hand balancing the stun gun, ready for use.

Dax's hand shot out, grabbed the man's wrist and twisted it downward, pressing the stun gun into the guard's leg.

The man let out a yelp.

Dax shoved him backward into the man holding the flashlight and pistol. The stun gun clattered against stone along with the flashlight, throwing Dax and the man with the gun into shadowy darkness.

A shot rang out, the bullet ricocheting off the stone walls. Dax dove over the downed man, rolled to the side and to his feet.

Another shot rang out.

The flashlight stopped spinning, the beam aiming away from the door.

Dax threw himself low and hard toward the guard with the gun as if sliding into home. His feet connected with the guard's shins, knocking his legs out from under him, his gun flying out of his hand to land with a metal clink against the stone.

With the light shining in the opposite direction, Dax couldn't see where the pistol landed, nor could he see the stun gun. His only weapon was the knife he'd slid into the sheath at his ankle.

When he reached for it, his fingers had barely wrapped around the handle when meaty fists swung in the darkness, cuffing him in the side of his head.

He ducked and rolled away, his head spinning.

Before he could get to his feet, the guard launched himself in Dax's direction, his shoulder slamming into Dax's belly, sending him flying backward into the passage wall.

He hit the wall hard, the wind knocked out of his lungs.

The Russian had him pinned, his right arm pressed into Dax's neck, cutting off his air.

With his hand still clutching the plastic knife, Dax stabbed the Russian in the side.

The guard brought his free hand down in a hard chopping motion, hitting Dax's wrist and knocking the knife out of his grip.

Without the knife, Dax clenched his fist and slammed it into the guard's side, where he'd stabbed him. Warm blood soaked his fist.

Still, the guard didn't ease off the pressure against Dax's neck.

Though he continued to hit the guy in the knife wound, he was weakening. He needed air. Soon.

Light bounced off the wall near Dax's face, blinding him.

Then, the guard who was choking him to death stiffened and dropped to the ground.

Giva stood behind him with the stun gun in one hand and the flashlight in the other.

The guy inside the dungeon groaned and moved slightly.

Giva bent and hit him with the stun gun again.

The guards laid still.

Dax sucked air into his lungs until his head cleared. Then he bent, grabbed the guard he'd stabbed by the ankles and dragged him into Maas's torture chamber. When Dax released him, Giva hit him again with the stun gun before he could regain complete control of his muscles. Dax moved the other guard further inside, out of the way of the door.

Giva patted the pockets of one of the guards.

"What are you doing?" Dax asked.

"I want my knives." Giva stood, holding up the two sheaths of throwing knives triumphantly. After she strapped one sheath to her ankle and the other to her wrist, she stepped out of the chamber, waited for Dax to follow and then pulled the door shut. She grabbed the ring of keys from the ground and handed them to Dax.

After he locked the door, she handed him the stun gun and retrieved the handgun

from where it lay against the wall.

Pounding footsteps raced toward them from the direction they'd come originally.

Giva turned away from the sound and ran ahead with the flashlight.

Dax followed, carrying the keys and the stun gun. He could have taken the pistol from Giva, stood his ground and shot whoever was coming. With stone walls surrounding them, it wasn't wise to get into a gunfight. Even if they missed their target, the bullets would continue to ricochet and could eventually find unintended marks.

Dax might have been willing to take his chances with his own life, but he wouldn't put Giva at risk. She might have come to the same conclusion based on how fast she was moving away from whoever was headed their way.

At the first intersection, Giva darted to the left.

Dax followed, quickly catching up to her. When the passage ended in a T-junction, she turned right.

Shouts sounded, echoing off the passage walls.

After another turn, Giva came to an abrupt halt, having reached a dead end of a solid stone wall.

Why would someone build a passage to a dead end?

Giva shined the light all around. No trap doors could be found in the floor, ceiling or side walls.

Dax stepped aside, allowing Giva to take the lead again, running back the way they'd come. She took the opposite direction at the T-intersection, the sounds of shouts and footsteps closing in.

The more they ran, the more Dax realized they were lost in the maze of passages and could end up going around in circles or finding themselves back at the command center with more guards ready to take them down. This time, Maas might not be so willing to hold onto them for interrogation.

The Russians wouldn't let him. Not after they'd injured one and embarrassed them by fooling them into letting them out of the cell.

Giva continued until they came to one of the doors with the metal plate beside it.

Dax pushed the plate upward to find a keypad. He entered the numbers he'd seen the guard use earlier.

The door slowly swung open.

Giva and Dax stood to the side, out of view of whatever or whoever might be on the other side. No one stood on the other side. The room was silent and appeared to be empty.

Giva stepped across the threshold.

"Wait," Dax said.

She stopped and turned toward him. They didn't need the flashlight in here. The room was equipped with motion-sensor lighting. As soon as she'd stepped inside, lights had blinked on.

Dax peered into the huge room, noting the conference table with the built-in raised-relief map.

“I know where we are.”

“Good,” Giva said. “I was worried we were lost. Can you get us out of here?”

Dax nodded. “I can get us to an exterior exit,” he paused and met her gaze. “I can also get us to the command center.”

Her brow furrowed. “We’re outnumbered back at the command center. We need to take the information we have to the team.”

“If we leave now, will we get back to Dmytro in time for him to stop what’s about to happen?” Dax stared into her eyes. “Or will it be too late?”

Her brow twisted, and her eyes narrowed. “If we go back, we’re outnumbered,” she repeated. “They won’t let us go again. Then, who will tell the team about the entity behind the EMP attacks? If they succeed with Shanghai, they could target other cities.”

“But what if we can stop Shanghai?” Dax asked.

“What if we can’t?” Giva shook her head. “We have to get this information to the team. Dmytro could stop it. He’s smart. He knows how to hack into systems. Surely, he can get into whatever Maas has developed and shut it down.”

“I’m afraid that if we don’t stop the attack on Shanghai, the world will implode into something even worse than World War III. Too many countries are sitting on nuclear weapons just waiting for someone to pull the first trigger.” He captured her hands in his. “We could end up wiping out humankind.”

She stared up into his eyes and sighed. “You want to go back to the command center, don’t you?”

He nodded. “But I want you to get out and bring back the team, the police and anyone else who’ll believe you that the whole world hangs in the balance.”

She was shaking her head before he finished. “I’m not leaving you down here to handle it all on your own.”

“You just said we have to get word back to the team. One of us has to do that.”

Giva lifted her chin. “Then let me take down the command center, and you get out and contact the team.”

Dax shook his head. “I know the way; you don’t. I’ll take you to the exit and get you out, then I’ll go back while you rally the team.”

“No way,” Giva said. “It would be suicide for you to go back alone.”

“It would be suicide for both of us to go, and you know it.” Dax pulled her into his arms. “I’m not going in with suicide in mind. I have a rain check to claim on one king-sized bed in a fancy hotel with a beautiful woman. You think I’d let that deal slip through my fingers?” He shook his head. “No way. Now, let’s get you out of here and me back to see what I can do to break more of Maas’s toys.”

Though Giva wore a mutinous look on her face, she allowed him to usher her across the room.

They’d only made it halfway when the door behind them creaked and started to open.

Dax grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the conference table.

She dove beneath the dark tabletop and hid behind the decorative skirting that hid the electrical cables and the legs.

Dax dropped to all fours and crawled in behind her. There was barely enough room for one person. Two was nearly impossible.

Giva scooted as close as she could bet to the faux-wood skirting. Dax spooned her body, pressing his front to her back, drawing his legs into the shadows.

As soon as the door had opened wide enough, four Russian guards slipped through, carrying what appeared to be AK-47 rifles. They searched all four corners of the room and shined a flashlight beneath the table, the beam missing the little shadowed area that barely concealed two grown adults.

They didn't stay long, exiting through the door at the opposite end of the big room.

Once they were gone, Giva stirred. "We should go."

Dax shook his head. "We can't."

"Why not?"

"Not yet. They went through the door that leads to the exterior," Dax said. "The direction we need to go."

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Chapter 11

Giva lay in Dax's arms, relishing the closeness, selfishly wishing they could stay there longer. Hidden. Safe.

The man cared about the world with its tenuous hold on peace and the lives of twenty-five million people whose lives could be destroyed with the push of a button.

Or, in this case, with the scan of an iris and then a push of a button.

"How easy is it to replace a biometric scanner?" Giva asked.

"I don't know. If we were in a big modern city like New York or LA, it might be possible to locate and replace one within a couple of hours."

"In Croatia?" she asked.

His arms tightened around her. "I doubt anyone would keep such a device in stock here."

"I overheard Maas say he could have one flown in overnight," Giva said. "That would give us time to get out, notify the team and get back to stop Maas from setting off the EMP."

"If he can't fix the one I broke, first," Dax said. "For all we know, he could've fixed it already."

“In which case, he would already have sent the EMP,” Giva reasoned. “We’d be too late to stop him. But if we leave now, we could get help and stop him from doing it again.”

“We’re not going anywhere until those guards come back through.” Dax shifted backward enough to give her some space.

Giva turned over to face him. “What will you do if the Nexus Collective’s plan goes through?”

Dax shook his head. “I’d do my best to let the world know who exactly was responsible and hope they believed me.” He brushed a strand of her hair back behind her ear. “Maybe we’d avert a world war.”

“And if nothing you can do will prevent a world war? What then?” she whispered, fascinated by every move his lips made as he spoke.

“I’d gather the people I love, my sister and my brothers in arms and find a tiny island no one remembers and live out my life away from all the bullshit of war and killing.” He leaned close and brushed his lips across hers. “Would you come with me?”

Her heart swelled with warmth. “Would you want me to come? We just met a few days ago.”

“I feel like I’ve known you for much longer than that. Like the minutes we’ve been together equaled days. A crash course in getting to know you.” He grinned. “I like what I know so far.”

Her chest tightened. This man had lost the love of his life once already. “Do you believe there is only one right person for you in the world?” she asked softly.

His brow creased. “What do you mean?”

Giva shrugged. “After losing your wife, do you believe you could ever love again?”
Giva held up her hands. “Don’t worry. I’m not asking you to declare your undying love for me. I just wonder if you believe there could be another person you could love as much as the one you lost.”

“My mother once told me that, when I was born, she couldn’t imagine loving another child as much as she loved me. She was afraid when she got pregnant with my sister that she wouldn’t love her as much as her first child. It worried her until they laid my sister in her arms, and she realized her heart was capable of loving more than one child.”

“Children are different than wives and lovers,” Giva said.

“True, but the principle still applies. The human heart is capable of so much love if you’re open to it.”

She wanted to ask but couldn’t... Would you have room in your heart to love me?

Giva had been so heartbroken over the loss of her family that she’d gone all in with her military training. Being a woman in a male-dominated career, she’d avoided the pitfalls of love, afraid of having her heart broken by loss or betrayal.

Now, lying in Dax’s arms, she realized what she’d been missing. The connection. Having someone to share life’s moments with, both good and bad. Knowing someone had your back and she would have his. Someone who wouldn’t judge her for not being soft and feminine enough. Someone who cared what happened to the people he loved and about innocent strangers who had never asked to be part of a war.

Someone like Dax.

Her heart stopped for a moment as she stared into Dax's eyes. Then it beat so fast it made her head spin. She opened her mouth to speak some of the thoughts flying around in her head but closed it again.

Too soon.

If she told him she was having feelings for him, he could spook and run in the opposite direction. He'd obviously loved his wife very much. Though he talked about humans having room in their hearts to love so many more, was he ready to be open to more? To her?

He had asked her to join him on the island with all his friends and loved ones.

A seed of hope sprouted in Giva.

Dax's brow wrinkled, his lips quirking on the corners. "You look like you have a thousand thoughts running through your head. Care to share?"

She almost burst out with a nervous laugh. Giva clamped her lips shut to keep that from happening. When she had control of her thoughts and mouth, she said, "Just going through different scenarios of how we can handle the situation."

It was a lie. She should have been thinking about their options and how they could get back into the command center and destroy the system and device Maas had created to send EMPs to specific targets.

"Even if we are able to shut down this attempt," Giva said, "what then?"

Dax's brow furrowed. "Maas has more than 7000 satellites in orbit. I'm not even sure how many of those he equipped with the ability to send electromagnetic pulses. We'd have to locate and destroy those."

“Dmytro is very good at computers, hacking and the like. Is he good enough to locate the satellites and effectively disable them?”

“I don’t know. We have to stop Maas first, then gain access to his data and programs. There are a lot smarter people than me who could make that happen. They chose me for this job because of my looks and combat skills.” He grinned.

“Same.” Giva reached out and brushed the lock of hair that had fallen over Dax’s forehead. “But you’re much better looking than Evan Maas.”

“Flattery will get you anywhere you want to go.”

Giva trailed her fingers from his forehead, across his temple and down to follow the line of his jaw to his mouth. “What if I want to stay here?” she whispered and leaned in to press her lips to his.

His arms tightened around her, crushing her to his chest as he claimed her lips in a hungry kiss.

She opened to him, meeting his tongue thrust for thrust. For a moment, she forgot where she was and the danger they faced. She pushed the weight of the world to the back of her mind and lost herself in the kiss.

When he finally raised his head, he smiled down at her.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“I’m thinking about that king-sized bed and a rain check.”

“We have to get out of here alive before you can collect on that rain check,” she said.

Dax nodded, his smile fading. He glanced around the desk, skirting to the door the guards had gone through.

“Has it been long enough?” she asked, not ready to leave his arms, but knowing they couldn’t stay hidden forever. “Do you think they’ll come back?”

“They’ve been gone a while. Maybe they’re outside, searching the streets for us,” he suggested.

“If that’s the case, that would make four less guards we have to fight our way through.”

He nodded. “A pistol and a stun gun aren’t much when we’re up against guards armed with submachineguns and military-grade rifles.”

A heavy weight settled on her chest. “We’re going back to the command center, aren’t we?”

“I’m going back. I need you to stay here and watch for the opportunity to get out when you can. You have to get to the team and let them know what we found.”

She shook her head. “I’m not going anywhere without you. We’re partners in this gig.”

He captured her face between her palms. “Twenty-five million people need one of us to get out and spread the word. I’m going back to do what I can to stall or stop Maas from starting World War III. Promise me you’ll get out and let the team know what’s happening...? I need to know you’ll do this.”

“And you need someone to have your back,” she insisted.

“You heard Maas. If they recapture you, Maas will use you to get to me.” Dax’s gaze held hers. “I’d tell them anything they wanted to know to keep them from hurting you.”

“You can’t,” she said. “The needs of the many... You know the saying. My single life is insignificant compared to the lives of millions.”

“It’s significant to me,” he said. “Promise.”

“If I don’t?”

He sighed. “You’re a stubborn woman.”

“You’re a stubborn man.”

“It broke my heart when I lost my wife.” He drew in a breath and let it out slowly. “I don’t know if I could live through losing another person I care so deeply about.”

A smile curled her lips. “You care about me?”

He nodded. “More than I thought I could.” Dax snorted softly. “Against my better judgment. I don’t know how it happened so fast, but it did. Please,” he begged, “don’t die.”

She cupped his face in her hand, a tear slipping from the corner of her eye. “I’ll do my best not to. Whatever this is between us...I want it to last.” Her voice dropped to barely a whisper. “Forever.”

They kissed and clung to each other like lovers about to take their last breaths.

As much as she hated leaving Dax, she knew he’d be better off going in alone. If they

tortured her, he'd cave. Once they had the information they wanted, they'd kill both of them anyway. Then, there would be no one to warn the world.

"I'm going for help," Giva said.

Dax nodded. "I'm going back to stall or stop Maas."

Giva pushed the pistol toward him. "Take it. You might need it more than I will. A pistol is better than nothing against a submachine gun or semi-automatic rifle.

He shook his head. "Too dangerous. I have the stun gun and the plastic knife. I'll be creative." He winked, rolled out from beneath the table and held out his hand to help her up. He gave her the code for the keypads and then gave her one last, hard kiss.

He turned and headed back toward the command center, disappearing through a door into a narrow, stone passage.

For a moment, Giva stared after Dax, a hard lump lodged in her throat. Would they live through the night? Of course, they would.

She refused to believe otherwise.

But first, she had a job to do. If she was to help him, she had to get out quickly and return with the cavalry.

Chapter 12

Dax slipped through the passages, grateful these tunnels were lit and trying to recall the number and direction of turns he needed to make to reach the command center. All the while, he had to move quickly and silently so as not to alert any guards the Nexus Collective might have posted along the way.

He suspected they'd made a circle through the tunnels when they'd been taken to the dungeon. Returning to the massive room with the conference table had been a miracle. He wasn't sure he could retrace his steps back the other route. They'd been running too fast and making snap decisions on directions. With guards hot on their heels, Dax hadn't had the opportunity to memorize the turns.

When he arrived at the first of the doors, he keyed the code and stood back, expecting a guard to be standing there ready to shoot.

No one was there.

He ran along the stone tunnel, arriving at the next door. Again, he entered the code and stood back in the shadows.

As soon as the door opened, a rifle's barrel poked through.

The door didn't remain open long. As it reversed direction, the guard started to back up.

Dax reached out, grabbed the barrel of the rifle and yanked it and the guard through

the door.

Pulled off balance, the guard stumbled and pitched forward. Before he could regain stability, Dax planted his foot in the man's back, kicking hard, sending him crashing into a stone wall.

The Russian slid to the ground.

Dax dove through the door with only inches to spare.

He ran along the corridor. Left turn here. Or was it right? Following his gut, he could sense he was nearing the command center. At the next corner, he slowed to a halt and peeked around it.

Two guards stood on either side of a door. One held a submachine gun, the other a rifle. They faced away from each other, each looking down the pathways leading toward them.

Dax ducked back around the corner, trying to figure out how to get past two heavily armed guards without them seeing him.

He had no way to distract them. And no gun to shoot them from a distance. All he had was a stun gun he could only use at close quarters.

That settled it.

Dax stepped into the passage and held his hands in the air. "Don't shoot," he called out in his limited Russian, hoping he'd got it right.

Instantly, their weapons were trained on him. He moved forward, trying to remember the word for surrender. When he couldn't recall the right words, he said, " YA tvoy

plennik .” I am your prisoner.

The man with the submachine gun motioned for the other guy to approach Dax.

Dax kept walking toward them. He had to get close enough to both of them to use the stun gun. And he had to get his hands into his pocket to get to the device.

The guy with the machine gun wasn't chancing it. He stayed far enough away Dax wouldn't be able to stun him and the rifleman in rapid succession.

All he could hope was that they wouldn't take away his stun gun and use it on him.

Rifleman reached for Dax's raised hands.

Machinegun Dude started to type the code into the keypad, keeping his gun pointed toward Dax even if his attention wasn't.

As rifleman lowered Dax's left arm, Dax lowered his right, slipped it into his pocket, turned slightly and pressed the pocket and the stun gun into the Russian's side.

He yelped and dropped to the floor.

Dax dove for the man with the submachine gun, knocking the barrel to the side with his left hand and tagging the man with the stun gun in his right hand.

The man went down like a ton of bricks, his head making a sickening thud against the stone.

Dax hit both men once more with the stun gun and relieved them of their weapons.

He removed the bolt from the rifle and slung the strap of the machine gun over his

head.

After one more hit from the stun gun to each guard, he entered the code into the keypad.

As the door swung open, he stepped through. “It’s over Maas.” He aimed the submachine gun at Maas and Yamaguchi, standing at the station behind the plexiglass.

Maas glanced up, his eyes wide. Then they narrowed. “Do your jobs, damn it,” he called out. to the Russians.

Four guards didn’t wait for Rotenberg to translate. They came at him at once.

Dax couldn’t let Maas go through with his plan. He had to stop him, and this might be his last chance. He braced himself and pulled the trigger, aiming at Maas. The burst of bullets slammed into what Dax had assumed was plexiglass.

When it didn’t shatter, he realized his mistake. It wasn’t plexiglass, it was bulletproof glass.

Dax turned the submachine gun on the Russians, closing in on him.

When he pulled the trigger a second time, nothing happened. The gun had jammed.

With no time to work the jam free, he used the weapon as a club and swung it at the nearest guard, hitting him in the side of the head.

Before he could swing at the next guy, he was hit in the head from behind. Pain shot through his skull, and Dax sank into to darkness.

How long he was out, he didn't know. Seconds, minutes? He was sliding in and out of consciousness as he was being dragged across the floor. His hands were being yanked together and bound around something metal.

He tried to resist, but he blacked out. When he opened his eyes again, his vision was too blurry, his head too heavy to hold up.

Voices sounded as if at the end of a long dark tunnel.

They were saying something about the girl.

Giva? Were they talking about Giva?

Dax fought toward the surface. He fought to open his eyes, but his head spun, and he couldn't...

A woman's voice sounded near Dax.

Yamaguchi.

"She knows... bring... authorities... leave... now."

"Can't let them have access... destroy... move... backup location." Was that Maas?

Dax needed to wake up. Time was running out.

"Where?" the German's voice demanded.

"Bel...deer... abandoned hotel," Yamaguchi said.

"We have five minutes," Maas was saying. "...detonate... destroy everything... this

room, including... imposter.” Someone kicked Dax in the ribs.

The pain shot through him, pulling him out of the fog to semi-consciousness. He raised his head in time to see everyone had left the room except Maas. The man stood in the open doorway, staring at Dax. “You look nothing like me. Should’ve stayed out of my business.”

He stepped through the door, and it closed.

Dax blinked his eyes several times, trying to clear the remaining fog from his mind. Five minutes echoed in his thoughts. Five minutes until what?

He lay on his side, his wrists bound together around a metal beam. Dax’s gaze followed the beam upward to the table it supported beneath the array of monitors displaying images from webcams all over the world.

Dax pulled his wrists, trying to break the bindings. They’d used three zip ties instead of one, making it impossible for him to break them by slamming his wrists against the pole. He swung his body around, braced his feet against the pole and then kicked as hard as he could.

The pole didn’t budge. He kicked again. Nothing. His movements had made his pantleg rise up enough he noticed the sheath strapped to his leg. The knife!

Dax wrapped his legs around the pole and positioned his right ankle close to his hands.

Five minutes until what?

As he pulled the knife free, his heart skipped several beats.

Detonation.

Maas had said five minutes until detonation.

Holy shit.

That left him less than five minutes to free himself and get out.

Holding the knife tightly between his heels, he rubbed the zip ties over the blade.

A few minutes had to have passed when he snapped the first zip tie. He worked steadily, carefully. If he dropped the knife and had to fumble around to reposition it, he'd waste valuable seconds.

The second zip tie snapped. He pressed his wrists against the last zip tie as tightly as he could and slid it over the blade. Once... twice...

Snap.

Dax rolled to his feet. He didn't have time to locate the explosives and defuse the detonator. His only hope was to get out of the command center and as far down the passage as he could.

He slid the metal plate upward, exposing the keypad and quickly entered the code. His hand shook so badly, he missed and had to start over.

The clock in his mind was ticking loudly, counting backward.

Ten... Nine... Eight...

His second attempt to enter the code failed.

Had they changed it?

Steady, man. Focus .

Seven... Six... Five...

He drew in a deep breath and slowly entered the numbers he'd memorized. After he pressed the last key, he waited for the reassuring click of the lock disengaging.

Four... Three... Two...

The lock clicked, and the door opened slowly.

Dax stood near the gap, fitting his arm through, then his leg, and finally, his body.

One...

Chapter 13

Giva's heart pounded in her chest like a bass drum at a rock concert as she ran through the stone-lined passages. Using the numerical code Dax had given her at each locked door, she eventually came to the last one leading out to the street beyond.

She'd become complacent after passing through two doors with no one on the other side to challenge her. The corridors seemed to be rising in elevation.

Because of the urgency of her exodus, she hardly noticed the incline.

At the third door and keypad, she almost didn't take precautions, expecting the door to open into yet another tunnel.

When it opened onto a street, she leaped to the side into the shadow of the interior tunnel.

A guard peered in through the door, his rifle held out in front of him.

Giva didn't have time to think through her every action. As the man entered and turned to look into the shadow where she stood, she grabbed the rifle and shoved it upward into the man's face, hitting him hard in the nose. He yelled and flung the rifle away.

The weapon skittered across the stone, out of reach of the guard and Giva.

She leveled the pistol at the man's chest.

Starlight glinted off the barrel of her pistol.

When the guard realized she had a gun aimed at him, he raised his hands into the air.

Now that she had him cornered, what did she do with the Russian? She didn't have time to deal with him. She needed to get to the other Brotherhood Protectors and bring them back to help Dax.

Impatient to be on her way, Giva tipped her head toward the tunnel, indicating he should go through the door.

Not that she'd allow him to get very far. With every intention of using the butt of the handgun to hit him over the back of his head, she waited for the moment.

The Russian bent toward the interior passage. As he ducked through the entrance, she held the pistol pointed at him.

In a flurry of motion, the Russian's arm shot out, knocking the pistol from her grasp, sending it flying through the air to land against the wall of a building.

Giva dropped into a defensive stance, her hands balled in fists, her head held high.

The guard dove into the passage and ran. By the time Giva retrieved the handgun he'd knocked from her grasp, he'd disappeared, and the door was closing.

She hesitated for a moment, worried he would catch up with Dax and keep him from reaching the Nexus Collective's command center. She wanted to follow the man and stop him from interfering with Dax's mission. If she did, she risked being taken and wouldn't get to the team to pass on information or bring them back to help Dax.

Dax needed more help than she could give alone.

Giva spun on her heels and raced to the end of the building.

As she rounded the corner, she plowed into a large man.

He gripped her shoulders and shoved her against the wall.

She fought, kicking and punching, anything to free herself. Time was running out for Dax. She had to get help

“Giva,” a voice broke through her desperate struggle.

She looked up into the face of the man she’d been pummeling.

Fearghas Gordon stared down at her, his brow furrowed. “Giva, where’s Dax?”

Her knees buckled. If Fearghas hadn’t been holding her by the shoulders, she would have collapsed in a heap at his feet. “He’s in there,” she said, her voice catching on a sob. “You have to help him.” She broke free of his grip and spun back toward the door hidden in a stone wall. “Hurry.”

Fearghas grabbed her arm. “Slow down. Tell me what happened.”

“He doesn’t have time. If we don’t get there soon, they’ll kill him and then kill twenty-five million people.” She tried to pull free of the hand on her arm, but Fearghas held tight. He tapped his radio headset. “Located Giva. No, he’s not with her. Will wait for you before we go in.”

“We can’t wait,” Giva cried. They’re going to send an EMP to Shanghai. Dax is trying to stop them. But he’s just one against several armed Russians.”

Fearghas’s brow creased. “Dmytro, Atkins and I are going with Giva. The Nexus

Collective are planning to fire off an EMP at Shanghai. Dax is trying to stop them.” He released Giva’s arm. “Go. I’m right behind you.

Freed, Giva raced ahead of Fearghas, skidding to a stop in front of the stone wall that had been a door moments before.

Her brow was knit as she skimmed her hands across the stones, searching for the metal plate hiding a keypad beneath it. She finally found it, slid it upward and entered the code.

As the door opened, Peter Atkins appeared at the end of the building and ran toward them.

With an abbreviated glance toward the two men, Giva shot through the door. She raced down the tunnel, pausing at the first locked door to enter the code.

Peter and Fearghas caught up with her as the first door opened. They ran through, following Giva as she led the way along the stone-lined passages to the great room where she’d last seen Dax.

Her heart hammering against her ribs, Giva rushed across the floor to the corridor Dax had disappeared into. Time was running out. She felt it in her bones. For Dax, for Shanghai and twenty-five million unsuspecting people.

One locked door led to a second. Her fingers shook as she keyed the code and waited, her pulse pumping hard through her veins. She almost cried when she reached the third door.

“How many of these are they?” she muttered, keying the code and waiting for the door to open enough for her to slip through it.

She sprinted down the passage without looking back to see if Fearghas and Peter were behind her. If she ran into Russian guards, she'd kill them and keep going.

As she rounded a corner, an explosion erupted from a doorway ahead, rocking the ground beneath her feet and sending debris shooting out, followed by dust billowing like a gray cloud into the tunnel.

Giva staggered backward, dropped to the ground and covered her head.

Thick dust enveloped her, making it hard to breathe.

"Giva," Fearghas called out behind her.

"I'm all right," she choked out and coughed. She pulled the collar of her shirt up over her mouth and pushed to her feet.

The lights in the passage still glowed, reflecting off the dust particles, making it impossible to see a hand in front of her face.

The explosion had to have come from the command center. Had Dax managed to destroy Maas's setup?

Oh, God. Had he been inside the command center when it exploded?

Giva rose up on her hands and knees and pushed to her feet.

"We need to get out of here," Fearghas's disembodied voice sounded in the haze. He coughed and continued. "The explosion could have compromised the stability of the structure."

"Dax could be in there," Giva said, her voice raspy, dust clogging her nose and

throat.

“If he was in there, he’s—” Peter started.

“We have to look,” Fearghas said.

The lights overhead flickered for a moment and then steadied.

“I’m going to find him.” With her hand on the wall beside her, she eased forward, sliding her feet across the rubble-littered stone.

When her feet bumped into something softer than stone, she gasped and bent to find a body lying amid the debris.

She dropped to her knees.

The body was big enough to be a man and covered in dust.

With her heart in her throat, Giva felt her way to the man’s head and turned him over enough to peer into his face.

As she wiped the dust from his skin, she released the breath she’d been holding in a whoosh.

It wasn’t Dax.

A groan sounded nearby.

“Dax!” Giva rose and stepped over the body. “Dax!”

A cough sounded from further along the passage.

“Dax?” she cried and rushed forward, stumbling over chunks of broken stone. “Dax!”

“Giva?”

“Where are you?” she cried.

“I’m here.” Dax materialized out of the haze.

Giva fell into his arms. “Oh, Dax. I thought... I thought...” Her body shook with sobs as she clung to Dax.

“I’m all right,” he said. “Are you?”

She nodded her head, her cheek pressed to his dusty chest. “I am now.”

“Giva? Dax?” Fearghas called out.

“Here,” Dax replied, his voice rumbling against Giva’s ear.

He was alive. Thank God. Dax was alive.

Fearghas and Atkins appeared in the mirky haze of swirling dust.

“We have to get out of here,” Dax was saying. “Maas and the others are on their way to a backup location. We have to get there before they set off the EMP.”

“Injured?” Fearghas asked.

“Nothing that will slow me down,” Dax said. “Let’s go.”

With his arm around Giva, Dax followed Fearghas and Atkins back the way they had

come.

Giva didn't want to let go of him. She had an irrational fear that if she did let go, he'd disappear into the dust that didn't seem to settle.

After they went through the first locked door, they were free of the dust and able to move faster.

"Do you know where the alternate location is?" Fearghas asked as they waited for Giva to enter the code on the second door.

"I overheard him say something about a bell, a deer, and maybe an abandoned hotel." Dax shook his head. "Maybe Dmytro can make sense of that."

The lock clicked, and the door opened.

They sprinted to the next door and finally emerged into the night.

Fearghas immediately contacted Dmytro and gave him the bits of information Dax had overheard. "He's looking." A moment later, Fearghas said, "I'm here. What do you have?"

Giva stood with her arm around Dax, holding her breath, straining to hear what Dmytro was saying to Fearghas.

"Belvedere Hotel, west of Old Town. We're on our way."

"We'll need transportation." Peter Atkins sprinted ahead of them.

Giva turned to Dax. "Can you make it?"

Dax's eyes narrowed in his dust-covered face. "Yes. Let's get there."

Giva hurried alongside Dax as they headed for Pile Gate. The clock was ticking for twenty-five million people.

They had to stop Maas.

When they passed through the gate, Peter Atkins shouted and waved. He stood next to an SUV and several motorcycles with riders.

Despite the late hour, traffic moved slowly past the gate as people left restaurants and bars in Old Town to return to their lodgings outside the walls.

As they neared Peter, he shouted, pointing to the car and the line of motorcycles. "Your choice!"

Giva and Dax veered toward the motorcycles.

Fearghas and Peter did as well.

Dax climbed on the back of one and held onto the driver.

Giva didn't hesitate. She slipped onto the back of another with a driver she didn't know. She preferred to drive the motorcycle herself, but they didn't have time to switch.

Dax's driver shot away from the curb and merged into traffic.

Giva wasn't far behind. The motorcycles weaved in between vehicles as they navigated the busy city streets.

Traffic thinned further away from Old Town, and the drivers opened their throttles.

Giva and Dax couldn't communicate or hear what was happening without radio headsets or earbuds. They had to trust that Hank Patterson's reinforcements were good, armed and knew where they were going.

They followed the coastal road as it climbed up a hill with sharp drop-offs and stunning views of the Adriatic Sea in the starlight.

Giva clung to her driver, praying he didn't miss a turn and send them plummeting to their deaths off a bluff. When he leaned into a curve, Giva leaned with him, hoping they would reach their destination soon.

With Dubrovnik's lights behind them, they drove on, passing fewer and fewer structures. The motorcycles slowed as they approached a blind curve.

The lead bike with Dax on the back slowed even more and pulled off the highway onto a winding, overgrown road leading down the side of a hill toward the sea.

Tree branches formed a canopy over the road, blocking any view of what lay ahead.

Dax's motorcycle slowed to a stop. The driver killed the headlight and the engine.

The others followed suit one by one, and the riders hopped off.

Peter hurried over to Dax and Giva. "Do you have radios?"

Dax shook his head. "No."

"Me either," Giva added.

“I thought as much.” Peter dug in his pocket. “I brought extra headsets.” He handed one to Dax and the other to Giva. “Weapons?”

“No,” Dax said again.

Peter pulled his jacket off to reveal a shoulder holster with a handgun tucked inside and a submachine gun slung down the middle of his back. He unslung the submachine gun and handed it to Dax.

When Peter turned to Giva, she held up the pistol she’d taken off the Russian. “I’m good.” She settled the radio headset over her ears.

“Comm check. Who have we got here, and from what Brotherhood branch? I’m Fearghas, International,” Fearghas said into her ears.

“Giva, International,” Giva said, raising her hand.

The dark-haired man who’d been her driver lifted a hand. “Chase from Montana.”

Dax’s driver, a big guy probably six feet four or five, raised a hand. “Bubba, Yellowstone.”

Peter Atkins raised a hand. “Atkins, International.”

Another one of the new guys nodded. “Falcon, Yellowstone.”

“Gavin, Montana,” the last of the reinforcements said.

Dax stepped into the middle of the group. “Dax, International. We don’t have much time.” He briefly explained what he’d discovered about the plot to aim an EMP at Shanghai and the people behind the plan. “We have to stop them before they let loose

that EMP. Not only could they destroy the lives of twenty-five million people in Shanghai, but this event could also trigger a world war.”

“Not if we can help it,” Fearghas said. “Dmytro said, this is a big place with eighteen levels and hundreds of guest rooms. It was abandoned in 1992 after it was bombed by Serbian and Montenegrin forces. A Russian billionaire purchased the property in 2014. My bet is he’s one of the oligarchs involved in this plot. Let’s divide into teams of two to cover as much ground as possible. Dax with Giva will be one. Atkins and I will be a team. Yellowstone another, and Montana will make a fourth team. If you find the location, let the others know where.”

“Does each team have a flashlight?” Atkins asked, handing his flashlight to Dax.

Fearghas, Chase and Falcon held up their flashlights.

Dax nodded. “Let’s go save the world.” He led the way, his limp less pronounced.

They followed the road as it descended the side of the steep hill. As the trees thinned, Giva saw a towering white stucco building with a terracotta tiled roof.

As they neared the first structure, Dax clicked on his flashlight and shined it across the wall.

Stains marred the white stucco, and tiles were missing from the roof. Though the hotel was abandoned and in disrepair, it must have been a beauty at some time. Old bougainvillea vines covered some walls in bright magenta flowers, a throwback to more prosperous times.

The hotel was a multi-level complex clinging to the side of the hill with views from every section.

The teams split up and slipped into the darkened complex, looking for lights or sentries guarding certain buildings.

Starting at the top, they spread out and worked their way through buildings.

Giva and Dax entered the original reception building with its tall ceilings and modern architecture, now covered in graffiti with plants growing through cracks in the floors. Starlight streamed through what had once been glass walls but now were open arches, allowing the elements free reign.

After a quick search of the building, they didn't see anything or anyone that would indicate the presence of the Nexus Collective or an array of computers poised to deliver a fatal blow to one of the largest port cities in China.

"This place is massive. It'll take too long to search every building," Dax said. "Maas had to have driven vehicles into the complex. If we find their cars, they have to be nearby."

Moments later, Fearghas's voice sounded in Giva's ear. "Cars parked on the third level down. This area appears to have been the office complex and one of the main entertainment facilities. There are a couple of guards standing in the shadows at an entrance."

"Coming," Dax said.

He and Giva had already moved to the second level, hurrying through, looking for vehicles or people.

From her perch a level up, Giva paused and listened. The faint hum of an engine rumbled in the night. "Do you hear that?"

Dax nodded, grabbed her hand, and hurried down the driveway to the third level.

They found Fearghas and Atkins at the corner of a building. The guards Fearghas had reported leaned against the wall, their rifles pointed downward.

“Yellowstone and Montana in position at the opposite end of the target building.”

“Cover me,” Dax said. Before Giva could stop him, he slipped around the corner. With his back to the wall, clinging to the shadows, he eased toward the guards.

Giva scooped up a couple of rocks from the ground and followed Dax, placing each foot carefully to avoid making a sound. Overgrown bushes and vines helped to conceal their approach from the guards.

When they were as close as they could get without being seen, Dax stopped.

Giva took his hand and placed the rocks in his palm. “Distract them,” she whispered, tucked the pistol into her waistband and bent to retrieve the knives from her ankle sheath. She eased around Dax for a better position, holding the blade of one of the knives between her fingertips at the ready—a second blade balanced in her other hand.

Giva focused, remembering all the practice she’d put in, perfecting her aim. The small knives wouldn’t necessarily kill the target, but sticking one in the right place would distract a guard—hopefully long enough for Dax and her to move in, disarm and neutralize them without too much noise.

Dax stood for a moment, unmoving. Then, as if making up his mind, he said, “We have to get inside.” He threw the stones into the overgrown garden area in front of the guards.

The sound made both men jerk to attention and move forward.

Giva flung the knife, aiming for the farthest man's face. The blade stuck in the man's cheek.

The man cried out, dropped his weapon and clawed at the blade embedded in his cheek.

When his partner turned toward him to see what was wrong, Giva launched another blade, aiming for the back of the second guy's neck. It missed, sinking into the man's shoulder.

Dax sprinted past Giva. She followed close behind, a third knife in hand.

The second guard yelped and spun toward Dax, one hand holding his rifle, the other reaching over his shoulder for the cause of his pain. By the time he spotted Dax, it was too late for him to raise his rifle.

Dax flew into him like a linebacker going in for the tackle. He hit him with enough force to knock him backward into his partner, sending them both sprawling across the concrete.

With his rifle trapped between himself and Dax, the guard couldn't reach the trigger. Dax had him pinned with his forearm pressed hard against his neck, cutting off air to his lungs.

The other man fought to free his arms from beneath the guard on top of him. He stretched out a hand, straining to reach the submachine gun he'd thrown to the ground. His fingers were mere inches from the weapon when Giva threw herself at him, plunging the knife into his throat.

He grabbed her throat with his free hand and squeezed hard.

Giva couldn't breathe. With one hand, she clutched at the man's hand in an attempt to pry his fingers loose. With the other, she felt for the knife she'd stabbed into his neck. Had she missed his carotid artery? If she could just find the knife...

The grip on her neck weakened.

She pulled his fingers away, and the hand dropped to the ground. The guard lay with his eyes wide open, staring up at the starry sky. Lifeless. He'd bled out.

Dax gave one final shove against the other guard's neck and rolled off the man's limp body.

Giva pulled her knife from her guard's throat. "Need this?" she asked, holding the handle out for Dax.

"No, he's dead," Dax said.

The other members of the team converged on the entrance. "Peter and I will take lead," Fearghas said.

"Follow the sound of the generator." Dax tipped his head toward the submachine gun the guard had dropped. "Take that and use it. Just be careful not to damage the equipment if you can. Even if we eliminate the Nexus Collective, the EMP capability is still up there in those satellites. We need access to the programs to incapacitate the devices completely. We don't know who else Evan Maas brought in on their development."

Fearghas nodded. "Roger." He lifted his chin toward Peter. "Ready?"

Atkins nodded.

Fearghas and Atkins entered first.

Dax followed, limping more heavily.

Giva had his back.

Teams Yellowstone and Montana brought up the rear.

The broken glass doors led into a massive entryway stretching three stories upward. Moonlight streamed in from huge broken glass windows, casting strange prisms of light and shadow across the space. At the center, a ghostly-white spiral staircase snaked upward from the ground to the floors above.

In the cavernous foyer, the generator's hum echoed eerily off the walls, making it impossible to determine the direction from which it emanated.

Fearghas pointed to Team Yellowstone, then pointed to his left, indicating they should search the corridors leading off the left side of the entrance. He pointed to Team Montana and then to the right corridors. The two teams took off, moving quickly.

Fearghas pointed to Dax and Giva and then to the corridors on the other side of the spiral staircase. They were to start there.

Fearghas and Atkins climbed the spiral staircase to the floor above.

Dax and Giva quickly moved down the corridor at the rear of the building, clearing room after room. All they found were pieces of broken furniture, graffiti and trash left behind by squatters.

They emerged in the grand foyer to find Team Montana and Yellowstone coming out at the same time.

“We hear the generator on the second floor, near the rear of the building,” Fearghas’s voice filled Giva’s ears.

“Hold fast,” Dax said. “We’ll come up the rear stairwell.” He motioned for the others to follow him to the corridor he and Giva had cleared. They’d noted a staircase at the end that would be a much better way to climb to the next level without exposing the entire team.

Dax led the way up the stairs, moving as quickly as his injured leg would allow. At the top, he eased open the heavy metal door and peered out into a dark hallway. A little light shone through the open doors of the rooms lining the corridor from windows long broken with views of a midnight sky sprinkled with diamond accents that never quit.

Fearghas stepped out of one of them and waved them into the room.

With all eight team members in one place, Fearghas gathered them in a circle and dropped to his haunches. With his finger, he drew in the dust.

“We found the room with the generator. It’s on the next corridor over, running parallel to this one. The door appears to have a series of heavy padlocks securing it and one guard standing outside. We think their alternate command center is at the end of the same hallway and around a corner. The rooms are set up similarly in each corridor in this section of the resort. We think they’ve set up in the suite at the end of the hallway.”

“Do they have a stairwell at the end, like on this hallway?”

Fearghas nodded. “We spied at least one guard pacing outside the suite, but I would guess there are two. The alcove in front of the door is large enough for two guards.”

“What about shutting down their power source in the room coming from the generator?” Chase asked.

“We thought about that,” Atkins said. “If they’re smart—and Maas is tech savvy—they’ll have battery backups to keep the computers running even if the generator goes down. Granted, it might be for a limited amount of time.”

“But enough time to kick off the EMP,” Dax said, his face grim.

“And if we turn off the lights by killing the generator, we’ve alerted them that we’re in the building.”

“They might already know if they’ve tried to contact the guards we took out at the front of the building,” Giva said.

Fearghas nodded. “True.”

“Based on the number of guards we saw in their original command center, we’ve whittled them down to maybe a handful.” Dax glanced around the room. “I believe we outnumber the guards with eight of us.”

“Agreed,” Fearghas said.

“And we’re running out of time,” Dax said. “They got here before us. They probably had to spend a little time booting up the generator, the computers and the satellite connection. If we move now, we might stop them before they initiate the command to launch the EMP.”

Fearghas nodded. “We’ll need to take out the guard in front of the generator door and the two in front of the suite.” He turned to Chase and Gavin. “Team Montana will take the guard at the door to the generator room. Team Yellowstone, you’ll set up a perimeter at the opposite end of the hallway from the stairwell door in case they recall other guards we haven’t accounted for.”

The men from Yellowstone and Montana nodded and began checking and adjusting their weapons and gear.

Fearghas continued, “The International Team of four will approach via the stairwell, which means going up a level and working our way around to the other corridor, then coming back down the stairwell next to the suite. Once we’re all in position, we’ll attack the generator room and the suite simultaneously. Can everyone hear via their radio headsets?”

Giva nodded along with the others, happy that Atkins had the foresight to bring extra communications devices. The short time she and Dax had been out of communication with the others had made her feel strangely blind and exposed.

Before they left the room, Fearghas contacted Dmytro and informed him of their plan.

Dmytro responded with, “Roger. Go get ’em.”

The teams split, moving out in opposite directions.

Dax moved ahead of Fearghas. “I’ll take point.”

Fearghas’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t argue.

Giva figured Dax had a little vengeance in mind after nearly being killed in the

explosion. She'd like to know more about how that went down after they stopped Maas from sending the electromagnetic pulse.

Once they had that locked down and the players corralled, she had a rain check to cash in. Her blood hummed with the excitement of the mission and the reward when it was all over.

She just had to keep Dax alive through it all. As point man, he was making it difficult for her to have his back. Giva squared her shoulders and stayed close on Dax's heels as they climbed the stairs to the next floor and hurried around the corridors to the other stairwell.

She had more than a rain check in mind as she followed Dax down the stairwell to their position outside the target suite.

The short amount of time she'd spent getting to know Dax had reminded her of how much she'd been missing.

Family.

People she loved and who loved her. Making new memories.

For so long, she'd been afraid to open her heart to love again. Not after losing everyone she'd loved at one time. Dax had been in a similar situation, having lost his wife. He hadn't let himself love again.

Despite having lost her family, she couldn't imagine her life without them for the time she'd had.

Could two closed-off people learn to open up and dare to love again, knowing one or the other might die at any given time? Dax could die that night for all she knew.

Her belly knotted. Would she wish she'd never met or fallen for him to save her the pain of loss?

No.

Giva was glad she'd met Dax. She felt more alive than she had since her family's death.

While pretending to love Dax, Giva had fallen in love with the man. If he died that night—she prayed he wouldn't—would she regret not telling him how she felt?

As she waited for everyone to report that they were in place, she leaned toward Dax. "Hey," she said, her heart racing for an entirely different reason than the imminent battle.

As the teams reported in, Dax turned toward her.

Giva leaned up on her toes and whispered into Dax's ear. "I love you."

"We move on my count," Fearghas said. "Three...two...one...go," he said softly.

Chapter 14

Dax nearly tripped over his own feet as he and Fearghas pushed through the door simultaneously, aiming their submachine guns toward the alcove in front of the doors to a suite.

As Fearghas had assumed, two guards stood there with rifles at the ready. When the stairwell door swung open, they aimed at the men charging through it.

Dax dove right. Fearghas dove left.

Dax landed on his side. His weapon pointed toward the guard on the right, his finger squeezing the trigger before the guard could fire off another round.

Fearghas did the same.

When Dax rolled to his feet, he expected Fearghas to rise up beside him.

He didn't. The Scotsman pressed a hand to his side. "Go. I'll be right behind you."

Dax shook his head. "Stay. We've got this."

"Generator guard neutralized," Chase reported as footsteps pounded toward them.

Gunfire sounded from within the suite.

"Get down!" Dax yelled.

Everyone dropped to the floor as bullets peppered the suite's double doors.

Dax stayed down until the rain of bullets slowed to a stop.

Then he was on his feet, charging for the door, head bent, leading with his shoulder. When he hit it with all the force he could muster, it exploded inward, weakened by the many bullet holes blasted through the metal.

Dax rolled to the side, firing up at the guard, turning his weapon back at him.

Giva flew into the room, screaming a war cry like a banshee rising hot from the gates of hell. She leveled her handgun on the guard and unloaded several rounds, shredding the man's midsection. He dropped to the ground, his weapon flying across the floor.

Rabinovich bent to retrieve it. As he raised it to aim at Giva, Dax nailed him with a burst from his submachine gun.

The Italian pulled a pistol from beneath his jacket. Before he could aim at anyone, a single shot from the open door dropped him. Fearghas leaned against the doorframe, his hand pressed to his wound.

Strüngmann and Kagalovsky raised their hands.

Another movement caught Dax's eye. Before he could warn anyone, Yamaguchi stepped out from behind the damaged door and pressed a handgun to the back of Giva's head.

"Move, and I will shoot the pretty imposter," she said.

Giva's eyes narrowed to slits, and her cheeks flushed a ruddy red as she tensed.

Don't do it, Giva , Dax thought.

There was no stopping the Israeli Sayeret Matkal as she ducked and spun simultaneously. She brought the butt of her gun up and around, knocking the handgun from the woman's grasp and slamming into the side of Yamaguchi's head.

The Japanese female crumpled to the floor and lay still. Giva bent to feel for a pulse.

None.

The Japanese woman was dead.

Even so, Giva kicked the handgun away from the woman and toward Chase and Gavin as they entered the room.

Dax's gaze swept through what he could see of the suite. Folding tables had been erected against one wall with several computer monitors lined up in a row, with no computers or laptops attached. And no technical genius to run them. His heartbeat ratcheted up. "Where's Maas?"

Kagalovsky pointed toward a closed door leading into another room.

Dax hurried toward the door and stood to one side. He reached for the doorknob and twisted.

It was locked.

Giva crossed the room, aimed her pistol at the doorknob and pulled the trigger, splintering the door and the doorframe and destroying the knob.

Atkins called out from behind her. "I've got this." He ran toward the door, leaped into

the air and kicked with both feet before dropping to the ground.

The door flew open. Bullets blasted through one at a time as if from a handgun, not a submachine gun.

Atkins rolled out of range.

Dax dove through the opening and rolled across the floor.

Maas stood behind a table, holding a handgun pointed at Dax. “You’re too late. The program has begun.”

Dax fired, aiming high, afraid that, at his angle, he’d hit the laptop on the table in front of Maas. One of the bullets clipped Maas’s shoulder. Maas grimaced but leveled his handgun at Dax again. “You’re nothing like me.”

Giva entered the room, aimed and fired, hitting Maas in the face.

He dropped like a sack of potatoes.

Giva snorted and lifted her chin. “He’s better than you’ll ever be.” She hurried toward the laptop, fired another round into Maas’s inert body and faced the computer.

Dax hurried to join her.

The screen displayed what appeared to be a clock counting down with thirty seconds remaining.

“How do we stop it?” Giva tapped the keyboard. An entry box appeared, asking for a password or a fingerprint.

Dax grabbed the laptop and dropped to his haunches beside Maas's body

Giva lifted Maas's right hand and touched the index finger to the biometric reader on the keyboard. Nothing happened. Fifteen seconds sped by.

She tried another finger and then it came to her. "He's left-handed." Giva grabbed his left hand and pressed the index finger to the reader.

The screen blinked and displayed the same countdown with five seconds to spare. Beside the countdown was a red button labeled cancel. Giva pressed her finger against the red button on the screen.

The countdown froze with one second remaining. A message popped up.

Are you sure?

"Hell, yes!" She touched the YES button.

A message scrolled across the screen.

Program discontinued.

Giva held her breath. "Did it stop?" she whispered.

"It says the program is discontinued." Dax glanced up at Fearghas, who leaned against the doorframe, his face pale.

Fearghas spoke into his radio, "Dmytro, do you have eyes on Shanghai? Anything?" Silence stretched tightly through the room as everyone waited.

"Bloody hell." Fearghas closed his eyes and slumped. When he opened his eyes

again, he said. “Nothing changed. Shanghai is still lit up like a beautiful fucking circus.”

Giva cheered with the rest of the team and flung her arms around Dax’s neck.

A grin spread across Fearghas’s face as he slid down the wall. “Oh, and Hank’s inbound in a helicopter with Interpol. Could one of you see if they’ll give me a ride to the nearest medical center?”

The team from Yellowstone secured the Russian and the German. Gavin helped make Fearghas comfortable and applied pressure to his wound.

The thumping sound of rotor blades echoed through the building as a helicopter lowered to the resort’s helipad.

Atkins left the building to meet with the landing party and help them find their way back to the alternate command center.

Dax held onto the laptop. Before the screen shut down again, he found the system settings and added his fingerprint to allow him to access the device without needing to use the dead man’s finger.

He didn’t want to hand it over to Interpol until Dmytro could access the programs, locate the satellites and find a way to disable or destroy their EMP capabilities. Dax trusted the Brotherhood Protectors above all others to ensure the world's safety by ensuring the programs and the devices weren’t passed into the wrong hands.

With one arm around Giva and the computer tucked under the other, he whispered, “Feel like going for a bike ride?”

She stared up into his eyes, then down at the laptop under his arm. Her gaze returned

to his, and she nodded. “I’ll drive.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Dax responded.

As they left the room, Dax turned toward the stairwell.

Giva touched his arm and shook her head. She turned in the opposite direction and led him to the spiral staircase. They descended to the bottom on the ghostly risers and exited through the once-grand entrance of a former five-star hotel.

As they climbed the hillside to where they’d parked the motorcycles, Dax glanced back to see the group disembarking from the helicopter.

The sooner they got the laptop to Dmytro, the better. Interpol would want it to conduct their own investigation into the activities of the Nexus Collective, now down to two members, who would tell all to avoid spending the rest of their lives in jail.

Giva mounted one of the motorcycles and started the engine.

Dax slid onto the back, wrapped one arm around her middle and held on tightly to the laptop as they climbed the twisting, overgrown drive up to the main highway.

Giva turned toward the bright lights of Dubrovnik and drove back to the hotel at a reasonable pace.

Dmytro met them in the lobby and rode up the elevator with them to the floor where he’d set up their own operations center.

Dax and Giva followed him inside.

Dmytro opened the laptop.

Dax touched the fingerprint scanner. The screen blinked to life, displaying the frozen countdown clock with one second remaining.

Dmytro raised an eyebrow. “Cut it close, did you?”

“Too close,” Giva said.

“Do you think you can disable the EMP satellites?” Dax asked.

Dmytro drew in a deep breath and let it out. “We’re going to do our best. I have the other two Brotherhood Protectors’ highly skilled tech support personnel on standby. We hope that, between the three of us, we can make certain no one tries to take control of those devices.”

Dax and Giva stayed until the rest of the team arrived.

Atkins was first through the door.

“Interpol wasn’t happy the laptop went missing. What have you got?”

Dmytro frowned. “It’ll take time to get through the code and understand the links to the satellites. Interpol will have to wait. Where’s Hank?”

“The helicopter with Hank and Interpol is taking Fearghas to the trauma center at Dubrovnik’s General Hospital,” Atkins said. “They’ll stabilize him there and arrange for medical transport to a hospital in Zurich, where he can be with his wife and baby.”

Dax hadn’t known Fearghas had a wife and baby. The Scotsman had disappeared each night while they’d been in Zurich. Dax had been so caught up in learning his role as Evan Maas that he hadn’t asked his teammate about his family situation. He

vowed to fix that now that he was a member of the team.

“Is he going to be all right?” Giva asked.

Atkins nodded. “He lost a lot of blood, but they build the Scottish tough. He’ll pull through.” He nodded toward Dax. “We can take over here if you want to clean up and get some rest.”

Dax ran a hand through his hair, stirring up a cloud of dust. “You sure you don’t need me for anything else tonight? No cities full of millions to save? No crazy oligarchs to wrangle?”

Atkins gave him a crooked grin. “Not tonight. Maybe tomorrow. Rest up. Hammer will have another assignment for you before you know it.” He held out his hand. “You did good. Welcome to Brotherhood Protectors International.”

Dax shook the man’s hand, feeling pretty damned good, despite the pain in his leg and the knot on his head. Those would heal.

“I’m going to get a shower, then,” he said, turning for the door. He made it out into the hall before Giva caught up with him.

“You know you don’t have to pretend to be my fiancée anymore,” he said as she fell in step with him. “You could’ve stayed with the others to make sure they fix the mess Maas made.”

She held up a key card. “You’ll need this to go to our room.” Giva entered the elevator first, waved the card over the reader and punched the button for the penthouse floor.

As soon as the doors closed, Dax pulled her into his arms. “I know I’m covered in

dust and probably smell like a dungeon, but I have to know something.”

She gazed up at him, her nose wrinkling. “You are both of those things.”

“Back there, before we stormed into the suite, I heard you say something, or maybe I misheard you, but I need a little clarification.” He cupped her cheek and tipped her face up so that he could stare into her beautiful brown eyes.

“What did you hear?” she asked, turning her face to press a kiss into his palm.

“I heard you say I love you .” His eyebrows dipped low. “Was it wishful thinking? Could a woman as beautiful, brave and kickass as Giva Haviv love a former Marine, covered in the dust of a thousand years and smelling like the dankest of dungeons?”

She stared up into his face. “And if she did?”

His face split in a grin. “That would be great, considering that smelly Marine, who vowed never to fall in love again, fell hard for a woman who’s his equal in combat skills and superior in her knife-throwing abilities.”

Her eyes widened. “He did?”

The elevator doors opened at that moment.

Dax grabbed her hand, dragged her out into the hallway and crushed her to his chest. “Yes. He did.” He shook his head. “I did. As crazy as it seems, I’m in love with you, and I’m not afraid to say it. I want to spend my life with you. If that’s forty years or forty minutes, I’ll take whatever I can have and love you like there’s no tomorrow.”

Giva smiled up into his eyes, her own filling with tears. “It is crazy, but I’ve never felt more alive than when I faced death with you.” Her brow puckered. “But it would

be nice not to face death on a daily basis. Can we postpone that part for a day or two? I have a rain check to collect.” She took his hand and led him down the hallway. “I intend to collect it in full.”

He chuckled. “Can I get a shower first?”

She nodded. “ We can get a shower first.” She passed the key card over the reader and pushed the door open.

Dax followed her into the room and kicked the door shut behind them. “I love a woman who knows what she wants.”

“And I love a man who knows how to please me.” She cast him a challenging glance. “Do you know how to please me?”

“If I don’t, I’ll spend the rest of my life learning how.”

Epilogue

Four years later...

“Dax, darling, could you corral the twins and bring them to me?” Giva called out across the backyard of their cottage in a little village in the hills on the outskirts of Zurich. “We’re supposed to pick up your sister at the airport in forty-five minutes.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Dax responded. “We’ll be right there.” He leveled a cool, hard stare at Jordan and Joshua where they stood in front of an expandable play tunnel, the beginning of the mini obstacle course he’d designed for his sons. At the intrepid age of three years old, they were ready to follow in their parents’ footsteps as protectors.

They’d need to be strong, agile and ready for anything the world had in store for them. This obstacle course wasn’t the first Dax had created for his boys, and it wouldn’t be the last. And when his daughter was born, she’d join her brothers and probably kick their asses—especially if she had even a tenth of her mother’s genes.

Dax held up the stopwatch. “You’re racing through a narrow tunnel beneath the streets of an ancient city. You’ll have to duck low. When you come out of the tunnel, you’ll walk along a wall. Be careful not to fall off the wall into the water. From there, you’ll swing across a pit filled with poisonous snakes. Then you’ll have to climb over a wall to save the beautiful princess of a country called Croatia.” He paused and cocked an eyebrow. “Where is Croatia?”

Jordan’s hand shot up first. “In Europe, Daddy.” His brow wrinkled. “You know that.”

“What sea is next to Croatia?” he continued.

“The Adriatic Sea,” Joshua shouted.

“Where did Mommy fall in love with Daddy?” he asked.

“Croatia!” both boys shouted at once.

“Are you ready to save the world?”

“Yes!” Joshua and Jordan yelled.

“Ready... Set... Go!” Dax started the stopwatch and ran alongside the boys as they raced through the tunnel, climbed up on a balance beam and ran its length to the end. They jumped down, grabbed the rope dangling from a tree branch and swung across the sandbox, landing neatly on the other side. Then they ran toward an A-framed sloped wall four feet high and hurled themselves up the slick slope. At the top, they slung their little legs over and slid to the ground on the other side.

Both boys arrived at the beautiful princess, their Bernese Mountain Dog, patiently sitting where Dax had positioned her with a tiara perched on her head.

Dax pressed the plunger on the stopwatch and stared down at the timer as the boys hugged Princess, the crown slipping sideways off her broad, furry head.

“Great job! You improved your time by thirty seconds.” Dax grinned, gathered the boys into his arms and lifted them off the ground. As he turned toward the cottage, he caught sight of his beautiful wife.

Eight and a half months pregnant with their daughter, she stood with her arms crossed over her baby bump, shaking her head. “Really?”

He gave her a sheepish grin. “Don’t you want your rain-check babies to be ready to protect their little sister?”

“They’re three years old,” Giva said, her frown softening. “Besides, I’m betting their sister will fully be capable of protecting herself.” Her lips twisted. “Hmmm. Maybe it’ll be good for the boys to learn how to protect themselves from their sister.”

Dax set the twins on the ground. “Go wash your hands,” he said and gave them a nudge toward the house.

The boys took off like little rockets, racing each other to the back door.

“You make our daughter sound like she’ll be a little terrorist.” He smoothed his hand over Giva’s rounded belly.

“By the way she’s turning somersaults in here, she’s going to be a handful,” Giva said.

As if to prove her mother’s point, the baby inside gave a healthy kick at Dax’s hand.

He chuckled. “She’ll be a real ball-buster like her mother.” Gathering Giva into his arms, he kissed her gently.

She wrapped her hands around his neck and deepened the kiss, making him hungry for more.

When he raised his head, he stared down into her eyes. “Think my sister can get a taxi to bring her here?”

Giva’s eyes flared with desire. Then she shook her head. “How you can find this big body of mine attractive right now baffles me.”

He leaned back and stared down at where her belly pressed against his, his daughter kicking like mad inside. “Sweet cheeks, you’ve never been more beautiful. I love you and our rapidly expanding family and the life we have together.”

She smiled up at him. “Who knew pretending to be in love could lead to all this? I love you, the family we’ve created, and our extended family of the Brotherhood Protectors. We’re no longer alone in this big, crazy world. I couldn’t be happier.”

“Ditto,” he said and kissed the tip of her nose. “Let’s go get my sister. I’m glad she’s coming to live with us.”

“She’s so good with the boys, and she’ll be great with the baby when I go back to work.”

“I’ll be glad to have my partner back. We make a great team.”

She cupped his cheek. “Damn right, we do. As long as you let me drive.”

“Always.” Dax slipped an arm around her and walked with her into their home.

Chapter 1

Had he known they would be deployed so soon after their last short mission to El Salvador, Rucker Sloan wouldn't have bought that dirt bike from his friend Duff. Now, it would sit there for months before he actually got to take it out to the track.

The team had been given forty-eight hours to pack their shit, take care of business and get onto the C130 that would transport them to Afghanistan.

Now, boots on the ground, duffel bags stowed in their assigned quarters behind the wire, they were ready to take on any mission the powers that be saw fit to assign.

What he wanted most that morning, after being awake for the past thirty-six hours, was a cup of strong, black coffee.

The rest of his team had hit the sack as soon as they got in. Rucker had already met with their commanding officer, gotten a brief introduction to the regional issues and had been told to get some rest. They'd be operational within the next forty-eight hours.

Too wound up to sleep, Rucker followed a stream of people he hoped were heading for the chow hall. He should be able to get coffee there.

On the way, he passed a sand volleyball court where two teams played against each other. One of the teams had four players, the other only three. The four-person squad slammed a ball to the ground on the other side of the net. The only female player ran after it as it rolled toward Rucker.

He stopped the ball with his foot and picked it up.

The woman was tall, slender, blond-haired and blue-eyed. She wore an Army PT uniform of shorts and an Army T-shirt with her hair secured back from her face in a ponytail seated on the crown of her head.

Without makeup, and sporting a sheen of perspiration, she was sexy as hell, and the men on both teams knew it.

They groaned when Rucker handed her the ball. He'd robbed them of watching the female soldier bending over to retrieve the runaway.

She took the ball and frowned. "Do you play?"

"I have," he answered.

"We could use a fourth." She lifted her chin in challenge.

Tired from being awake for the past thirty-six hours, Rucker opened his mouth to say hell no . But he made the mistake of looking into her sky-blue eyes and instead said, "I'm in."

What the hell was he thinking?

Well, hadn't he been wound up from too many hours sitting in transit? What he needed was a little physical activity to relax his mind and muscles. At least, that's what he told himself in the split-second it took to step into the sandbox and serve up a heaping helping of whoop-ass.

He served six times before the team playing opposite finally returned one. In between each serve, his side gave him high-fives, all members except one—the blonde with the blue eyes he stood behind, admiring the length of her legs beneath her black

Army PT shorts.

Twenty minutes later, Rucker's team won the match. The teams broke up and scattered to get showers or breakfast in the chow hall.

"Can I buy you a cup of coffee?" the pretty blonde asked.

"Only if you tell me your name." He twisted his lips into a wry grin. "I'd like to know who delivered those wicked spikes."

She held out her hand. "Nora Michaels," she said.

He gripped her hand in his, pleased to feel firm pressure. Women might be the weaker sex, but he didn't like a dead fish handshake from males or females. Firm and confident was what he preferred. Like her ass in those shorts.

She cocked an eyebrow. "And you are?"

He'd been so intent thinking about her legs and ass, he'd forgotten to introduce himself. "Rucker Sloan. Just got in less than an hour ago."

"Then you could probably use a tour guide to the nearest coffee."

He nodded. "Running on fumes here. Good coffee will help."

"I don't know about good, but it's coffee and it's fresh." She released his hand and fell in step beside him, heading in the direction of some of the others from their volleyball game.

"As long as it's strong and black, I'll be happy."

She laughed. "And awake for the next twenty-four hours."

“Spoken from experience?” he asked, casting a glance in her direction.

She nodded. “I work nights in the medical facility. It can be really boring and hard to stay awake when we don’t have any patients to look after.” She held up her hands. “Not that I want any of our boys injured and in need of our care.”

“But it does get boring,” he guessed.

“It makes for a long deployment.” She held out her hand. “Nice to meet you, Rucker. Is Rucker a call sign or your real name?”

He grinned. “Real name. That was the only thing my father gave me before he cut out and left my mother and me to make it on our own.”

“Your mother raised you, and you still joined the Army?” She raised an eyebrow. “Most mothers don’t want their boys to go off to war.”

“It was that or join a gang and end up dead in a gutter,” he said. “She couldn’t afford to send me to college. I was headed down the gang path when she gave me the ultimatum. Join and get the GI-Bill, or she would cut me off and I’d be out in the streets. To her, it was the only way to get me out of L.A. and to have the potential to go to college someday.”

She smiled “And you stayed in the military.”

He nodded. “I found a brotherhood that was better than any gang membership in LA. For now, I take college classes online. It was my mother’s dream for me to graduate college. She never went, and she wanted so much more for me than the streets of L.A.. When my gig is up with the Army, if I haven’t finished my degree, I’ll go to college fulltime.”

“And major in what?” Nora asked.

“Business management. I’m going to own my own security service. I want to put my combat skills to use helping people who need dedicated and specialized protection.”

Nora nodded. “Sounds like a good plan.”

“I know the protection side of things. I need to learn the business side and business law. Life will be different on the civilian side.”

“True.”

“How about you? What made you sign up?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I wanted to put my nursing degree to good use and help our men and women in uniform. This is my first assignment after training.”

“Drinking from the firehose?” Rucker stopped in front of the door to the mess hall.

She nodded. “Yes. But it’s the best baptism under fire medical personnel can get. I’ll be a better nurse for it when I return to the States.”

“How much longer do you have to go?” he asked, hoping that she’d say she’d be there as long as he was. In his case, he never knew how long their deployments would last. One week, one month, six months...

She gave him a lopsided smile. “I ship out in a week.”

“That’s too bad.” He opened the door for her. “I just got here. That doesn’t give us much time to get to know each other.”

“That’s just as well.” Nora stepped through the door. “I don’t want to be accused of fraternizing. I’m too close to going back to spoil my record.”

Rucker chuckled. “Playing volleyball and sharing a table while drinking coffee won’t get you written up. I like the way you play. I’m curious to know where you learned to spike like that.”

“I guess that’s reasonable. Coffee first.” She led him into the chow hall.

The smells of food and coffee made Rucker’s mouth water.

He grabbed a tray and loaded his plate with eggs, toast and pancakes drenched in syrup. Last, he stopped at the coffee urn and filled his cup with freshly brewed black coffee.

When he looked around, he found Nora seated at one of the tables, holding a mug in her hands, a small plate with cottage cheese and peaches on it.

He strode over to her. “Mind if I join you?”

“As long as you don’t hit on me,” she said with cocked eyebrows.

“You say that as if you’ve been hit on before.”

She nodded and sipped her steaming brew. “I lost count how many times in the first week I was here.”

“Shows they have good taste in women and, unfortunately, limited manners.”

“And you’re better?” she asked, a smile twitching the corners of her lips.

“I’m not hitting on you. You can tell me to leave, and I’ll be out of this chair so fast, you won’t have time to enunciate the V.”

She stared straight into his eyes, canted her head to one side and said, “Leave.”

In the middle of cutting into one of his pancakes, Rucker dropped his knife and fork on the tray, shot out of his chair and left with his tray, sloshing coffee as he moved. He hoped she was just testing him. If she wasn't...oh, well. He was used to eating meals alone. If she was, she'd have to come to him.

He took a seat at the next table, his back to her, and resumed cutting into his pancake.

Nora didn't utter a word behind him.

Oh, well. He popped a bite of syrupy sweet pancake in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. She was only there for another week. Man, she had a nice ass...and those legs... He sighed and bent over his plate to stab his fork into a sausage link.

"This chair taken?" a soft, female voice sounded in front of him.

He looked up to see the pretty blond nurse standing there with her tray in her hands, a crooked smile on her face.

He lifted his chin in silent acknowledgement.

She laid her tray on the table and settled onto the chair. "I didn't think you'd do it."

"Fair enough. You don't know me," he said.

"I know that you joined the Army to get out of street life. That your mother raised you after your father skipped out, that you're working toward a business degree and that your name is Rucker." She sipped her coffee.

He nodded, secretly pleased she'd remembered all that. Maybe there was hope for getting to know the pretty nurse before she redeployed to the States. And who knew? They might run into each other on the other side of the pond.

Still, he couldn't show too much interest, or he'd be no better than the other guys who'd hit on her. "Since you're redeploying back to the States in a week, and I'm due to go out on a mission, probably within the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours, I don't know if it's worth our time to get to know each other any more than we already have."

She nodded. "I guess that's why I want to sit with you. You're not a danger to my perfect record of no fraternizing. I don't have to worry that you'll fall in love with me in such a short amount of time." She winked.

He chuckled. "As I'm sure half of this base has fallen in love with you since you've been here."

She shrugged. "I don't know if it's love, but it's damned annoying."

"How so?"

She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "I get flowers left on my door every day."

"And that's annoying? I'm sure it's not easy coming up with flowers out here in the desert." He set down his fork and took up his coffee mug. "I think it's sweet." He held back a smile. Well, almost.

"They're hand-drawn on notepad paper and left on the door of my quarters and on the door to the shower tent." She shook her head. "It's kind of creepy and stalkerish."

Rucker nodded. "I see your point. The guys should at least have tried their hands at origami flowers, since the real things are scarce around here."

Nora smiled. "I'm not worried about the pictures, but the line for sick call is ridiculous."

“How so?”

“So many of the guys come up with the lamest excuses to come in and hit on me. I asked to work the nightshift to avoid sick call altogether.”

“You have a fan group.” He smiled. “Has the adoration gone to your head?”

She snorted softly. “No.”

“You didn’t get this kind of reaction back in the States?”

“I haven’t been on active duty for long. I only decided to join the Army after my mother passed away. I was her fulltime nurse for a couple years as she went through stage four breast cancer. We thought she might make it.” Her shoulders sagged. “But she didn’t.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. My mother meant a lot to me, as well. I sent money home every month after I enlisted and kept sending it up until the day she died suddenly of an aneurysm.”

“I’m so sorry about your mother’s passing,” Nora said, shaking her head. “Wow. As an enlisted man, how did you make enough to send some home?”

“I ate in the chow hall and lived on post. I didn’t party or spend money on civilian clothes or booze. Mom needed it. I gave it to her.”

“You were a good son to her,” Nora said.

His chest tightened. “She died of an aneurysm a couple of weeks before she was due to move to Texas where I’d purchased a house for her.”

“Wow. And, let me guess, you blame yourself for not getting her to Texas

sooner...?" Her gaze captured his.

Her words hit home, and he winced. "Yeah. I should've done it sooner."

"Can't bring people back with regrets." Nora stared into her coffee cup. "I learned that. The only thing I could do was move forward and get on with living. I wanted to get away from Milwaukee and the home I'd shared with my mother. Not knowing where else to go, I wandered past a realtor's office and stepped into a recruiter's office. I had my nursing degree, they wanted and needed nurses on active duty. I signed up, they put me through some officer training and here I am." She held her arms out.

"Playing volleyball in Afghanistan, working on your tan during the day and helping soldiers at night." Rucker gave her a brief smile. "I, for one, appreciate what you're doing for our guys and gals."

"I do the best I can," she said softly. "I just wish I could do more. I'd rather stay here than redeploy back to the States, but they're afraid if they keep us here too long, we'll burn out or get PTSD."

"One week, huh?"

She nodded. "One week."

"In my field, one week to redeploy back to the States is a dangerous time. Anything can happen and usually does."

"Yeah, but you guys are on the frontlines, if not behind enemy lines. I'm back here. What could happen?"

Rucker flinched. "Oh, sweetheart, you didn't just say that..." He glanced around, hoping no one heard her tempt fate with those dreaded words What could happen?

Nora grinned. “You’re not superstitious, are you?”

“In what we do, we can’t afford not to be,” he said, tossing salt over his shoulder.

“I’ll be fine,” she said in a reassuring, nurse’s voice.

“Stop,” he said, holding up his hand. “You’re only digging the hole deeper.” He tossed more salt over his other shoulder.

Nora laughed.

“Don’t laugh.” He handed her the saltshaker. “Do it.”

“I’m not tossing salt over my shoulder. Someone has to clean the mess hall.”

Rucker leaned close and shook salt over her shoulder. “I don’t know if it counts if someone else throws salt over your shoulder, but I figure you now need every bit of luck you can get.”

“You’re a fighter but afraid of a little bad luck.” Nora shook her head. “Those two things don’t seem to go together.”

“You’d be surprised how easily my guys are freaked by the littlest things.”

“And you,” she reminded him.

“You asking what could happen? isn’t a little thing. That’s in-your-face tempting fate.” Rucker was laying it on thick to keep her grinning, but deep down, he believed what he was saying. And it didn’t make a difference the amount of education he had or the statistics that predicted outcomes. His gut told him she’d just tempted fate with her statement. Maybe he was overthinking things. Now, he was worried she wouldn’t make it back to the States alive.

Nora liked Rucker. He was the first guy who'd walked away without an argument since she'd arrived at the base in Afghanistan. He'd meant what he'd said and proved it. His dark brown hair and deep green eyes, coupled with broad shoulders and a narrow waist, made him even more attractive. Not all the men were in as good a shape as Rucker. And he seemed to have a very determined attitude.

She hadn't known what to expect when she'd deployed. Being the center of attention of almost every single male on the base hadn't been one of her expectations. She'd only ever considered herself average in the looks department. But when the men outnumbered women by more than ten to one, she guessed average appearance moved up in the ranks.

"Where did you learn to play volleyball?" Rucker asked, changing the subject of her leaving and her flippant comment about what could happen in one week.

"I was on the volleyball team in high school. It got me a scholarship to a small university in my home state of Minnesota, where I got my Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing."

"It takes someone special to be a nurse," he stated. "Is that what you always wanted to be?"

She shook her head. "I wanted to be a firefighter when I was in high school."

"What made you change your mind?"

She stared down at the coffee growing cold in her mug. "My mother was diagnosed with cancer when I was a senior in high school. I wanted to help but felt like I didn't know enough to be of assistance." She looked up. "She made it through chemo and radiation treatments and still came to all of my volleyball games. I thought she was in the clear."

“She wasn’t?” Rucker asked, his tone low and gentle.

“She didn’t tell me any different. When I got the scholarship, I told her I wanted to stay close to home to be with her. She insisted I go and play volleyball for the university. I was pretty good and played for the first two years I was there. I quit the team in my third year to start the nursing program. I didn’t know there was anything wrong back home. I called every week to talk to Mom. She never let on that she was sick.” She forced a smile. “But you don’t want my sob story. You probably want to know what’s going on around here.”

He set his mug on the table. “If we were alone in a coffee bar back in the States, I’d reach across the table and take your hand.”

“Oh, please. Don’t do that.” She looked around the mess hall, half expecting someone might have overheard Rucker’s comment. “You’re enlisted. I’m an officer. That would get us into a whole lot of trouble.”

“Yeah, but we’re also two human beings. I wouldn’t be human if I didn’t feel empathy for you and want to provide comfort.”

She set her coffee cup on the table and laid her hands in her lap. “I’ll be satisfied with the thought. Thank you.”

“Doesn’t seem like enough. When did you find out your mother was sick?”

She swallowed the sadness that welled in her throat every time she remembered coming home to find out her mother had been keeping her illness from her. “It wasn’t until I went home for Christmas in my senior year that I realized she’d been lying to me for a while.” She laughed in lieu of sobbing. “I don’t care who they are, old people don’t always tell the truth.”

“How long had she been keeping her sickness from you?”

“She’d known the cancer had returned halfway through my junior year. I hadn’t gone home that summer because I’d been working hard to get my coursework and clinical hours in the nursing program. When I went home at Christmas…” Nora gulped. “She wasn’t the same person. She’d lost so much weight and looked twenty years older.”

“Did you stay home that last semester?” Rucker asked.

“Mom insisted I go back to school and finish what I’d started. Like your mother, she hadn’t gone to college. She wanted her only child to graduate. She was afraid that if I stayed home to take care of her, I wouldn’t finish my nursing degree.”

“I heard from a buddy of mine that those programs can be hard to get into,” he said. “I can see why she wouldn’t want you to drop everything in your life to take care of her.”

Nora gave him a watery smile. “That’s what she said. As soon as my last final was over, I returned to my hometown. I became her nurse. She lasted another three months before she slipped away.”

“That’s when you joined the Army?”

She shook her head. “Dad was so heartbroken, I stayed a few months until he was feeling better. I got a job at a local emergency room. On weekends, my father and I worked on cleaning out the house and getting it ready to put on the market.”

“Is your dad still alive?” Rucker asked.

Nora nodded. “He lives in Texas. He moved to a small house with a big backyard.” She forced a smile. “He has a garden, and all the ladies in his retirement community think he’s the cat’s meow. He still misses Mom, but he’s getting on with his life.”

Rucker tilted his head. “When did you join the military?”

“When Dad sold the house and moved into his retirement community. I worried about him, but he’s doing better.”

“And you?”

“I miss her. But she’d whip my ass if I wallowed in self-pity for more than a moment. She was a strong woman and expected me to be the same.”

Rucker grinned. “From what I’ve seen, you are.”

Nora gave him a skeptical look. “You’ve only seen me playing volleyball. It’s just a game.” Not that she’d admit it, but she was a real softy when it came to caring for the sick and injured.

“If you’re half as good at nursing, which I’m willing to bet you are, you’re amazing.” He started to reach across the table for her hand. Before he actually touched her, he grabbed the saltshaker and shook it over his cold breakfast.

“You just got in this morning?” Nora asked.

Rucker nodded.

“How long will you be here?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? I thought when people were deployed, they were given a specific timeframe.”

“Most people are. We’re deployed where and when needed.”

Nora frowned. “What are you? Some kind of special forces team?”

His lips pressed together. “Can’t say.”

She sat back. He was some kind of Special Forces. “Army, right?”

He nodded.

That would make him Delta Force. The elite of the elite. A very skilled soldier who undertook incredibly dangerous missions. She gulped and stopped herself from reaching across the table to take his hand. “Well, I hope all goes well while you and your team are here.”

“Thanks.”

A man hurried across the chow hall wearing shorts and an Army T-shirt. He headed directly toward their table.

Nora didn’t recognize him. “Expecting someone?” she asked Rucker, tipping her head toward the man.

Rucker turned, a frown pulling his eyebrows together. “Why the hell’s Dash awake?”

Nora frowned. “Dash? Please tell me that’s his callsign, not his real name.”

Rucker laughed. “It should be his real name. He’s first into the fight, and he’s fast.” Rucker stood and faced his teammate. “What’s up?”

“CO wants us all in the Tactical Operations Center,” Dash said. “On the double.”

“Guess that’s my cue to exit.” Rucker turned to Nora. “I enjoyed our talk.”

She nodded. “Me, too.”

Dash grinned. “Tell you what...I’ll stay and finish your conversation while you see what the commander wants.”

Rucker hooked Dash’s arm twisted it up behind his back, and gave him a shove toward the door. “You heard the CO, he wants all of us.” Rucker winked at Nora. “I hope to see you on the volleyball court before you leave.”

“Same. Good luck.” Nora’s gaze followed Rucker’s broad shoulders and tight ass out of the chow hall. Too bad she’d only be there another week before she shipped out. She would’ve enjoyed more volleyball and coffee with the Delta Force operative.

He’d probably be on maneuvers that entire week.

She stacked her tray and coffee cup in the collection area and left the chow hall, heading for the building where she shared her quarters with Beth Drennan, a nurse she’d become friends with during their deployment together.

As close as they were, Nora didn’t bring up her conversation with the Delta. With only a week left at the base, she probably wouldn’t run into him again. Though she would like to see him again, she prayed he didn’t end up in the hospital.