



# Hayes (Voodoo Guardians #37)

**Author:** *Mary Kennedy*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Hayes ONeal thought his future was all planned out.

He was in love, found a career and was ready to travel the world.

Or wherever the Navy sent him.

Unfortunately, the love of his life was terrified to leave the safety of their home.

Caught in a land where Americans were no longer welcome, Hayes has no choice but to send an SOS to the very woman that crushed his soul.

He can only pray that someone is listening and will rescue his sorry ass.

Victoria Baird was in pain.

The kind of pain that only recedes with time.

The only man shed ever loved rejected her out of fear.

Not his.

Hers.

He just didnt understand the depth of her anxiety and terror at the thought of leaving Belle Fleur.

He also didnt understand the depth of her fear of losing him.

With nothing to guide her other than that fear, Victoria must face it all head on or lose the only person shes ever loved.

**Total Pages (Source):** 33

# Page 1

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Hayes couldn't remember his last name. Not his real last name, like other kids had when they were born and raised by biological parents. In fact, he wasn't sure he ever knew his real last name or his parents.

He'd been adopted by Hoot and Scout O'Neal when he was older. But his childhood was a mystery. There didn't seem to be any part of it that he could remember. No core memories. No birthday parties. No Christmas mornings.

He knew his parents didn't understand him and didn't tolerate his questions well. He knew that they thought he was strange, perhaps even born with some sort of abnormality.

In fact, Hayes grew up thinking there was something wrong with him. His parents definitely believed he was abnormal. They had him tested for autism, Down Syndrome, and all sorts of things because they didn't understand how his mind worked.

Unable to handle his unique skills, they found a school willing to take him all year round. In fact, the educators seemed thrilled to enroll him in their school.

Hayes was too young to understand or even care that he was being taken away from his home. Usually left on his own to his own devices, leaving his parents seemed natural to him.

Not even three yet, he was given a small suitcase with his teddy bear, some clothing, and a brief hug from his parents. That was it. That was all Hayes remembered of his childhood.

The school seemed fun to Hayes. Children were allowed to use their skills working on complex math, engineering, and science problems. Any equipment they needed, they were given.

The hard part was that the children were constantly tested for their intelligence. New doctors, scientists, engineers, and others were always in the school asking to see what the children could do.

In Hayes' school, it was only boys. He would learn later that there was a school for girls as well.

When he first came to the school, one of the teachers placed a milk crate full of gears and parts of an engine in front of him. He came back five hours later, and Hayes had constructed a working Ferris wheel.

Then one day, they told him he was leaving. They packed his small child-like suitcase for him and shuffled him out the door and into a van with several other children. Some he recognized, others he didn't. In fact, there were several girls in the van.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Just be quiet," said the driver.

The girl seated on the side of him leaned against the window, staring off into space. She wore an oversized sweatshirt and looked as though she were going to be sick.

On the other side was another girl with beautiful long hair and big blue eyes. She looked at him and tapped his leg. She was tapping Morse code.

"Do you know Morse?"

“Yes,” he tapped out on her leg.

They conversed the entire way using their system. He learned that the girls had been stolen from their school, or sold, and it was likely that he had been sold as well.

They had no idea where they were going or what they were going to be expected to do. That is, until they arrived at an underground school where they were forced to show how good they really were.

It didn't take any of them very long to learn that they couldn't show how smart they actually were. What these men and women were asking the children to do would destroy the world.

Locked in the underground lab somewhere in El Paso, Texas, the older children tried to keep the younger ones comfortable, but it wasn't easy. They intentionally delayed the work asked of them, hoping, praying that someone would come for them.

Just as they were losing hope, Monroe said that a strange man spoke to him through an air vent.

“Are you sure?” whispered Hayes.

“Of course, I'm sure. It wasn't a ghost. He said he'd come back for us and to just keep stalling. Geez, I'm a kid, but I'm a genius,” smirked the boy. Hayes laughed at him, ruffling his hair.

“We're all geniuses, Monroe. What's wrong with Chelsea?”

“I'm not sure. She won't talk to anyone. I'm scared for her.”

They would learn after being rescued that Chelsea was pregnant. She delivered a

baby boy and got married to the man who rescued her.

For Hayes, his entire world was turned upside down in the best possible way. He watched all the younger children first fostered to the families of their rescuers, then all of them were adopted.

He was happy to be fostered with the O'Neal family. Scout and Hoot were amazing and the coolest people ever.

“Hayes, do you remember your parents or other adults, besides the teachers?” asked Hoot.

“I don't remember having parents or anyone around me, not really.

There are brief glimpses of something now and then, but I'm not sure if it's my imagination or real.

I don't really remember anyone, except the other kids and the teachers.

They were terrible, by the way. None of them were very good teachers, at least not for us.

Any one of us was smarter than they were.”

“Well, that doesn't surprise me. Did they give you a last name?” asked Hoot.

“No,” said the young man, swallowing hard.

Wilson was sitting across from him. They'd spent a lot of time together playing volleyball the last few days. Wilson thought that Hayes was a natural talent, and if he wanted to, he should foster that into competition.

“Would you like a last name?” asked Hoot. Wilson grinned at Hoot, then at Hayes.

“You mean, just make one up and give it to me?” he frowned.

“No, son. I mean, I, we, Scout and I, we’d love for you to be Hayes O’Neal.”

“But that’s your last name,” he said quietly. Hoot laughed, shaking his head.

“I think you’re screwing this up,” smirked Wilson. “Hayes, Hoot is asking if you’d like to be adopted by him and Scout. You would become Hayes O’Neal. Legally.”

“Why would you want to do that? I’m not a little kid. I’m not a baby. That’s usually what people want to adopt.”

“Hayes, we want to do this because we genuinely want to be your parents. We think you’re the most amazing young man in the world.

Now, I’m no genius. In fact, you’ll be able to teach me more than a few things.

But there are a lot of things that I can teach you.

If you’re interested in learning to use a gun or knife or how to defend yourself, I can teach you that.

I can teach you about life and love. Many things.

Many of the men and women here can teach you.

“The bottom line is, we’d love for you to be Hayes O’Neal. But listen carefully. If you don’t want that, then we’ll be just fine having you as our foster son.”

Hayes stared at the two men, his mouth opening and closing. Shaking his head, he folded his hands, looking down as tears trailed his cheeks.

“Son? Hayes, are you okay?” asked Hoot.

“No one, no one has ever wanted me. Never. You want me.”

“You’re damn right we do,” said Hoot. “And all those other people were stupid.” Hayes could only laugh at his new father’s way of speaking. Plain and to the point.

“Miss Scout wants to be my mom?”

“Miss Scout demands to be your mom,” said Scout, taking a seat beside him, wrapping her arms around the young man. “Sorry I’m late.”

“No problem, babe. I was just trying to convince Hayes that we think we’d be an amazing family.”

“We love you, Hayes. It’s only been a few weeks, and we already know that if you left our home, we’d be crushed. What do you say? Do you want to adopt us?” Hayes laughed, shaking his head as he wrapped his long, thin arms around Scout.

“I can’t think of anything that would make me happier.”

Not only had Hayes found a family, but it was also a family that fostered his interests, talents, and desires to do something to help the world. In fact, they included him in team meetings and made him feel valued.

“I’m not sure that will work,” said Cam in the morning meeting.

“I’m certain,” said the voice in the back of the room.

They all turned to see Hayes seated in the back row, in the corner.

“Sorry. I was curious and wanted to hear what you talked about. I’m certain it can’t be traced.

I’m able to use a technology that I created to divert all trackers, tracers, and recording devices.

They won’t be able to record what we send out.

In fact, I can pretty much divert any recording devices, in essence, scrambling them.”

“Wait. You mean even if we send a recording of a conversation, they can’t record that and analyze it?” asked Luke.

“Yes, sir. It was really easy to do,” he smirked.

“Damn, that kid is brilliant,” nodded AJ to Hiro and Tanner.

For Hayes, it was the beginning of a life he never dreamed possible.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

Victoria didn't remember her parents or if she ever had a last name. The staff at the school, the teachers, all just called her Victoria. They placed puzzles and problems and books in front of her every day, asking her to read them, study them, recite them, or fix them.

At first, she didn't mind. It was interesting and sort of fun. Then she realized what they were doing. When she started to ask questions, she was told that she was no longer able to stay at the school and would be moving on.

She didn't understand what that meant, but in the middle of the night, someone covered her head with a hood and took her away. She bounced from one location to the next, each time covered in a hood and kidnapped.

It was terrifying.

The 'teachers,' who weren't actually teachers at all, demanded that they work on the strange problems presented to them, but Victoria knew what they were doing. It would cause the world to be in such chaos that she couldn't be a part of it.

When they were moved once again, this time she wasn't placed in a hood. Other kids joined the small group she was with and were told they'd been sold to someone who needed their services.

She was surprised to see a handsome young man get into the van and sit between her and Chelsea.

He was very tall and very thin, but he was also very handsome.

They immediately became friends, whispering in corners, making plans for escape, and guiding the young children to not follow the directions of the adults.

It was a complete and utter surprise when they were rescued by a group of the largest, handsomest men that any of them had ever seen. Rushed off to a helicopter that fascinated all of them, they found themselves on one of the most beautiful properties they'd ever seen.

Never in her life had she been treated with such kindness, such love. Given clothing that she loved, all her own, a place to work on any of her ideas, and even more, to work with some of the most brilliant minds in the world.

Where she really got lucky was becoming the foster child of Ophelia and Moses Baird. He was tall, dark, handsome, and brave, and Ophelia was a beauty with beautifully curly hair and perfect skin.

Eventually, they requested to adopt her. But the moment she knew she was in the right place was the day they sneaked into the morning meeting.

“Luke? Cam? We need to speak with you about the new kids,” said Elizabeth, standing with Jessica, Keith, and a few of the others from the school.

“Is there a problem?” asked Luke. “Are they having behavioral issues?”

“No. No, nothing like that,” said Jessica.

“It’s almost embarrassing to say, but I’m not sure we’re equipped, intellectually, to teach these children.

They’re far above our intellect and abilities.

Whatever we attempt to teach, they get bored easily because they already know it.

Most, if not all, are at collegiate-level learning.

Some, like Victoria and Hayes, are at master's or PhD levels. ”

“I never thought about that,” said Cam. “Usually, our kids far surpass those in other schools because we push academics so well in our own school. But I guess we weren't prepared for a group of Mensa kids.”

“It's not just that they are all at genius-level IQs, Cam.

These children are constantly solving problems in their heads that none of us can even conceive.

I put forth a problem that was PhD-level physics, and almost all of them got it correct.

The youngest, Monroe, had all but one component correct,” said Keith. Jessica nodded, continuing.

“Brady, he's only eleven, gave us a complete presentation on how we could better preserve the marine life in the bayous if we added a certain mineral to the land closest to the water so that it could be washed in naturally.

He said it would give us tenfold the oyster, crawfish, and shrimp population that we've had in the last five years. ”

“Damn, how do we solve this problem? I'm no genius. I can't fucking help these kids. I mean, I'm a smart man, but I'm not capable of teaching those kids,” said Eric.

“We solve this like we always have,” said Jessica.

“As a team. We have other geniuses here. What if we made a modified schedule of their curriculum for the kids, something advanced and less time-consuming? It could be taught by May, Thomas, Montana, Doug, Pigsty, Alexandra, Erin, Finley, Jean, even Tony.”

“We’re going to have one of the ghosts teach the kids?” smirked Hex.

“Do you have a better idea?” asked Elizabeth.

“These kids need to be challenged, and we can only go so far. If all of our resident geniuses chip in, we’ll keep their attention.

I even think that by involving Chipper, Teddy, Matthew, some of the older men, they could teach them life skills that these kids have never learned. ”

“What do you mean?” asked Eric.

“ Eric, these kids don’t know anything about money or how to balance a checkbook.

They’ve never been to a store and purchased something.

They’ve never been to a gym, never gone for a run, never swam in a pool or lake.

Hell, many haven’t even played a board game other than chess.

There are basic skills they don’t possess. ”

“I never thought of any of that,” said Luke. “Maybe this becomes community teaching. Maybe we all need to take a part in this, but also give the kids real time out

at G.R.I.P. They could work in the labs, help the team out there with things.

“But we oversee everything. I don’t want any mad science experiments, and I damn sure don’t want anyone saying that we’re using their intelligence for our profit.

They only go out there if they want to. But most of all, I want those kids to have time with other kids.

They can’t be all about academics and nothing else.

They need to learn how to function with others. ”

“Hayes and Victoria are the oldest. Allow them a little more freedom than the others. I mean, for goodness’ sake, they know five languages, not counting all the math and computer languages,” smirked Jessica.

“It sounds like you have a good plan,” said Eric.

“I’m in favor of it. We want them to grow but also have normal lives.

If they want to be involved in athletics, we let them.

If it’s music they want, then give them music.

Mia can instruct as well as some of the others.

We have Lissa at the dance studio. We have artists — Ela, Shay, and several others.

Let them be who they want. I do not want to push these children. ”

“Mr. Eric?” said a small voice at the door. He turned, smiling at the two little boys.

They could not have been more different. One black. One white. One blonde. One with black hair. Dark eyes versus blue eyes. Yet they were determined to be brothers.

“Nigel, Spencer, what can we do for you?” smiled Luke.

“What if we like math and science? I don’t want to just play ball. I don’t know how to play ball.”

“Me neither,” said Spencer. “I only know numbers and formulas.”

Luke, Eric, Cam, and Hex took a seat on the dais, making them closer to the boys’ level. They waved them over to sit in front of them.

“Boys, you don’t know how to play ball because no one has taught you,” said Cam. “But if you don’t want to play, you won’t have to. What we’re saying is that you can choose to do whatever you like. Anything.”

“Anything?” asked Spencer.

“Anything, son.”

“Can I learn to bake cookies with Mr. George and draw cool pictures like Mr. Callan does on skin?” he asked. George and Callan were several rows behind them, smirking at the young men.

“I believe George and Callan would welcome that,” said Cam. “What about you, Nigel? What would you like to learn to do?”

“I want to learn to fish with Mr. Matthew and learn about international law with Miss Georgie and Miss Sira,” he said softly. “Can I do that?” Luke looked up at his grandfather, smiling, then at Georgie and Sira.

“I believe they would enjoy that very much,” nodded Luke.

“Good,” smiled Nigel. “Miss Georgie and Miss Sira are really cute.” The men chuckled, shaking their heads. Carl gave a playful frown to Nigel, who laughed at the big man.

“Now, who else is hiding in the auditorium?” asked Luke.

All the men turned, looking for the other hidden children. Hayes and Victoria were sitting out in the open, but Brady, Marilisa, and Monroe couldn’t be seen.

“Brady? I know you’re here, son. Come on out,” said Eric.

“Y-yes, sir. Are you going to spank me?” he asked.

Eric frowned, still seated on the dais. He waved the boy down from his hiding place beneath the chairs. He walked slowly, preparing himself for a spanking.

“Brady, take my hand,” said Eric, holding out his big arm and wide palm.

The boy stared at him, looking down at his hand.

He set his small, pale hand in his own larger, dark one, and Eric carefully closed his fingers over the boy’s hand.

“Listen to me, Brady. No one here will ever spank you unless you’ve hurt someone or damaged property intentionally.

We choose to make rules, and we expect those rules to be followed, but we don’t hit children.”

“That’s a relief, sir,” said the little boy. Eric smiled at him.

“Now, is there something special that you’d like to learn?” he asked. Brady looked around the room, finally seeing the two men he wanted. He pointed to Rory and Noa.

“They’re awful big, and I know they know how to fight and hurt bad people. I want to learn that too, so I can protect my friends,” he said.

Rory and Noa stared at the boy, then at Eric. They would be happy to teach the boy self-defense, but what they really wanted to know was why the boy wanted that. Noa and Rory turned to Hayes and Victoria, hoping they could fill them in.

“Brady lived with his father near the sea. Brady was obviously very curious about everything to do with the ocean or any body of water. His father was a fisherman, but he killed dolphins, sharks, anything he could for a dollar. He didn’t care what was in his net.

He sold what he could, keeping the rest for himself.

He often killed whales and sharks for countries or companies that wanted them for their own benefit.

“One day, a man came to speak with his father about his business. His father was gone, but Brady knows everything there is to know about the sea,” smiled Victoria.

“He told the man what his father did for a living. He was only four at the time, but as you can imagine, he sounded much older. He didn’t realize he was sending his father to prison. ”

Luke, Cam, Eric, and Hex stared at the boy, then back at Hayes and Victoria.



“The man left, but Brady’s father was hidden outside and heard everything.

He beat him incessantly with a fishing rod.

He denied him food and water for days. When the police came back, they arrested his father.

The Einstein school was there, ready to take him.

His father had already sold his son to the school.

Brady didn’t know it then, neither did the police.

They just said the father had arranged for him to be sent to a special school,” she said sarcastically.

“Brady,” said Rory in the softest voice he could manage. “Brady, I will teach you to defend yourself, but it will be a trade.”

“A trade, sir?” frowned Brady.

“Yes. I would love to learn more about the sea, about our bayous out there. I’m not a sailor, and I’ve never been very good at fishing. Can you teach me? I’m kind of slow,” he smirked. “I’m just an old Marine.”

“You’re not just a Marine, sir. You were MARSOC. I know what that means.” Rory chuckled, lifting the boy in his arms, tossing him into the air.

“Noa and I will work with you twice a week on how to defend yourself. School comes first. Always. It’s important.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What about you, Marilisa?” asked Hex. “What would you like to learn?”

“I want to learn to sew like Miss Gwen so that I can always sew my own clothes,” she said quietly. Hex nodded, chuckling at the sweet girl.

“I believe I can make that happen for you,” he smiled. “Miss Gwen is my wife. She makes beautiful clothing, and I know she’d love for you to work with her.”

“I just want to learn to sew my own clothes,” she said. Hex frowned, looking toward Victoria and Hayes for guidance again.

“She was three when she arrived at the school. Her parents dropped her off with only a pair of underwear on her body. No clothing. She’s never had anything that was just hers. It was always hand-me-downs.”

“Well, from now on, you will learn to create your own clothing with Miss Gwen. I know that Ashley and Trevor would love to take you shopping for your own things.”

“My very own?” she asked, looking back at Trevor.

“Your very own,” said Trevor, lifting the little girl in his arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck, squeezing until he coughed with laughter.

“Monroe? What about you, son?” asked Cam.

“Um, well, I like what I study. I like math, computers, and the other stuff. Jax and Ellie are teaching me really cool stuff, including art. But I’d like to work with the animals too. Can I work out there a few days a week? The dogs are amazing.” Sniff smiled at the boy.

“I think we can make that happen as long as Jax is okay with it,” said Sniff.

“I’m okay with it,” smiled Jax. “In fact, I think I’ll come with you and learn more about the dogs myself.”

“Cool. By the way, I love the ghosts, and I’ve learned a lot already from Tony, Nathan, Franklin, and Yori.

Grip is super cool. He’s kind of big and gruff, but he knows stuff, and he’s always got funny stories.

He woulda’ made a good dad. Just so you know, it’s psychokinetic energy that causes the ghosts to appear.

It’s very cool and very strong here. I think they’re here for a reason. Just thought you should know.”

“Well, I think we have our curriculum rounded out,” smirked Luke.

It changed all of their worlds forever. The children thrived, growing strong, independent, healthy, and happy.

Except Victoria still had one fear she could not overcome. One that might take from her the only thing she ever truly desired.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

“I don’t understand, Hayes. Why would you join the Navy? You have four college degrees, a job at G.R.I.P., and endless possibilities here. Why do this now?” she asked.

“I admire these men and what they’ve done, Victoria. I want to prove I’m more than just my brains. I want to feel useful.”

“Don’t you feel useful here? Now?” she asked.

“I do. But I know there’s more for me,” he said, holding her hand in the gardens. “I know it’s not for you, Victoria, but I want to see what else is out there. I want to see the world, other places, cultures, all of it.”

“What if they take you again? What if they take me?”

“Victoria, the men here have all told you that they wouldn’t allow that to happen. No one is looking for us any longer. All those people are gone. Please, think about it. You could move near base and work from home, or you could keep going to school for your additional PhD.”

“I don’t know, Hayes. I just don’t feel safe leaving here. I just know the minute I step off the property, someone will take me again.”

“Nothing I say will change your mind, Victoria. But you have to get over this. You need to speak with Bree, Ashley, and Calla. You’ll be stuck here for the rest of your life if you don’t.”

It infuriated Victoria that Hayes thought he had it all figured out.

“You know what, Hayes? I don’t need you to tell me I’m going to be ‘stuck’ here.

I don’t consider being here being stuck.

I’m grateful to have a home and a family, and a place to work that I love going to.

I’m not afraid of someone taking me from this property, and I know that I’m safe.

Here. I’m safe here, Hayes. Not out there. ”

“You know I didn’t mean it that way,” he said, frowning. She pulled her hand from his and stood, staring down at him.

“In case you’ve missed it, Hayes. I’ve been seeing Bree and Ashley since the day we arrived. I go twice a week, sometimes more. Maybe it’s you that needs to talk to them so you can learn a little about managing other people’s emotions.”

She stood and stormed away from Hayes.

“Victoria!” he yelled. She didn’t bother to turn around, and he just shook his head, not sure what to do.

“You gotta be patient with her, son,” said Angel.

“Patient? I’ve been patient since we arrived. There’s no one out there that’s going to take us. She’s being ridiculous!”

“Don’t do that,” said Trak, staring at the boy. “We’ve spent a lot of time with her because she feels safe with us. Her fear is palpable, and although it may be irrational

to you, it's rational to her."

"I can't live like that," he said. "I can't hide away and be afraid of the whole damn world. I want to experience the world."

"Then go," said Angel. "Go and experience the world. But it's unfair of you to think that she should experience the world just because you want to. It sounds to me like you're afraid of doing it alone."

Hayes opened his mouth, then closed it. There could be some truth to him being afraid as well, but at least he was willing to face his fears and go out into the world.

Trak and Angel left him seated in the grove, hoping he would take some time to think about things.

"You should listen to them. They're very wise," said Tony, one of their resident teen spirits.

"Isn't that how you got killed, though? Going off property?"

"Yes," he smirked, "but it was because I wanted to save Alexandra. I was the one who found her in that tree house out on the island, and then to see her being brave, hoping to help the others, it was something I couldn't ignore.

She was amazing, and that man was going to kill her.

I couldn't stand by and watch that happen. "

"You were incredibly brave," said Hayes. "That's what I want to be. Brave."

"There are other ways to be brave," said Tony. "You were brave just keeping yourself

alive and getting to this point. I think a man has to do what he needs to do, but you can't expect that Victoria will want to do the same thing. That's not fair of you."

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" he said a little louder than expected. "If she loves me, shouldn't she do what will make me happy?"

"Boy, you need some lessons on what love really is," said Grip, walking toward him.

"Great, another ghost to tell me what to do," he frowned.

"Don't test me, Hayes. I'm capable of more than you think," growled Grip.

"Yes, sir," he said, blushing apologetically. "I didn't mean it like it sounded. But why should I be the one to flex for her?"

"Sometimes you have to be the man and flex. It's just that simple," said Grip. "If you really love her, go and do your thing."

"Of course I love her! How am I supposed to just leave her?" he whined.

"I left Ajei," said Luke, walking toward the trio. "We all had to leave the women we loved at some point. Sometimes, it was only for a few weeks or months. Sometimes, it was for years. She knew that I loved her and didn't want to change her at all.

"Of course, we'd known one another almost our entire lives. We'd had a long time to build a relationship."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he frowned.

"Hayes, you're one of the most brilliant young men I know, but you are young. Joining the Navy is a huge leap for you as a young man. But it will present a lot of

challenges for you as well. You'll be in locations where there will be plenty of single women interested in you, romantically."

"I don't want other women. I want Victoria."

"You sound like a spoiled child not wanting to share a toy," frowned Cam, staring at the younger man. "Look, Hayes. We all know what you're feeling, but if you keep pushing Victoria, you're going to push her away."

"You don't have to change who you are, but you do have to understand her, son. You do have to attempt to understand her fears. Join the Navy. Do your thing. But you can't expect that she will sit here and wait patiently for twenty years for you to be done," said Eric.

"I need to think about this," he frowned, standing to leave. "I know that I'm supposed to join the Navy, and if I'm lucky enough, I'd like to eventually become a SEAL. But I want my wife, my girlfriend, with me."

"I think you need to ask yourself why that's so important to you, Hayes. Otherwise, you might just push away the woman that you love," said Luke.

They watched the young man walk away and looked at one another.

"Anyone else feel like this isn't going to end well?" asked Eric. Cam nodded.

"Down to my bones."



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

Victoria sat on a bench within the maze, softly crying into her sleeve. She didn't want anyone to hear her, and she didn't want to bother her adoptive parents about all of this. It felt so silly.

Hayes should be able to understand how she was feeling. He knew her fears and why she didn't want to leave the property. Why was he pushing her so hard?

"Care for some company?" asked Ajei, walking toward her with Kate, Sophia, and Gwen.

"Oh," she sniffed, wiping her eyes. "Sure."

"Honey, what's going on?" asked Ajei.

"It's Hayes," she hiccupped. "He wants to join the Navy, which is fine, I guess. But he's insistent that I come and live off-base with him. I don't want to leave here!"

"You don't have to leave here, Victoria," said Sophia Ann. "We've told you that you don't have to leave here. But let me ask you something. What if we were forced to leave this place? What if something happened to the property, to the world, that forced us to leave?"

"We'd be leaving together. All of us," she said through tears.

"Yes, that's true. But you'd be leaving. Are you saying that if we all went with you, you'd leave?" asked Ajei.

“Yes. No. Maybe. I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “I feel safe here. Doesn’t anyone understand that? I feel like I’m protected here, that the world can’t get to me. I don’t want to leave.”

“Honey, you are protected here,” said Gwen, rubbing her arms. “We’re all protected here, but we’re not so naïve as to believe that the world can’t get to us here. They could. It’s unlikely, but it could happen.”

“I’m not naïve,” she said in a childlike tone.

“I wasn’t calling you naïve,” said Gwen, smiling at her. “What are you really afraid of, Victoria?”

“I was taken, over and over again. Taken from my home, taken from schools, taken from every place where I started to feel even the smallest bit of safety. Then I came here. No one has attempted to take me. I’m safe here.”

“Honey, you’ve got things backwards,” said Kate. “You are safe here, but you’re also safe out there. We’ve proven that to you. The people who took you are no longer living. There is no threat for you, or Hayes, or Monroe, or any of you.”

“So, you’re saying I should just run out into the world with no protection?” she asked sarcastically.

“Victoria, you know we’re not suggesting that,” said Kate. “I think it would help you to take small day trips, eventually taking some overnight trips with other people. Just a few.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said, walking away from the women. What she really wanted to do was run from them, but then again, where would she run? She didn’t want to leave the property, so her only option was her parents’ cottage.

She knew the women were trying to help her, but no one understood the depth of her fear of the outside world.

“That young woman is going to be left all alone if she doesn’t do something,” said Sophia Ann.

As time went on, Hayes did leave for the Navy, and Victoria vowed to stay in touch and support him in his career choices. There were glimpses of her making progress, sitting at Café du Monde with Angel and Trak, having café au lait and beignets.

While with them, she felt safe and protected and was actually enjoying the experience of being out and in the city. But the moment she returned to Belle Fleur, it was as if the noose tightened once again, and she couldn’t leave.

Hayes went off and joined the Navy, not returning home for quite some time. He wanted to clear his head and do things in his own way. Become the man that he knew he could be.

While meeting about a case, the team was shocked to see him walk in.

## Page 5

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“Okay, then we cross off work as a motive for this,” said Eric. “Has anyone spoken to the others? Katelyn, Chelsea, Marilisa, Victoria, all of the genius kids.”

“Does that include me?” said the big, deep voice at the door. They all turned, smiling and shaking their heads at Hayes.

“I’ll be damned,” laughed Eric. “What the hell has the Navy done to you?” They all hugged him, welcoming him home.

“To answer your question, it’s not just the Navy. I’m a SEAL now,” he grinned.

“Are you fucking kidding?” smirked Luke. “Why wouldn’t you tell us that? Why didn’t you call us and ask for help?”

“No, sir. I wanted to do this on my own. I knew that’s what I wanted to do. Your training when I was here got me there. I’m still part of intelligence but through the SEAL teams.”

“Why are you home?” asked Hex.

“I had leave coming, and I wanted to see Victoria. I know she’s been nervous about me not communicating with her. I’ll be home for a few weeks, then gone again for a while.”

“Well, as long as you’re here, any thoughts on why someone would want to kill Stephanie?” asked Brax.

“She’s the girl who was the clone, right?”

Victoria told me. I never met her, but I can only imagine that it has everything to do with the fact that she is a clone.

I mean, that alone makes her more unique than the rest of us.

We’re all geniuses, but she’s a genius clone.

Can you imagine if someone figured that out and wanted to make dozens like her? ”

“Fuck me,” muttered Luke. Luke tapped a message to Riley and Suzette, asking them to come to the offices. It was only Riley who was able to come down.

“Hey, what’s up?” she asked.

“Thank you for coming, Riley. Can you explain the cloning process to us?” She stared at them, then burst into laughter.

“On that note,” smirked Hayes, “I’ll go see the love of my life.”

Hayes found Victoria in the little workspace where she was able to hide from the world whenever she wanted. She was so incredibly beautiful, and yet she still looked like a child in many ways.

“Hi,” he said quietly.

“Hayes!” She jumped up, leaping into his arms. He loved the way she felt in his arms, the way their bodies connected and molded together.

“How long are you home for?” she asked.

“For the wedding at least,” he smiled. “I hope to be home for a longer period of time, but we’ll see.”

All his grand plans of convincing her to come with him were dashed over and over again. While trying to speak with her rationally once again, she began crying and pushing away from him. In the distance, he saw Stephanie and Brax walking toward them.

“Hi,” said Stephanie. “I’ve been looking for you. Will you walk with me to the cafeteria, Victoria? I need to ask you some questions.”

“Uh, yeah. Sure. I don’t have all the translations done yet,” she said, wiping her tears. Brax waited until they walked off and then looked at Hayes.

“It’s not what you think,” said the younger man.

“What is it you think I think?”

“I wasn’t going to hit her.”

“Fucking right you weren’t, but it damn sure looked like you were angry enough to do it.”

“I wasn’t. I swear. It’s her obsession with not leaving the property. I mean, she’ll do short little trips into the city if Angel, Miller, or Trak are with her, but that’s all.”

“She’ll get there, Hayes.”

Brax was angry at the young man. He could tell that his emotions were overruling his common sense and worried that he might lash out at Victoria in an act he would regret.

“I want to get married and have her living with me off-base,” he frowned.

“Why?”

“Why? Because I love her,” he scoffed.

“No. I mean, I know you love her, but why would you do that to her? You bring her across the country, away from everything she knows, leave her in an apartment by herself with nothing and no one. Why?”

Hayes frowned, shaking his head.

“You’re fucking selfish, that’s why,” scolded Brax. Hayes stared at the other man, offended by the statement. “That’s right. I said it. It’s selfish of you to want that. What you want is a woman there for you when you are home. Someone easily accessible to satisfy you.”

Hayes said nothing, continuing to get soaked in the rain.

“Are you tempted?” frowned Brax. “Are you thinking of cheating on that girl?”

“No! No, I’m not,” he said quietly. “Girls approach us all the time, but I haven’t done anything.”

“Yet.”

“It’s not like that, Brax. I don’t want anyone except Victoria, but I need her to not be afraid to get off the damn property now and then. I want a life with her, but I want a life where we can travel together, do things other than walk the gardens here.”

“Hayes, that girl has had a miserable life. Just like you. But she’s absolutely terrified

that someone out there will know who she is and take her. She's watched all the others, Marilisa, Katelyn, Chelsea, and now Stephanie. Their past followed them.

"She sits here worrying herself to death over you every damn day. She tries to keep track of where you are, but you've obviously figured that out and turned off your tracking devices on occasion."

"I have to," he frowned.

"Bullshit. The military can't see them or find them. You do it because you don't want her to know where you are. Let me guess. Strip clubs? Bars? Partying with the boys?"

From Hayes' silence, Brax knew he'd hit a chord. It wasn't that he blamed him. He was a twenty-four-year-old young man, alone, with urges. He was doing what every young man in the military tended to do.

"Listen to me, Hayes. If you're gonna fuck around, you tell that young woman that you need a break. You want a break from her, and you need her to date other people to be sure that you're actually the one."

"Date other people! No fucking way!"

"Oh, I see. So, you want to play with the strippers and hookers, but she's not allowed to have dinner with someone?"

"I'm not seeing hookers and strippers!" he yelled. Before they knew it, six men were standing around them. Luke, Cam, Hex, Eric, Pax, and Saint stared at the young man. Luke pointed across the path.

"Office.Now."



“I haven’t done anything,” frowned Hayes, shaking off the water from his hair and clothes.

“Yet. You haven’t done it yet,” said Luke. “You’re obviously tempted.”

“Of course I am! Weren’t you?”

“No,” said Luke. “I was not. I knew that the only woman for me was Ajei. End of story.” Hayes looked at Eric.

“Sorry, buddy. Sophia Ann was always the woman I loved.” He looked at Cam.

“I was a man-whore,” he said, frowning. “I’m ashamed to say it now, but it’s the truth. I was lucky that Kate saw the real me and loved me. I’m grateful.” He turned to Hex.

“I was an older man when I found Gwen. I’d been with other women, but not while I proclaimed love for one back home.”

“Well, I guess you’re all boy scouts,” he frowned.

“We didn’t say that, Hayes. Listen, you’ve had some time out there in the world now without anyone hanging over your shoulder,” said Luke.

“We get it. We get being tempted. The problem with that is that Victoria hasn’t been out there in the world.

She doesn’t know how beautiful she is, how enticing.

We see it when the men at The Well look at her. ”

“You take her to The Well?” he yelled.

“Fuck, yes. The girl needs to get away from here. We agree with you on that,” said Eric.

“But there is always a half-dozen men around her when we go, and she does not move. She won’t even take a piss without two women going with her and a man outside the door.

She is terrified, Hayes. Have you thought about that at all? ”

“Of course I have! I mean. I know she’s scared, but she has to get over it.”

“She really doesn’t,” said Brax. “You need for her to get over it, but she doesn’t have to. She loves her life here, Hayes. She loves living with all of us and working here, and she loves you. But asking her to do something that will cause her immeasurable pain before she’s ready is not okay.”

Hayes stood and shook his head, heading toward the door.

“What will you do?” asked Brax.

“I don’t know. I have no fucking clue, but I can’t be trapped in one place forever, and I can’t live without her.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

“He didn’t hurt me,” sniffed Victoria. “Not physically.”

“What do you mean?” asked Stephanie, the other women huddled around her.

“He’s tired of me being scared to leave the property. He wanted me to just get over it and come and live in San Diego with him. I’m just not ready for that,” she said, wiping fresh tears.

“Oh, honey. You have to find a way to get over that,” said Ajei. “He means well, and I’m going to guess he’s lonely. And. As awful as it sounds, he may be tempted by women coming on to him.”

“Wh-what?” gasped Victoria.

“I didn’t say he’s done anything, but he is a man.

A very handsome, well-built young man who is also a Navy SEAL.

Luke and I knew we loved one another. While he was at Annapolis, I was in nursing school in Baltimore.

We saw one another all the time. But believe me, I noticed the women watching him all the time.

“Then we came back here and married. I lived near base for a while, and then when I got close to delivering Garrett, I came back here until he retired.”

“It was the same for Eric and me,” said Sophia Ann. “But everyone is different.”

“Cam and I definitely were,” frowned Kate. “I had his son and kept that from him. It was so wrong of me, and I regret it every day.”

“Hex and I met later in life,” said Gwen.

“We all have different stories,” said Lia, Scout, and Lucinda, seated beside her. “Yours is unique, Victoria, because of your fear of leaving the property.”

“I agree with that,” said Julia, “but you can’t expect him to have a ten- or twenty-year career as a SEAL, and the woman he loves lives across the country or the world, unable to come to him if he needs her.”

They all looked at Julia, surprised by her direct approach.

“I don’t mean to be cruel, Victoria, but you can’t expect him to not see anyone else if you’re not willing to go and visit him now and then. Think about all the weekends and days off that he has, but it’s not enough time to come home. You’re here, able to go and see him, but you won’t.

“I know it’s difficult for you. I know it’s an awful thought, but you have to find a way to do it for him or let him go. Even if it’s just for now.”

“I don’t want to let him go,” she said in a shaky voice. “I love him.”

“But do you love him enough to let him go?” asked Julia in a soft voice.

“I know you love him, honey, but there needs to be a give and take in this relationship,” said Ajei.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said, looking out the window.

She watched as Hayes emerged from the offices, the other men following him. When he entered the cafeteria, she stood and walked toward him. He said something to her, and she nodded.

Leaving the building, the team watched them head toward Victoria’s cottage, watching them closely. It seemed, at least for now, they were talking about options. Then, just a few days later, he would be gone again.

Brax watched the young couple, both nodding, both looking as though they’d reached an agreement. Neither looked like they were upset by anything, and then Victoria hugged him, turning and waving at him.

Hayes looked up to see Brax and Stephanie and walked toward them. To ask them a favor.

“Hi. Everything okay?” asked Brax.

“Not really. I’ve been called back. I thought I could be here for your big day, but it’s just not possible.”

“Brother, I understand that better than anyone,” smiled Brax. “It’s all good. You’ll be home soon.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I hope so,” he nodded. “Listen, watch out for her for me. Okay?”

“Hayes, you’ll be back soon to watch over her yourself,” said Stephanie.

“No. We agreed that we should, uh, see other people,” he said, swallowing. He looked away, trying to hide his tears, but just couldn’t. “I love her so much. I just

don't understand why she can't do this one thing for me."

"Oh, honey," said Stephanie, hugging him. "Give her time."

"I've given her years, Steph. I can't keep waiting. I want to, but I'm afraid of what I'll do behind her back. I guess I'm a weak, pathetic male."

"No. You're a man with male urges, desires, and wants. I'm not going to judge you for that," said Brax. "If it's meant to be, it will happen. For now, I'm proud of you, Hayes. It's hard to let someone you love go, but you've done the right thing."

Hayes nodded, wiping his face with the back of his hands. He stood tall, looking at Brax, and gave another quick nod. As he moved toward the waiting vehicle, Hoot in the driver's seat, he turned back one last time.

"Do me a favor? Don't let her be alone for the rest of her life."

Hayes spent a few weeks just feeling like shit and lonely, then he went out one night with the guys and actually had a great time. They had a few beers, shot some pool, watched the game, and that was it. But he enjoyed himself.

He found that he enjoyed the attention of the women in the bar, and he enjoyed the fact that women wanted to be with him, wanted to spend time with him.

Yet every time he got close to kissing the woman, taking her home, he backed up and shook his head. He just couldn't do it.

"I'm sorry. There's someone back home," he said to the woman that night.

"She's a lucky girl that you're so honest," she smiled. "Listen, Hayes. You're a great guy. I've watched you since you came to the area, and you're a gentleman, you're

smart, and everyone knows that you're a SEAL. Yet you don't touch another woman."

"What's your point?" he frowned.

"Put a ring on it, and make her yours," smiled the girl.

"It's not that easy. We, she had a rough childhood and is terrified to be away from home."

"That must be awful for her," said the girl compassionately.

"Awwful for her? What about me?"

"You know what, that's the first selfish thing I've seen in you. A terrified woman generally has a reason to be terrified. If she's worth turning away women willing to go to bed with you, my advice is to marry that girl and find a way to work this out."

She stood and bent down, kissing his cheek. As she walked away, Hayes wanted to run after her but knew that it would be useless. Damn his soul, he was completely in love with Victoria.

He just needed to find a way to make it work between them.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

At Belle Fleur, Victoria was trying to find her new normal. There was no longer daily or even weekly communication with Hayes. He would send short text messages every few weeks just to say that he was okay, but that was all.

She knew that being unable to leave the property had damaged their relationship permanently. She wouldn't be surprised if she never saw him again. He was already in his second tour as a SEAL, traversing around the world to fight evil, maintain peace, and just do good.

Thankfully, work kept her very busy, and she was happy being on the property and supporting her friends and family.

For Victoria, work was exciting and fun. The challenges presented by the team at G.R.I.P. kept her engaged and always thinking about other possibilities for their technology. She was fulfilled.

Almost.

“I know what you've been trying to do,” said Victoria, staring at the group of women.

“You forget that I'm a genius. I don't like concerts, and I don't like restaurants other than ours.

I shop online, not in stores. I like animals, but we have plenty here.

I don't need to visit a zoo. I like movies, but I can download them and stream them here. ”



“You’re no fun at all,” frowned Ajei. “This is not healthy for you, Victoria.”

“Says who?” The women all stared at one another. “Look, I appreciate that you think you’re helping me, but you’re not. It’s only making me more anxious and feeling as though I’m weird and the outsider.”

“Honey, we never wanted you to feel that way,” said Gwen. “We were just worried about you. At least dance with someone the next time we’re at The Well. I mean, you go with us, but you stay hidden at the table. You’re a beautiful young woman, and there are a lot of fine men out there.”

“I don’t want a lot of fine men. I want one, and he hasn’t changed his mind,” she frowned.

“Neither have you,” said Sophia Ann softly. Victoria looked up at her and nodded.

“No. I haven’t. So, with all due respect, stay out of my business. I’m fine right where I am, doing what I’m doing.”

They watched as she stormed off, running toward the docks for G.R.I.P. Ajei shook her head, looking at her friends as she sipped her coffee.

“That girl is in for a load of sorrow if she doesn’t do something.”

“Well then,” said Kate, “I guess we prepare to pick up the pieces because she’s not going to change.”

Victoria spent weeks working ten- and fifteen-hour days at G.R.I.P. just to avoid people during meals. Doug, Ryan, and Paige ordered her to take a day off, and she took the day to spend it alone out at the animal sanctuary.

She'd stopped trying to track Hayes. Invariably, he seemed to turn off his comms at the exact moments that she was searching for him. She just wanted to know that he was alright.

"Knock, knock," smiled Wyatt and Monroe. They'd been part of their band of misfits found by the team.

"Hi, boys," she smiled, staring at them as they walked into her office. "What's up?"

"Nothing. Just checking on you," grinned Wyatt.

He and Monroe were both part of the team at G.R.I.P.

and decided to forgo military training to pursue their ideas here at home.

They were amazing physical specimens. At just nineteen, they both looked as though they'd been working out with world-class athletes for a decade. In fact, they truly had.

"I'm fine. I wish everyone would stop worrying about me," she frowned.

"Victoria, we just care about you and Hayes. You guys were like the parents of the group when we were taken. Every location, you stepped up and helped us to cope. You never once were frightened," said Monroe.

"I was terrified," she said under her breath.

"Well, you didn't act like it. Where is that brave woman?" said Wyatt.

"You guys know what it was like. We waited to see what would happen next. Who was going to come and take us, sell us, like they did the others. Always waiting to see

what would become of us. What would they do to us? It was the most horrible, uncontrollable feeling in the world. I can't do it again. I just can't."

The young men both looked at her and nodded. It was Monroe who stepped forward.

"One day, Victoria, you may not have a choice."

They kissed her cheek and left her sitting in her office. It was after seven, and she was supposed to be long gone. Wyatt turned to speak to her again.

"We brought the small skiff," he said. "You take that back, and we're going to take the last of the bigger boats. Doug said if he doesn't see you in thirty minutes, he's coming to get you."

The boys disappeared, leaving the massive fortress of a building. When the door banged closed, Victoria threw her chair across the room, screaming to herself.

"Why can't everyone just leave me alone?" she cried to herself. She shook her head and picked up the chair, straightening her workspace as she always did before she left.

As she went to shut down her computer, there was one final message that had come through. One more and she'd do as they asked. She would get off the island. At least for today.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

Hayes and his team trudged through the desolate mountain terrain. They'd been asked to infiltrate a rebel camp, kill their leader, and scatter the other men, or kill them.

They'd found the group of rebels, disposed of their leader and fifteen other men, watching as the remainder ran into the mountains. Now, they had to get back off the mountain.

"Treetop one, we're ready for pickup," said Hayes into the comms device.

"Roger that. Headed to the extraction point now."

The men simply nodded, walking higher and higher up the rocky face of the mountain terrain. His lieutenant was near the top and looked back down at the team.

"Make sure there are no tangoes hidden behind the rocks. I don't want anyone dying on this mountain."

Hayes, at the rear as always to maintain comms, nodded, then looked more closely at the rocky, ragged terrain around them. As they reached the flat surface from which they'd be picked up, Hayes noticed a small crevice in the mountainside.

"Hey, are you guys seeing what I'm seeing?" he whispered to the men beside and in front of him.

They all followed his eyes and immediately drew their weapons. It wasn't very big, but it was damn sure big enough for a small man or child to fit through. The four men slowly began moving toward the crevice, Hayes remaining in the clear for comms.

In the distance, Hayes could see their chopper coming for them. He didn't hold him back, not yet. One of the men pointed the rifle at the crevice, calling for anyone to come out with their hands raised.

Hayes stared at the crevice, then back at the chopper headed toward them. They heard a small voice, and suddenly, a young boy walked out, his hands raised. But none of that mattered. None of it mattered when they saw what was taped to his little body.

“Fuck!” cursed Hayes. “Treetop one, treetop one, hold your position. We've got a child with explosives.”

“Say again?”

“Stay where you...”

It was all Hayes got out as the boy cried out for his mother, then disappeared in an explosion of noise, rock, and bodies.

He watched his teammates flying through the air, as if in slow motion.

He didn't even recognize that his own body was falling down the side of the mountain, sliding against the sharp rock face.

When his body finally stopped sliding, he looked up at the mountaintop where his team had been. Except there was no longer a mountaintop, nor was there a team. They were gone. All of them were gone.

He reached for the comms device on his body to call for the chopper, but his arms refused to move. Nothing seemed to connect with his brain. Then it was dark except for one blurry figure.

Hayes awoke to find himself in total darkness. No, that wasn't right. He wasn't in total darkness. He awoke in the middle of the night. Still lying on the small shelf of rock that he'd landed on, he wasn't sure whether to move or not.

Carefully, he pushed himself toward the rock face, crawling to sit up. He wanted to scream in agony, realizing that his shoulder was dislocated and his wrist broken.

Leaning against the rock, he reached for his comms device only to find that it was crushed. It would take him hours to fix it, and even then, he wasn't sure it would work. Removing his pack, he pulled out a t-shirt and bound his arm to his body.

Inside the medical pack, he swallowed the powdered pain medication and then took a big swig of water from his canteen.

“Think, Hayes,” he muttered. “Think.”

He dared to stand and look up the mountain where his team had once been. They were all gone. All of them. He was on a mountain in the driest climate on earth with only a few days' worth of water, at most, and, no doubt, the rebels coming straight for him.

Injured, it would take tremendous effort to get off the mountain and walk for help. That's when he realized he had another option. Another form of communication that would work, as long as it was still operable.

Tapping his own comms device for VG, he prayed it wasn't damaged. Like everyone on the VG team, it was an implant behind his ear, but the explosion had caused him to hit his head multiple times as he rolled down the mountain.

In the distance, he could see that the sun was beginning to rise, which meant he would be exposed. Remembering that they'd passed a number of small openings,

crevices, and caves coming up the mountain, he slid down on his bottom, hoping to find one for shelter.

When he found the first one, he easily fit inside, happy to see that he was alone. Standing with great effort, he leaned against the opening and tapped his comms several times. When he got no reply, he dug out his VG communication device.

His eyes blurred, a headache overwhelming him. No doubt he was concussed, and the effects were hitting him hard. The screen blurred before him, but he tapped out the message he needed.

Need help at location ASAP. Only one alive.

“What in the world?” whispered Victoria. She texted back.

Is this a joke, Hayes? Are you trying to get me to leave the property?

There was no reply, and Victoria’s stomach bottomed out. She tracked his comms device, hoping that he had turned it back on.

“No. No, this can’t be,” she whispered. Grabbing the tablet and her phone, she ran from the building and found the small skiff. She’d race to Trak or Angel’s and ask them to come with her.

Then she remembered that they were in Chicago. Shit!

It didn’t matter. None of it mattered any longer. She docked the skiff, ran to her cottage, and gathered her things in a backpack. Rushing back to the cafeteria, she realized that everyone was already gone. It was late, and they’d returned to their own homes.

If she asked them to help, they would force her to stay on the property in spite of her overwhelming desire to help Hayes.

Frantic, unsure of what to do, she saw the SUV and decided to take her chance. She'd never driven so fast in all her life. When she arrived at the airport, she approached the international counter, slid the location across the counter, and simply said.

“I need to get here as fast as I can.”



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

The entire time Victoria was making her way toward Hayes' location, she never once had the thought that she should have found someone, anyone to help her.

Not once. If she had taken the time to find someone, explain it all, it might have been too late.

Then her genius kicked in. They would have used their aircraft, which were twice as fast and loaded with deadly artillery.

“Damn,” she muttered to herself.

She'd stolen the SUV, parked it at the airport, boarded a flight for London, then another for Dubai, and from there a small plane into Kuwait.

Having the ability to speak multiple languages with little effort, she easily communicated her needs to the local taxi drivers, who believed she was a local woman.

When she arrived in the small village, she purchased as much water as she could carry and rented two horses. From her tablet, she could see that Hayes was only a few miles away. She never once thought those few miles would feel endless.

When she could see the mountain range his comms device was pinging from, she moved carefully up the trail, the second horse following closely. Fortunately, the horses were used to the terrain. Victoria was not.

“Please. Please, please, just get me to Hayes,” she whispered to the horse. When the

signal rapidly pinged on her device, she realized she was right on top of him. But where?

“Hayes?” she whispered. Getting off the horse, she called for him again. “Hayes?”

Staring at the device, Victoria thought perhaps it had been damaged in some way. Then she heard soft groans and moans.

“Hayes?” she called louder.

Seeing the dark crevice in the rock, she moved slowly toward it, then stopped, realizing she had no weapon other than the knife that Trak had given her. She'd turned her own comms device off, worried that somehow the enemies of Hayes could track it.

“Hayes, are you in there?” she said again.

“Dreaming,” she heard.

“Hayes!” she called, running into the darkness. She immediately hit his legs, tripping and falling forward. “Ouch. Hayes? Hayes, is that you?”

“Vic...” Victoria shone her flashlight on the form lying on the floor of the cave and crawled toward him.

“God. Oh, God,” she muttered. “Hayes, I’m here. Hayes. Here, take some water.” She held the water to his lips, and he drank and drank, coughing because he was drinking too quickly.

“Victoria,” he whispered.

“Hayes, I came for you. It’s alright now. I got your message, and I came for you. You’re going to be alright.”

“Dreaming,” he said, shaking his head.

“No, you’re not dreaming. I would never leave you alone. Never,” she cried, touching his face. She looked at his hand and realized his fingers were turning a bluish purple.

“Damn. Hayes, you’re hurt bad.”

“Shoulder. Shoulder is out of place,” he mumbled. “Th-think I broke my wrist. Brave. You’re so fucking brave. You came, you came.” He repeated it over and over, tears in his eyes.

“I can fix the shoulder,” she said.

Remembering everything she’d ever read in medical books, she immediately lined up his underarm to her body. She’d have to pull with all her strength, but she should be able to pop the shoulder back in place.

“Count to three,” she said to him. As he began to count, she pulled, hearing the loud crack of the shoulder. Hayes bellowed in pain, and Victoria started to cry.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” she said, touching his face again.

“Okay. It’s okay,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s in place. God, you’re so fucking brave, Vic. I was wrong. I was wrong to push you.”

“Here. Take some more water,” she said, holding up another bottle of water. He drank the water more slowly this time, staring at Victoria as she looked at his wrist.

“Hayes, we need help.”

“You didn’t come with anyone?” he asked. “There’s no one with you?”

“N-no. I-I got your message. I didn’t stop. I-I don’t know why I did it. I should have. I know that now, but I just left.”

He laughed, pulling her toward him and moaning in agony from the movement. He covered her mouth with his own, kissing her over and over again.

“You did it, babe. You went out on your own. But you damn sure picked a shitty time to get brave on me.” She just smirked at him, shrugging.

“Maybe this was what I needed,” she said. “Let me try to call for help.” She stood and started to walk toward the opening of the cave.

“Oh, shit. What am I going to say?”

“There’s no way that’s her location,” said Mo. “She wouldn’t leave the fucking property, let alone the country. Something is wrong. Someone has taken her!”

“Shit, she was worried for good cause,” said Ham, staring at the others in the room.

They’d been scrambling for seven hours, ever since realizing she was no longer on the property.

At first, they thought she just needed time alone, so they didn’t pay much attention to it.

But when she couldn’t be found anywhere, they started tracking her comms and tracking devices, and initially, those weren’t showing up.

When it finally began pinging, they couldn’t believe her location.

“Hey, guys!” yelled AJ. “I have her!”

“Where? Where is she?” asked Mo.

“No, I have her on the line. You’re not going to fucking believe this.” He flipped the switch and spoke to Victoria. “Go ahead, Victoria. We’re all here.”

“Oh. Okay. Um, hi. I don’t have time to explain everything.

Hayes and his team were attacked. They’re all dead, but he’s alive.

We’re in a cave on a mountainside. Hayes says to tell you it’s near the old Camp 93 base location.

” There was dead silence in the room, wondering if it was some sort of hoax.

“Hello? Dad? Is anyone there?” she called.

“We’re here, Victoria,” said Eric. “Honey, how the fuck did you get there?”

“Well, a few flights, a taxi, a horse. What does it matter? I need help. He’s hurt bad, and I can’t carry him. I’ve fixed the dislocated shoulder, but his wrist is broken, and I don’t think his fingers are getting blood flow, they’re all purple, some turning darker.”

“Gather the gear and get the fucking Osprey ready,” said Luke. “Get medical here to see if they can help her with his wrist. Victoria? I’m so damn proud of you, honey, but I fucking wish you would have found someone to help.”

“Yeah. I’m thinking that would have been better,” she giggled nervously. Then she started to softly cry. “But I did it. I’m off the property. I’m okay, but we won’t be for

long. They're looking for him.”

“How do you know that?” asked Luke.

“Because I can see them off in the distance. There's nothing else here. I just know they're looking for him.”

“Don't fucking move,” said Cam. “Don't leave that damn cave. Does he still have his weapon?”

“Yes. He does, and I have the knife Trak gave me and a rifle that belonged to one of his teammates. It must have slid down the mountain. I have enough water for a day or so and some energy bars.”

“Good girl,” smiled Cam. “You're doing great. The team is on the way, Victoria. Stay right there.” She laughed nervously, holding back the tears.

“I've got nowhere to be.”

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Victoria went back inside the cave to see Hayes still sipping the water and eating one of the energy bars.

“They’re on their way,” she smiled, kneeling beside him. He shook his head.

“I’m so fucking proud of you. And fucking angry.” She frowned at him, tilting her head to the side. “Vic, babe, you’re a woman in the middle of a hostile country with a group of rebels ready to kill me the minute they find me.”

“I’m well aware of all of that. That’s what I think is most surprising to me.

I knew what the dangers were, and I never thought twice about it.

I only wanted to get to you, Hayes. I’m sorry.

I’m so sorry for everything I put you through.

” He shook his head, pulling her close with his good arm.

“No. I’m the one who should be sorry. I thought I could move on, Victoria, but I couldn’t. I tried. Every woman that approached me, I compared to you. I couldn’t do it. All I could picture, all I could think about, was you.”

“Oh, Hayes,” she said, pushing back tears. “This was all my fault. I mean, look at me. I’m in a hostile country, as you pointed out, and I’m not falling apart. At least not yet.”

The comms device pinged, and she opened the screen to see Cruz's very angry face.

"Can we do the yelling part later?" she smirked.

"We will do the yelling part later," he said. "Let me see his hand." For twenty minutes, she held the camera over his hand, touching, answering questions, Hayes telling him what he was feeling.

"What should I do?" asked Victoria.

"You have to set the bones, honey, or he might lose that hand." She swallowed, staring at Hayes.

"Tell me what to do."

Hayes couldn't believe how brave she was being. Not one sign of fear, shock, or the look that she might run from him. Nothing. She was just his beautiful, brilliant Victoria.

"Bite on this," she said, handing him a rolled-up t-shirt. "Cruz says this is going to hurt. I'm sorry."

Following his instructions, she did exactly as he suggested. With one final pull and a nauseating cracking sound, Hayes' hand began to turn fleshy pink once again.

"I think that worked," she said.

"It worked for now," said Cruz. "I'm on the flight with the others. We should be there in a few hours. Are you safe?"

"I don't think so. I can see them coming, or at least I think it's them," she said,



standing at the cave opening. She felt Hayes' hand on her shoulder and turned to smile up at him.

“Cruz? They're about ten miles out, and she's right. I think that's them. My team is gone. All of them.”

“Can you get to safety?” asked Luke.

“There are dozens of caves and crevices to hide. If we descended, as they ascended, we might be able to spiral down the mountain while they come up it. I'm not sure.”

“What if we used the resonance sound machines?” asked Victoria.

“Reso-what?” asked Luke.

“The original device created by Thomas making sound bounce off objects and appear to come from other locations. We've refined it and used it several times.

I have some tools with me, and I think I could place small speakers in a number of the cave openings or crevices in the rock.

I could make it sound like footsteps or even us talking.

They'd be poking around the mountain for days. ”

“And you're certain you could be clear of them?” asked Cam.

“I'm certain,” she nodded.

“You picked a damn fine time to be fucking brave and bold,” smirked Mo at his daughter. “I couldn't be more proud of you.”

“Thanks, Dad. I’m proud of me too. But we still have to get out of here safely. I sent the horses back down the mountain. I thought if they were found, they would think we either fell off, died, or were rescued.”

“That was smart. Alright, do as you suggested with the sound thingy,” he smiled. “Your mother and I love you, Victoria. Take care of yourself, and Hayes.”

“I will, Dad.”

“Sir,” said Hayes. “Is my father there?”

“I’m right here,” said Hoot with tears in his eyes.

“Good, I want you to hear this, Dad. Mo, I might not remember this later, so if I ask twice, I’m sorry. I’d like to ask for your permission to marry your daughter, sir.”

“You would, huh? And where would she live?” he asked.

“Anywhere she damn well wants to.” Victoria laughed, shaking her head at Hayes’ sudden transformation.

“What do you say, Victoria?” asked Mo.

“I say yes. And I want to live where my husband is. I know I can do this now,” she said.

“Well, then. I think we’ve got a wedding to plan,” said Luke. “After we rescue your asses.” Hayes looked off in the distance and nodded at the screen.

“Gotta go, sirs. Time to spiral down a mountain.”

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“I’m telling you he’s alive on that mountain,” said the man. “He was alive when I passed by him. He was out of it, but he was alive. When you have him, you’ll have the greatest mind the Navy has ever produced.”

“If you’re lying to me, I’ll have your head,” said the man standing in front of him.

“You know, Khalil, you’d think that you could show me a bit of gratitude. If this doesn’t work out, if we don’t find that fucking guy and kill him, I’m going to be hunted by every member of the U.S. military for the rest of my damn life!”

“Lieutenant Bonds, I don’t care if you’re hunted for the rest of your life. It matters not to me. What matters is that we find him, get what he has stored in his brain, and then kill him. If you had done your job better, he’d already be in my hands.”

“And if your men had done their part and taken him earlier, we wouldn’t be in this predicament. As far as the world knows, I’m already dead, but if he sees me, if by some strange circumstance anyone sees me, I’ll be running for the rest of my life.

“I’m handing over to you the most brilliant man I’ve ever known, and that’s saying a lot. If this drug you have is capable of forcing him to give up all the secrets in his head, you’ll be able to stop all the communications from the U.S. military and the Voodoo Guardians.”

“And if he cannot, I will kill you myself,” said the man walking away from him. Leland Bonds just stood there, watching as Khalil Aamani barked orders to his wayward soldiers.

Actually, it was an insult to call them soldiers. They were men who had nothing else to do. No homes, no farms, no jobs. Some had families and earned their little bit of money by killing and stealing for Khalil Aamani.

He knew that Hayes O'Neal was something special the moment he walked into BUDs. It had been almost five years earlier. Already a stellar sailor working in Navy intelligence, he had shown an amazing ability to solve any problem at any time, in record time.

That alone wouldn't have caused him to pay much attention to him. But when he received a few visitors one weekend, Bonds knew he was more than special.

"Lieutenant Bonds, nice to see you, sir," said Hayes.

"Hayes, great job on the trainings today. You're going to be an exceptional SEAL," he smiled.

"Thank you, sir. Oh, this is my father, Benjamin 'Hoot' O'Neal, and my uncles, Tanner Sung, Jak Robicheaux, and Gator Dougall." Bonds remembers his stomach bottoming out, overwhelmed with the need to vomit. "Sir?"

"Oh, sorry. I think I recognize the names of some of these men," he smirked, hoping to cover his shock.

"Maybe," nodded Jak. "Nice to meet you."

"Same," he said. "Well, I'll see you Monday, Hayes."

"Yes, sir."

The men had watched him walk away and then continued toward their dinner

location. Bonds hid behind the building, watching them, and knew Hayes O'Neal wasn't just any brilliant kid in intelligence.

They'd all been amazed at the ease with which he coped in SEAL training. It wasn't easy, but compared to the others, he seemed to struggle less.

Now, he knew why. He was one of them. One of the fucking VG. He'd have to watch him closely. And closely watch he did.

He made sure that the kid was placed within his grasp, watching as he fixed problems swiftly, easily with his superior mind. When his physical abilities seemed to match his intellectual acumen, even Bonds was amazed.

Someone would pay for that brain. But he knew that VG men were built differently. The kid would rather die than give up any secrets. Yet there were organizations, countries out there that could easily drug him and force him to tell the secrets he held within that big, beautiful brain.

If they could just get it all out, they'd be able to stop VG and definitely stop the U.S. and their superior behaviors.

"Bonds? Bonds, are you ready?" called Aamani.

"Yes. I'm ready. Are we headed up the mountain?" he asked.

"We are. We're going to search every cave, every opening, every crevice until we find your man. If we don't, you'll be the one to pay for the mistake."

"Stop threatening me, Aamani. I'm on your side. I want that damn kid as much as you do. You forget, if he's alive, sooner or later, he'll remember that I walked off that mountain. Then the whole world will come looking for me," he said with assuredness

and a cocky grin.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” said Aamani. “The whole world won’t care. Only a small group of men who will feel like the whole world.”

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“I’m sorry,” whispered Hayes breathlessly as they struggled down the mountain. The trail spiraled around the rocky terrain, allowing them to be on one side, while their pursuers were on the other.

“What are you sorry for? This isn’t your fault,” she said breathlessly. His injured arm was tight to his side, his good arm draped over her shoulder.

“I’m sorry that I’m weaker than I thought. I shouldn’t need this much help,” he said breathlessly. Victoria stared up at him, then looked down and across the plain to see the vehicles getting closer.

“Let’s rest a minute,” she said. “Hayes, you have nothing to be sorry for. Your team was blown up. That child, that poor, misled child, was sent to kill you all. That wasn’t your fault.”

“I know,” he said, nodding his head as he leaned against the boulder. “Frenkel, Darnell, Hatcher, and Bonds were ahead of me. I’d stopped to ensure that we got the comms off, and the chopper would come in. I saw that kid and knew we were all dead.

“I flew backwards and started rolling. I remember looking up and seeing blood and...” He stopped, frowning.

“It’s alright, you don’t have to say anything else. I understand,” she said, ensuring they were still alone on the mountain.

“No. No, I looked and saw the blood, but I saw someone walking toward me. Bonds.

Bonds was walking toward me.”

“There is no one else on this mountain,” she said. “I didn’t see a soul. Surely if someone were here, especially an American SEAL, I would have seen him.”

“I know what I saw, Victoria. He was walking toward me. The cave, the cave where you found me, were there any signs of others having been there?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, staring at him. “In fact, I only went inside because I heard you moaning. When I approached the opening, it looked like you had dragged yourself into the cave.”

“No,” he said, standing straighter. “No, that wouldn’t have been possible with just one arm and my injuries. Someone dragged me in there, and I think I know who.”

“But why would a teammate do this to you? What purpose would it have?”

“He kept questioning how I knew so much about the equipment we used. It’s all from G.R.I.P.

They’re older models, but I was able to update them to suit wherever we were.

At first, I thought he was curious, but then it became creepy.

He’s my superior, so I tried to answer without giving answers. ”

“I know what you mean,” she said, nodding.

“My rifle. Where’s my rifle?” he asked.

She handed him the rifle, and he dug inside the pack for the long-distance scope. As



he fitted it to the weapon, he used Victoria's shoulder to steady the weapon so that he could see who was coming toward them.

"What do you see?"

"Him. It's him with a man we do not want to meet. Khalil Aamani."

"I know that name," she frowned. "Doug and Ryan were talking about him before I left. They said that the Rangers had asked for something that would prevent Aamani from running the region."

"The comms disrupter," he frowned.

"Yes. How did you know that?" she asked.

"That's why Bonds was so curious about what I did and how I did it. We need to see how close the others are," he said. She pulled out the tablet and held it so they could both see.

"Everything okay?" asked the image of Luke when it connected.

"No. Everything is not okay. I just figured out that I was intentionally attacked and my team killed. By my Lieutenant."

"Fuck," muttered Luke.

"We're dealing with Lt. Leland Bonds and Khalil Aamani." There was silence on the other end of the line, then a few more faces filling the camera space.

"Did you just say Aamani?" asked Mo.

“Yes, sir. We need to get off this damn mountain fast. What’s your ETA?”

“Forty minutes, thirty-three if we punch it. Can you hide until then?” asked Eric.

“I think so, but if we go down, there will be nowhere for you to land. I think we have to go back up to our original landing zone. It will be flat, or at least somewhat flat, and we can be more visible for you. If they’re climbing the mountain, they won’t see us at the top.”

“How long would it take them to get to the top?” asked Cam.

“It took me a little more than six hours with horses,” said Victoria, “but I’m alone, carrying a very heavy pack. They might have horses that are better trained and lighter packs.”

“You’re still ahead of them,” said Luke. “Turn around and get to the top of that damn mountain. We’re going to deploy drones and see if we can provide some distraction and cover. Just ignore whatever you see or hear and keep going.”

“Yes, sir,” they said in unison. Luke smirked at their images.

“Before we pick the two of you up, is this bullshit between you settled?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Victoria definitively. “Wherever Hayes is will be where I am.” Mo and Hoot both laughed, shaking their heads. Mo stared at his adoptive daughter.

“Thank fuck!”

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Almost exactly thirty-four and a half minutes later, the Osprey hovered in stealth above the mountain. Bonds and Aamani were making their way up the mountain and heard nothing.

As they boarded the chopper, Victoria hugged her father, then Hoot and the others.

“I’m so damn proud of you,” said Mo, “but you’re grounded.” She laughed, shaking her head at him.

“Thank you, Victoria,” said Hoot. “You saved my son.”

“I saved my future husband,” she grinned. “I know that I messed up. I should have woken everyone or found you. I should have left a detailed message, something. I just wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“Weren’t you afraid, honey?” asked Eric.

“I-I was. I mean, I remember that I was, but the fear for Hayes overwhelmed me. I guess that’s what I needed,” she smiled.

“Yeah, well, that might be true, but let’s not do that again, okay?”

“Yes, sir,” she said, grinning at Eric. “Thank you all for coming for us. Are we headed home?”

“Not just yet,” said Luke. “We’re going to hang around for a few days to see what we can find out about Bonds and Khalil.”

We know that he's trying to cause upheaval in the area, but ruling the area, district, or even the country isn't in the cards for him.

There are too many men above him far more powerful. ”

“What do you know about Bonds?” asked Mo, staring at his soon-to-be son-in-law.

“He met Dad, Gator, Jak, and Tanner when they came to see me one weekend. I always knew I was going to enter SEAL training and hopefully be accepted, but I wanted to do it on my own. I spent a few years in intelligence, and they were impressed with my work.”

“What specific work?” asked Cam.

“Obviously, a lot with data and comms. Most of the equipment is ours, G.R.I.P.'s, so if it needed repairs or upgrades, it was child's play for me to fix it.”

“And he saw that?” asked Cam.

“I don't know if he saw it, necessarily, but he knew the outcome, which was that it was fixed. He was really weird the weekend he met Dad and the others, though. He even said some of the names sounded familiar.”

“I remember that,” said Jak. “He stared hard at your dad and me for sure.”

“Yeah, it wasn't just that. He always seemed to be watching me. He was wherever I was, and when I worked on things during missions, he always seemed to be over my shoulder. OUCH!” he yelled, looking down at Cruz.

“You wanna keep the hand or not?” he growled.

“I’d appreciate keeping the hand,” he smirked. Then he sobered, staring at Cruz.  
“Wait. Am I at risk of losing my hand?”

“No,” said Cruz, frustrated. “But it’s a fucking mess. Victoria did a great job of setting the bones, but you did some serious damage, and I’m not sure how much mobility you’re going to have with it going forward.”

“Maybe the pond will help,” he frowned.

“The pond should help, but I just want to get it to a good point right now.”

“Thank you, Cruz,” smiled Victoria.

“You did good, kiddo,” he said, smiling at her.

“Back to Bonds. Why was he on this mission? Shouldn’t he be in Coronado?” asked Luke.

“That’s what we all said. Our normal command, Gregor Dodds, came down with a stomach bug that had him in the hospital. Bonds happily stepped forward and took his place,” said Hayes.

“I bet he did,” growled Hoot.

“We have clearance to land and stay in Qatar,” said Autumn. She was flying with Chipper, who, in spite of his age, was still one of the best combat pilots on the team. Luke and Cam nodded at their team.

“Alright, we’ll find accommodations in Qatar, lay all this out, and then we find Bonds.”

## Page 14

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“We’ve been up and down this mountain three times,” growled Aamani. “He is not here, and we did not pass him. Do you care to explain this?”

“I left him in that fucking cave! You could see that he was in there, and there were medical supplies and water bottles.”

“And where did those magically appear from?” he snapped.

“I don’t know.”

Aamani’s men came back toward him, babbling in a language Bonds didn’t understand. He was getting nervous, shifting from one foot to another.

“A woman,” he said quietly. “My men tell me that it was a woman that rescued him. The footprint was very small, but not so small as to be a child.”

“Then maybe it was someone from the village,” said Bonds, feeling somewhat relieved.

“It’s possible, but they know the punishment if they go against me. Does VG have women operators?”

“Yes,” nodded Bonds. “Some. They’re every bit as good as the men. But I can’t imagine just one coming to rescue him. It doesn’t make sense.”

“No. No, it doesn’t,” said Aamani.

He rapidly fired off orders to his men, and Bonds watched as they ran toward the village. He knew what they would do. They would search every home, destroying people's possessions, then begin the beatings, torture, and eventually, killing anyone who won't tell them what they want to hear.

"Tell me what else you know of these men," said Aamani. "I've heard tales of their fathers but thought they were all dead."

"I think we all believed they were all dead," said Bonds. "Their grandfathers were legends in the Special Forces communities. SEALs, Rangers, MARSOC, Delta, Green Berets, and others were FBI, CIA, or other agency."

"They have been the darlings of the security community for decades. Presidents called on them to do all the dirty work that no one else would do."

"I am aware," frowned Aamani. "Men, such as I, have been trying to kill them for as long as we've been aware of them. Do they still work with your presidents?"

"Some. As you know, they've been known to take down a few presidents. That endears them to the next man who moves into the office, but not necessarily to those waiting to take the office. The fear is that they could be next on their list."

"What you need to be more concerned about is the foreign governments that enjoy their services. There are not many who would rid the world of them."

"Perhaps not. But I feel certain there are men and women of opportunity who would gladly rid themselves of their interference. How have they gained such advantage?"

"It's not just the muscle they have, the skilled warriors, it's the brain power. The brightest, smartest, most intelligent men and women in the world work for them."

“Where?”

“I’m sorry, what?” asked Bonds.

“Where? Where do these brainy people work?” asked Aamari. “They must live and work somewhere. Where is it that they live and work?”

“No one knows. Literally. Anyone I’ve ever talked to has no clue where their physical address is located.”

“So, these men, these women brainiac people live and work in a location no one has ever seen or been to, in spite of what they provide to your country?” asked Aamari.

“That about sums it up.”

“Your government is stupid. I would demand to inspect their facility and see what I’m paying for.” Bonds stared at him.

“That may be, Khalil, but if they were the only ones capable of providing what you desired, the only ones capable of fulfilling the needs to make you the most powerful nation on earth, you would give them great leeway.”

Khalil nodded, staring up the mountain, then back down again.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps I would kill them all and start over.”



## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

The United Arab Emirates, and especially Dubai, had progressed further than any country in history in such a short period of time. Or at least you would think so if you'd ever been there.

The truth of it was, Dubai was now the most populated city in the UAE. Located on the south-eastern coast of the Persian Gulf, there were more than four million people in Dubai, many, roughly ninety percent, are expatriates.

With a cosmopolitan view that rivaled New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles, Dubai now boasted one of the world's densest skylines, including the world's tallest building, the Burj Khalifa. With luxury homes, condos, and apartments, the city was a mecca for the young, rich, and willing to spend.

But it wasn't the only reason Dubai had literally exploded in the last twenty years.

Dubai was safe.

The city is heavily monitored with extensive CCTV around the city, laws that are strictly enforced, and has a low tolerance for a lack of adherence to the laws. It is considered one of the safest cities in all of Europe and Asia.

Where most Americans and Europeans got into trouble was with displays of public drunkenness and behavior, as well as drinking in public, which is forbidden.

For the VG team, they had no desire to become stuck in Dubai, but then again, not everyone knows a Sheik.

In fact, he was the son of the ruler of Dubai. The family had ruled the area since the early 1800s.

“Omar, it’s good of you to welcome us,” smiled Luke. The man walked toward him with open arms, laughing as he hugged the big man, slapping his back.

“Luke! We are happy to have you as our guests.”

“That was quite a back slap. Are you trying to kill me?” smirked Luke. The man laughed, shaking his head.

“Don’t attempt to flatter me. Nothing I do physically to your body will harm you. You are better than a cat. You have at least twenty lives that I’m aware of.”

“You look well, my friend.”

“So do you,” he smiled at Luke. “I see you brought many of my favorite people. Cam, Eric, Mo, Hoot, I love that name so much. Hello, gentlemen.” They all waved, smiling at the man.

“But wait. Who is this beauty in your midst?” he smiled.

“Sir, this is my daughter, Victoria,” said Mo. Victoria stepped forward, blushing as the man held her hand between both of his.

“You are very lovely. I have many sons. Are you single?” he asked.

“No, sir,” she smiled. “Although it would have been the greatest honor to be considered for one of your sons.” Omar laughed, shaking his head.

“She has been taught well. Beauty, grace, charm, and I suspect great intelligence in

those beautiful eyes. Come. Come, all of you. You will be guests in one of my private residences.”

“Omar, we appreciate that, but there are more than twenty of us here,” said Luke.

“I can count, Luke,” he smirked. “This is a palatial residence.”

Omar wasn’t wrong. The mega-mansion had thirteen bedrooms, twenty-two bathrooms, two swimming pools, and four kitchens. If anyone got lost, they’d have to use trackers to find them.

“This is stunning,” said Victoria, staring at the residence.

“Thank you, my child. Come, my staff will place your things in the rooms. Tell me why you are here.”

“Khalil Aamari,” said Hayes. He was sweating, pale, and definitely losing strength.

“Is he well? I can have a physician here immediately,” said Omar.

“A physician would be welcome,” said Cruz. “I tried to convince him to go home, but he refused until this is done. I’ve set his bones, but he’s struggling.”

Omar immediately ordered for the physicians to come, bringing portable equipment. He knew the men wouldn’t want to be in public at a hospital. Then he told the staff to prepare a meal for the team.

Within moments, tea, flavored waters, sodas, coffee, sandwiches, and sweets were laid out before them. Trays of fruits, dates, almonds, and other things were arranged in front of them, and the men dug in.

“Khalil Aamari. What has he done?” frowned Omar.

“He killed my entire team and attempted to kidnap me,” said Hayes. Omar stared at the young man, understanding all of the undertones not spoken.

“He is creating quite a problem in the region. He’s determined to rule all of Kuwait and beyond. He would have to kill many leaders above him to do that, but he thinks he has something that others need.”

“Maybe it was you,” said Hoot, staring at his son.

“Could be,” nodded Hayes.

“Another brilliant warrior?” asked Omar. Luke gave one quick nod, and Omar knew. “We have a few of those ourselves, and they are a treasure to our country. Having men who are fearless and brilliant is especially a blessing. I can see that you have women with those qualities as well.”

“Me?” asked Victoria with surprise. “No, sir. I’m not a warrior at all. Up until all of this, I was an absolute coward, not wanting to leave my home out of fear.” Omar smiled at her, touching her cheek with a fatherly gesture.

“My dear, fear is a sign of courage. Never, ever trust a man who is not afraid of something. He’s a liar.”

“I’ll try to remember that,” she smiled. “Sir? Is there somewhere I can get some clean clothing? I left in a bit of a hurry and didn’t get what I needed. I wasn’t myself.”

The men all laughed at her, shaking their heads.

“I could use some clothes as well,” said Hayes.

“I will have my guards take her to our famous shopping center,” smiled Omar.

“Will she be safe?” asked Hayes.

“Hayes, son, I would trust his guards with anyone in our family. Anyone,” said Luke. Hayes nodded.

“My apologies. I meant no offense, sir.”

“None taken. A beauty such as this should be protected. I will send her with my men, and two of yours can accompany her to be sure she gets what she needs. The mall has all of the famous brands, designers, and much more. She’ll come back an entirely new woman with a wardrobe that will make others envious. ”

“My first in-person shopping experience, and I’m so excited I might come back with more than necessary,” she laughed. Luke looked at the others as she walked off with the guards, Jak, and Gator.

“No doubt in my mind, she’s going to burn through a credit card.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

“This is probably the last thing you guys wanted to be doing. Shopping,” smirked Victoria. Jak and Gator laughed at her, while the two bodyguards of the sheikh just nodded.

“I don’t think any of us minds, Victoria. Honestly, it’s nice to see you off the property and out of the house, although this was definitely not what I thought of for you,” laughed Gator.

“Me either,” she smiled. “Kind of strange that it just took getting that message from Hayes to get to me. Maybe he should have tried that sooner.”

“No,” said Jak, looking around the mall. “Hayes is too good of a man to ever do anything like that to you. Well, you’ve got plenty of choices in stores. Where do you want to go?”

Victoria did a little circle, staring at the dozens and dozens of high-end retail shops. Prada, Gucci, Chanel, Hermès, Louis Vuitton, and much more.

“Isn’t there a Target or Walmart near here?” she said, crinkling her nose. Gator and Jak chuckled, then looked at the local bodyguards.

“Miss, the sheikh has ordered the shops to give you whatever you need. This is his treat. I would suggest you buy everything you like,” he smiled.

“Oh, no. No, I can’t do that,” she said, shaking her head. “I only need a few pairs of jeans, some comfortable shoes, and undergarments.”

“Wait one moment,” said one of the guards. He turned and walked into the shop for Chanel, and the woman smiled, nodding at Victoria and waving her over. She stepped inside, and the woman simply pointed to a chair.

“Please have a seat. We will have all the things brought to you. I’m guessing you are a size four.”

“Yes. You’re very good,” said Victoria.

“Thank you, madam. I will get you some juice.” She returned with a tray of juice and tea for the men, along with a small plate of fruit, nuts, and other snacks. Thirty minutes later, six large bags were placed in front of her.

“What is this?” asked Victoria.

“Everything you need. If we have missed anything, please just call, and we will have it delivered to you.” The bodyguards picked up the items and began walking out.

“Wait! How do I know that it fits or I like it?” asked Victoria. The bodyguards turned, frowning at her.

“Madam, I have never known a woman who does not like Chanel, Dior, or any other designer featured here. Trust Malai. She is the best at what she does and has never misjudged anyone’s size.”

“Don’t argue, honey,” said Jak. “You’ve got yourself some clothing, and you’ll be just fine.”

As it turned out, she had more than clothing. There were handbags, watches, bracelets, earrings, dresses, six pairs of shoes, including two pairs of comfortable shoes.

“Where on earth will I ever wear any of this?” she asked.

“I’d say we’ll be doing a lot more dinners out,” smirked Hayes, walking into the room. His hand was bound in enough layers of gauze to look like a cast. He looked tired and weak.

“Hey, are you alright?” she asked, walking toward him.

“He’s done considerable damage to that hand,” said Cruz. “The surgeon sent by the sheikh was amazing, but it’s highly likely that he’s not going to have full feeling in that hand again. I’m not sure what the Navy is going to say.”

“No. No, we can’t have gone through all this only for them to make you leave,” she said with genuine sorrow.

“We’ll worry about that later,” he said, kissing her. He leaned on her as she walked with him to the sofa. He stared at the haul and just shook his head.

“What do we do now?” asked Victoria.

“We have to find out what Bonds wants and what Aamani is looking for, other than Hayes.”

“Have you ever encountered him before?” asked Victoria. “Maybe on another mission, did you see him or stop something he was attempting to do?”

“No. Never. I knew of him, of course. Many in the spec ops community know who he is. But I’ve never met him.”

“But Bonds knew him,” said the young woman standing and pacing around the room. “Bonds, who watched you manhandle communications devices, data, complex



mathematical problems, and much more. Bonds knew your abilities.”

“What are you saying?” asked Luke.

“I’m saying that maybe what Aamani wants is Hayes. His mind and what it can do for him. With him, he’d have the secrets to every weapon, device, or vehicle created by G.R.I.P. Even if you didn’t want to, under duress, torture, or drugs, you would give up the secrets.”

“Shit,” muttered Hayes. “Has anyone ever thought to do this before? Has anyone attempted to take any of us before?”

“I feel like that’s a yes, but I can’t put my finger on who it was,” said Cam.

“But you damn sure bring up a good point. Sooner or later, the world will figure out who our boys are, our sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons, and use them for their own evil. Ryan. Ryan was one they tried to use for secrets.”

“How did we forget that?” asked Luke.

“I think there are a lot of things we’d like to forget, but we can’t,” smirked Gator. “We have to find Bonds and Aamani. Somehow draw them out and stop them. With Hayes’ testimony, Bonds will be on the Navy’s most-wanted list, especially after all those men were killed.”

“Fuck. He killed my team. Our team. He never once gave a second thought to that. He killed them all,” said Hayes in a fog of painkillers.

“We need to get him to bed,” said Cruz. “Let’s go, big boy. Time for you to rest.”

Cruz jerked his head toward Gator and Jak for some help, and the two big men lifted

him, carrying him fireman style up the steps to his room.

“What do I do?” asked Victoria. The resounding response echoed throughout the house.

“Nothing!”

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

“Listen, I didn’t say I would go out into the streets to interrogate people. All I was saying is that I can help.”

“How?” asked Eric. “As you pointed out, you cannot go out into the streets.”

“I don’t know. I mean – wait,” she said, standing and pacing back and forth.

“Their comms equipment. Bonds would have been wearing the same equipment. It’s made by G.R.I.P.

, I have the last coordinates for Hayes, and if I have that, I can track backwards for Bonds and find out where he is or at least where he dumped the equipment. ”

“Awesome,” said Luke. “What do you need?”

Victoria pulled out all the electronic equipment she had with her, then made a list of the things she would need to create the piece required to find Bonds. Within an hour, the guards returned with more equipment than she could possibly use.

“Oh, wow,” she laughed. “You guys really believe in overkill. Thanks. This will work.”

“You’re welcome. May I watch?” asked one of the men. “I have an interest in communication devices and a degree in electrical engineering.” Victoria looked over her shoulder at Cam, and he nodded.

“Yes.Of course.”

After hours of working on the device, she pushed it back and stretched her neck back and forth, hearing the cracks. Then she suddenly stood and stared at the room of men talking softly.

“Shit.”

“Shit? Shit what? What do you need?” asked Cam.

“I don’t need anything. But if he can’t get to Hayes, he’ll try for someone else. Wyatt. Wyatt O’Neal is flying Raptors off the deck of a carrier parked in the Gulf.”

“But he’s just a pilot,” said Jak.

“No one in our family is ‘just’ anything,” said Victoria with a small smile. “Wyatt has a degree in aeronautical engineering with a minor in weapons systems.”

“Shit,” muttered Luke. “We need to get to him.”

“On it,” said Gator.

He nodded to Jak for him to follow, and the two men left the safety of the house with one of the local guards. They would need to take a helicopter to the aircraft carrier, get permission to land, and then find a way to convince them to let Wyatt leave with them.

As the son of HG and Maggie O’Neal, he was another fortunate child taken beneath the wings of Belle Fleur. Wyatt was actually Maggie’s nephew. His mother died when he was just four years old, and in a wild turn of events, Maggie thought HG was his father.

He was six-two, two hundred pounds, lean and extremely good-looking with his

biological father's caramel skin and his mother's blue eyes. He'd grown up attending school at Belle Fleur, training with the men every day.

After circling the carrier for twenty minutes, they were finally given permission to land. Wyatt stared at Gator and Jak, shaking his head.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked.

"It's a long story, but we need to speak to the captain of the ship and you in private."

"I can't leave my duty station. Are you nuts?" said Wyatt.

Now thirty-two years old, Wyatt had been flying for the Navy for almost a decade. He'd flown multiple combat and rescue missions and was one of their favorites in testing new aircraft. Not only was he an experienced, superior pilot, his head was full of secrets for the Navy, as well as G.R.I.P.

"O'Neal," said his commander, "I think these men have a good point. Someone may try to take you as well or create issues here. I think if I notify command that we believe Bonds is alive, they just might let all of this fly until he shows himself."

"I'm on a fucking U.S. carrier. Sir," he said, sobering. "No one will get to me on this ship."

"And what happens if you're called to fly out?"

" asked Gator. "You get in that jet and leave this carrier, you're an open target.

And you're not stupid, Wy. You know as well as I do that Bonds could maneuver his way onto this ship and get you off.

There are five thousand men and women on this carrier.

One man missing might not be seen for days. ”

“I see you have a lot of faith in my flying abilities,” frowned Wyatt. “I do know what the hell I’m doing, you know.”

“Wyatt, we have no doubt you know what the hell you’re doing, but if they get to you, they will find a way to dig out every fucking secret you have. Do you hear me?” growled Jak.

Wyatt knew enough to not push the big man too far. He was big, strong, and fearless, and wouldn’t hesitate to knock his ass out and toss him over his shoulder.

“So, I’m just supposed to leave my team, my ship, and my plane and walk away for a few days?” he asked, staring at the faces.

“Let’s call it mandatory leave,” said the commander. “We’re not short of pilots right now, but if I should become short, you’ll have to return. I’m sorry, gentlemen, but he is a naval aviator and one of the best on this ship.”

“We understand, sir, but our first priority is to keep his flying ass alive. Sir,” smirked Gator.

“You guys are something else. Tell your old men I said hello,” he grinned.

Gator and Jak tilted their heads, wondering if he actually knew their fathers.

“Did you think I wouldn’t know Keith Robicheaux and Cam Dougall?

I wasn’t born yesterday, boys, and this isn’t the first time one of you assholes has

boarded my ship.

Go. Take O'Neal with you, but settle this shit fast. I need him back. ”

“Thank you, sir,” said Gator. “Let’s go, Wy.”

“Sometimes, I hate you guys.” Jak laughed, gripping the younger man’s shoulders.

“We know, and surprisingly, we’re okay with that.”

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

“Wyatt!” cried Victoria, running toward the big man for a hug.

“Hey, Sprite. Fancy seeing you somewhere other than Belle Fleur,” he grinned.

“I know, right?” she laughed. “It’s a long story.”

“Don’t worry, these two jerks filled me in on the way here. Look, you’re a genius, Victoria, and I trust you, but do you really believe that they’d come for me?” he asked.

“I think you’re accessible and an easy target. You also know more than just about anyone, other than Doug, Ryan, and Paige, about our planes, choppers, and comms equipment.”

“I don’t even rank with you, Sprite,” he smiled.

“You wanna stop smiling at my woman?” said Hayes, looking groggy and weak.

“Holy shit. What happened to you?” grinned Wyatt.

“Long story, but it’s why you’re here, I’m sure. Lieutenant Bonds fucking killed my team and was after me. He planned to put a bow around my neck and hand me over to Aamani.”

“No shit,” muttered Wyatt. “Okay, now this is getting interesting.”

Hayes kissed Victoria, looking at the equipment on the table.



“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m going to trace Bonds comms equipment. They were older versions of the G.R.I.P. 575Ci. I can track it and see if he still has it or find where he dumped it.”

“My beautiful genius,” smirked Hayes. “I should have thought of that.”

Victoria just laughed, tapping the keys a hundred miles an hour, and then waiting for the data to roll through. Locations in latitude and longitude appeared in rows, showing the history of the equipment.

“He’s been a busy boy,” whispered Victoria. “Looks like he did a lot of nighttime walks while you guys were doing your work. See here. 0113, 0314, 0266. All in the middle of the night, he walked approximately one mile from where your teammates’ equipment was.”

“Wait, you can see where the entire team is?” asked Luke.

“Of course. We connect the equipment of a team for that very reason. No man gets lost. If someone is reported missing, we can see who it might be and where they are, or at least where the equipment is.

“For Bonds, his team was always located about a mile from where he was wandering every night. He’d be gone, it looks like, twenty to twenty-five minutes and then return.”

“He took watch at those hours,” said Hayes. “That bastard left us vulnerable so that he could meet with Aamani.”

“It looks that way. Okay, I see his equipment at your last location, then it moved down the mountain, then here in the village at the bottom of the hill. That’s where it’s

still located.”

“Do we send men in?” asked Wyatt.

“No. It could be a trap. We use drones to see if we can spot him or Aamani. I’ll get AJ and Hiro to launch the drones that are closest,” said Victoria.

“No need, ma’am,” said the bodyguard. “We have drones in the area now.”

“Do we want to know why?” asked Cam. He sobered as his boss, the sheikh, walked in.

“You do not want to know why. Just know that we are interested in what Aamani is doing as well.” He looked at the bodyguard and nodded. “Launch the drones.”

The bodyguard nodded, looking down at the laptop in front of Victoria.

He raised his brows, asking for silent permission.

She nodded, standing. Watching his every move, she saw that he did exactly as he was supposed to.

He logged into their own drone site and launched four drones. All purchased from G.R.I.P.

“Your equipment is very good,” he said, standing. “When this is over, I should like to ask some questions about how we could improve it for our own uses.”

“Of course,” nodded Victoria.

Victoria, Hayes, and the others all watched the screen as the drones flew with

incredible speed toward the village. Hovering high enough to not be heard or seen, they scanned the village area.

“I’m not seeing anything yet,” said Victoria. The drones moved slowly over the space, and then she saw something. “Wait! There. That man is the one we saw with Bonds.”

“That’s Aamani,” said Luke. “What the fuck is he doing?”

“I believe he’s killing villagers.”

“Why? Why would he do that?” asked Victoria, staring at the brutal images showing on the screen.

“He thinks they helped me get away,” frowned Hayes. “He’s killing those innocent villagers because he thinks they helped me. There’s nothing we can do.”

“We have to try and help them,” said Victoria.

“Honey, we can’t,” said Mo. “It would expose us and Hayes. I think we need to find another way to get to Bonds and Aamani.”

“You could use me as bait,” said Wyatt. They all turned to stare at him. “I mean if you think I was his second choice to Hayes. You could use me.”

“Actually,” said Hayes. “We could offer him a two-for-one special.”

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Bonds was beginning to panic. There was no sign of O'Neal, and no one in the village confessed to seeing him or helping him. If he didn't produce him soon, things would go downhill fast for him.

"My patience is wearing thin," said Aamani. "You promised me a genius that could make all my dreams come true. Where is this genius?"

He wiped the blood from his hands, then from the knife he'd used on a few local villagers. When he was done, he tossed it at the wall near Bonds' head, where it stuck, bobbing up and down.

"You kill me, you have nothing!" yelled Bonds.

"You're already dead, lieutenant. Remember? You and your entire team died on that mountain." Bonds was beginning to panic, then it hit him. He was thought to be dead.

"Wait. I'm not dead. I could contact command, let them know that I survived, but I believe O'Neal was the traitor."

"No. If they believe he was a traitor, they will want him and will want to try him for his crimes. They need to believe he's dead."

"Alright, then I'll make the case for a second."

"A second?" asked Aamani.

"Yes. He has a fellow teammate, someone from the same family tree, shall we say? A

pilot with amazing abilities and a mind nearly as good as O'Neal's."

"And who is this flying genius?" asked Aamani.

"Wyatt O'Neal."

"A brother?" he asked.

"Cousin, I believe. I think he's stationed on the carrier sitting out there in the Gulf.

If I contact command and ask for pickup to get to the carrier, I may be able to convince them that I need his assistance.

If you know where he's going to be, you shoot the jet down, he bails, and you've got yourself your man.

"Bonds was proud of himself, smiling at the other man.

Aamani stood, pacing back and forth. He was rubbing the scruffy beard that he believed made him appear more authoritative. To Bonds, it made him appear dirty and unkempt.

"He's a genius?" he asked.

"His IQ is well above the norm. He flies every aircraft imaginable and understands the navigation, satellite, communication, and stealth abilities created by G.R.I.P."

Aamani nodded, grinning at Bonds.

"Call your ship. I need that man."

Hayes had been sleeping on and off all day, the pain from the resetting of the bones and the surgery to hopefully regain feeling was more than he expected.

Cruz was managing his pain the best he could, but it would be a long road to recovery for Hayes.

One that he might not fully heal from, even with the pond.

“Hey, I’ve got command from the carrier on the phone,” said Wyatt, walking into the room. He put the man on speaker for everyone to hear. “The entire team is here, sir.”

“You nailed it. Bonds suddenly appeared alive but desperate for pickup and is requesting a pilot to go in and bomb the area where he is certain Aamani is currently residing. I’ll give it to him. The guy is ballsy. He went so far as to request O’Neal. Wyatt O’Neal,” he smirked.

“You know that he’d shoot me out of the sky,” said Wyatt. “We can’t let him do that to a multi-million-dollar aircraft.”

‘I’m aware,’ growled his commander.

“Sorry, sir.”

“It’s fine. Listen, if you’re asking my opinion, and you’re not.

But since you have two active-duty Navy personnel in your hands that technically belong on my ship, I’m going to give you my opinion.

We get him onboard the carrier, hear his plan, the coordinates, all of it, and make it look as though we’re sending someone out.

“While the jet leaves the carrier, headed to the alleged bomb site, you guys get your asses in there and kill Aamani. I don’t need him alive. I need him dead. That guy has been a pain in my ass for years.”

“It just might work,” said Luke. “We need to get our team back on the carrier to confront Bonds.”

“I let you on once, I can do it again,” smirked the man.

“I’ll reach back out to Bonds, find out where he’s located, and get him on board the ship.

I have no doubt once he’s here, he’s going to insist he be in on the attack of Aamani, which then, of course, would get him off the ship and able to disappear again. ”

“We won’t let that happen. Once we have our dummy jet launched from the carrier, we’ll let him signal Aamani, and then we approach him.”

“I can’t wait to see that,” smirked the commander.

“You may want to step out after we walk in, sir,” said Cam. “Plausible deniability and all that bullshit.”

“Son, this is my ship. If it happens here, I’m going to witness it, and I don’t give a damn about anything else.”

“Yes, sir,” nodded Luke. “We’ll catch the same bird to the carrier and see you soon.”

“Roger that.”

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The bodyguards stayed back to make sure that Victoria was safe, but the rest of the team, including an insistent Hayes, arrived at the carrier and were whisked behind closed doors.

“We’ve sent a chopper to pick up Bonds. He found himself being aided in a small village. We all know it’s a bunch of bullshit because it was the same village that Aamani went into and attacked people for suspicion of helping O’Neal,” frowned the commander.

“This guy definitely has balls,” frowned Eric. “I do believe I’ll cut them off.”

“Maybe not that drastic on the ship,” smirked the man.

Eric only shrugged as Wyatt and Gator helped Hayes to take a seat, his hand secured to his body, crossed over his chest as if he were saying the Pledge of Allegiance.

“I assume you guys have a plan?” he asked. Eric nodded.

“Yep. We got a good one.”

Bonds watched as the chopper landed near the small village. Aamani did him a favor, throwing a few well-placed punches to make it look as though he’d literally been through hell.

“Lieutenant Bonds?” asked the young medic running from the chopper toward the man.



“That’s me,” he said through pain. “At least, I used to be. I’m so damn glad to see you. Did the commander get my message?”

“Yes, sir. He said to tell you they’d have a pilot ready for you when you arrived.”

“Perfect,” he nodded.

The entire flight, Bonds had to try and hide his happiness. He was about to get two VG men for the price of one. Sooner or later, he or Aamani would find Hayes. With any luck, they’d have Wyatt and Hayes.

Two O’Neal’s for the price of one.

He actually dozed off on the chopper as they sped toward the carrier. It was always humbling to be looking down on the massive floating city from above, as the chopper circled, waiting for final clearance.

When it landed, two more medics rushed out, helping him as if he were completely disabled. Bonds hid his smile. He’d play the beaten, bruised hero if it got him what he wanted.

Inside the sick bay, medics took his vitals, checked his wounds, and then allowed the doctor to give a final overview.

“It’s strange, lieutenant,” said the doctor. “Your wounds seem to be more in line with a bar fight, not an explosion.”

“Really?” said Bonds, swallowing. “Well, it’s my first time being blown off a mountain, so I wouldn’t know.”

The doctor played his role to an Oscar-worthy performance. When he was done, he

escorted Bonds to the commander's quarters.

"Lieutenant Bonds," said the commander, standing and waving toward a chair.

"You're looking well considering what you've endured."

"Thank you, sir," he said, still standing.

"Sit. You look like you could use a seat," he smirked. "Tell me why you want to go in and bomb this area where you believe Aamani is located."

"He did this, sir. He killed my team. My entire team," he said dramatically. "I want him to pay for what he's done."

"We don't send multi-million-dollar aircraft and bombs because we want someone to pay for what they've done," frowned the man.

"I didn't mean it that way, sir. I just meant that I know he's in the area, and we could send in the best pilot we have and be done with this issue."

"I have a lot of great pilots," said the commander.

"I know you do, sir. I'm familiar with a few of them. I believe you have Captain Wyatt O'Neal on board. I had his cousin on my team. I'm sure he'd like a little payoff."

"Well, the O'Neal's are known for wanting to pay people back," he smirked. "Let me meet with him and see what we can come up with. Until then, why don't you get some rest?"

"Yes, sir," he said, moaning as he stood.

As the commander opened the door, a medic stood waiting to walk Bonds to his bunk space. Bonds stared at the man, eyeing him for a moment.

“Right this way, sir,” he said.

“Do I know you?” he asked.

“No, sir,” said Mo. “Right this way.”

Mo left Bonds in the small guest quarters, gently closing the door and hoping to give him time to hang himself.

The room was loaded with G.R.I.P. equipment, allowing for them to hear every conversation the man might have, including the one he was most assuredly going to have with his satellite phone.

They’d immediately noted that he hid the phone, hoping to not allow anyone access to the Aamani phone.

“Where are you?” asked Aamani.

“I’m on the ship. They fell for it hook, line, and sinker.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying. Will I get the pilot?” asked Aamani.

“Yes. I’ll let you know when we have the flight plan, and you can time the shooting precisely. Just remember, you need him alive. If you shoot it down and he doesn’t eject, we’ve just got a dead pilot and a crashed plane.”

“Do not tell me what I need to do,” said Aamani. “I’m well aware of what I need to do to make this happen. I must have this man’s knowledge in order to fulfill my

destiny.”

“Right,” nodded Bonds. “Fulfill your destiny, and then you’re going to give me my millions, and we part ways. If you fuck me over, Aamani, I’ll bring down the entire United States Navy on you.”

“You bore me, Bonds. Can you see me shaking? Get me my pilot.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

“You wanted to see me, sir?” said Wyatt, stepping into the commander’s office. Bonds was sitting in one of the leather chairs, looking beaten and forlorn.

“Have a seat, captain. Captain O’Neal, Lieutenant Bonds.” The two men shook hands, and then Wyatt took his seat. The commander proceeded to run through what Bonds had endured and what his plan was to kill Aamani.

“Bastard deserves to die, sirs,” said Wyatt. “I’m happy to help where I can. Do we have coordinates of where he’s located, and are we certain he’s there?”

“He’s there,” said Bonds.

“Am I supposed to just trust that, sir?” questioned Wyatt.

“No. No, of course not,” said Bonds. “I’m certain that I can obtain aerial photos of his location. Give me some time, and I can ensure his location.”

Bonds somehow obtained satellite photos showing Aamani and his men in the village. Of course, it was most likely bogus, but that didn’t matter. He now had dug such a hole for himself, he’d never see the light of day again.

“I’d like to tag along on this flight,” said Bonds.

“I’m sorry, we can’t allow that,” said the commander. Bonds nodded, pretending to be disappointed.

“Then I would simply ask that you fly me to Kuwait so that I can be close to the

action.” The commander stared at him and nodded.

“Excuse me for a moment. I need to make sure everything is ready, and then we can get you on another chopper and into Kuwait.”

When the commander left, Bonds locked the door and then dialed the number one more time.

“It’s done. He’ll be in the air within the hour.” Bonds could hear noise in the background, something that sounded like gunfire, but he couldn’t be sure. With Aamani, it could have been anything.

“Wonderful. Will I have just one pilot or two?”

“Just one, but I’ll meet you in Kuwait,” said Bonds. “Have my money, and we’ll be done with one another.”

“Of course, my friend. Of course,” chuckled Aamani.

The background noise was gone now, only silence behind Aamani’s voice. Whatever the maniac was up to didn’t matter to Bonds. He just wanted his money.

Bonds unlocked the commander’s door and took his seat once again. When the door opened, he turned, smiling.

“Are we ready?”

“We thought you’d like to see the pilot take off,” said the commander. Bonds nodded, smiling.

“Yes. Yes, that would be great,” he said with a little too much excitement.

Standing on the bridge, he watched as the man walked toward the jet, his helmet secured. The side of the helmet listed his name quite clearly, and Bonds could feel his excitement.

It was a spectacular sight watching a jet take off from a carrier. It seemed an impossible task, and yet they did it daily, multiple times per day. When the jet was gone, he pressed three keys on his satellite phone, telling Aamani the jet was on its way.

“Well, I can get to Kuwait now,” said Bonds.

“I don’t think so,” said the commander. All the men on the bridge, once facing toward the deck, now turned, staring down at Bonds. One face he instantly recognized.

“H-Hayes,” he whispered.

“Surprise!” said Hayes, raising one hand. “Bet you thought I was dead.”

“I-I’m so happy to see you’re alive,” he said with an anxious expression.

“Fuck off, Bonds.”

“Sir!” said Bonds, staring at the commander. The older man just raised his brows and then looked at the others.

“I believe these gentlemen have something they’d like to speak with you about,” said the commander.

Bonds thought about running, but it was too late. He looked at the room full of men and realized that one of them was, in fact, Wyatt O’Neal.

“I-I thought,” he started.

“Oh, you thought I was going to be shot out of the sky? No fucking way, asshole. But you’re going to have to explain to Aamani why there wasn’t a pilot or plane over his airspace.”

“He’s going to get what he wants either way,” said Bonds.

“You fucking killed my entire team,” said Hayes. “Our entire team. For him? For that maniac?”

“Don’t be obtuse,” frowned Bonds. “I didn’t do it for him. I did it for money. Money is the key to everything. Didn’t you know that?”

Luke hit him so hard, he fell backwards, landing on the hard steel plates of the floor. A loud thud echoed in the room, and Bonds shook his head, then sat up, slowly gaining his bearings.

“Where is he?” asked Hayes.

“I don’t know,” said Bonds. “That’s the truth. He was going to have a team shoot the plane out of the sky, forcing the pilot to bail. He’d capture the pilot and get what he wants.”

“And what is it that he wants?” asked Hayes.

“Originally, you. He wants all the intel on the G.R.I.P. comms, data, and flight systems. He was also going to use your mind for other more interesting things,” he smirked.

This time Wyatt slammed a fist into his gut. Bonds doubled over, spitting on the



deck, blood coming from his mouth.

“You’re going to call him and get a location,” said Hayes.

A young sailor ran into the room, whispering to the commander. He stared at him and nodded.

“Gentlemen, it seems we have a call from Khalil Aamani,” said the commander. They all stared at one another as the young sailor piped in the call for all to hear.

“Khalil Aamani, to what do I owe the pleasure?” said the commander.

“We will dispense with the polite exchanges. I knew that Bonds overestimated his worth and value. I’m letting you know that it no longer matters. I will have what I want in another way.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Mo.

“Voodoo Guardians and your predecessors have many brilliant minds. Too many to count. It’s unfair really. Terribly unfair,” said Aamani. Luke stared at the others, feeling his phone vibrating nonstop in his pocket. Finally, he looked down at the screen.

“No,” he whispered.

“Yes,” laughed Aamani. “Say hello, darling.”

“Da-daddy.”

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

“Dear God,” whispered Hayes. He nearly fell over and then looked toward Bonds, who knew that his life was over. “Where is he? I won’t ask you twice.”

“I-I don’t know. I swear to God, I don’t know. He obviously was planning on screwing me over,” said Bonds.

“Then you’re of no use to us,” said Eric. He gripped the man by the back of the neck, throwing him down the steel deck stairs, waiting for him to hit bottom. It continued until he was at the fantail, at which point, he tossed Bonds overboard.

“Lost at sea seems appropriate,” said Hex, nodding at his friend.

When they were all seated in the war room, Sheikh Omar’s face appeared on the screen.

“I’m so sorry, my friends. My bodyguards were shot, three are dead, only one lived to tell me what happened. He’s in surgery now, but we are not sure if he will live.”

“How did Aamani know where to find her?” asked Hayes.

“We don’t know. If it was someone local, they will pay with their life,” said Omar. “I have my team of men gathering intel to help find her location. People in the area saw a caravan of identical vehicles leave, going in multiple directions, no doubt to confuse the traffic cameras.”

“He’s taken her back to Iraq,” said Hayes. “That’s where he operates, that’s where he’ll want her.”

“We will get her back,” said Omar. “I will use everything within my power to get the girl home safely.”

“We’re headed your way,” said Luke. “And Omar? I’m sorry about your men.”

“Me too, my friend.”

“God,” whispered Hayes, tears filling his eyes. “All her fears, her worst nightmares, have just come to life. She was so fucking brave coming to rescue me, and for what? So that she could be taken!”

“Stop!” said Mo. “Don’t do this. My daughter needs you right now, Hayes. You’re going to help us if you can, and we’re going to figure this shit out. She’ll survive.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because she has to. There is no other choice.”

With the promise of support from the Navy, Omar, and the authorities in Dubai, Luke had his private army ready to roll. The more difficult part would be controlling Hayes and Mo.

“I think I’d be better served on the ship,” said Wyatt. “If they send air power, you can count on it being me.”

“Thank you, Wyatt,” said Mo. He hugged the younger man, each person doing the same. Wyatt hugged Hayes, slapping his back, mindful of his damaged hand.

“We’ll find her, Hayes. I swear to God, we’ll find her. We’ve got her trackers working, right?”

“The team back home is attempting to track her now,” said Cam. “We believe she might be underground because the signal is spotty. But we’ll find her.”

With Bonds dead, the team headed back to the palace of Sheikh Omar. They found him seated at the dining room table with a dozen military men, police officers, and more bodyguards. He stood, ready for any punishment coming his way.

“I did not guard her the way you asked. I should have put more men on her,” he said.

“It’s not your fault, sir,” said Hayes, trying to make himself believe it. “We all thought she was safe, that it was me and Wyatt he was after. I’m not even sure how he found out about her.”

“Emri, the bodyguard who underwent surgery, he told the medical team that he believed he found her because she was able to track Bonds. He was somehow about to reroute her tracking back here. Had you all been here, he might have taken everyone.”

“No, he would have been dead,” said Luke. “Lessons learned. We will not leave anyone behind again, but we’re damn sure going after our girl.”

“Luke, you read?” asked AJ.

“Roger that. Loud and clear.” The others all nodded, indicating they could hear AJ on comms as well.

“We’ve tracked her to Az Zubayr.”

“But that’s a residential, city area,” said Hayes, frowning at them.

“It is, but it has an ancient marketplace that we’ve tried to tell the U.S. military to

check out for years. We think there are underground tunnels beneath the city, leading out into the desert and the mountains, possibly even to the Euphrates.”

“Shit,” muttered Hayes, shaking his head. “She must be so fucking scared. I hate myself right now. This is my fault.”

“Son, it’s not your fault,” said Mo. “You were ambushed by your own lieutenant. Victoria came to save you, to rescue you. Don’t let her down. It’s your turn now to get to her.” He nodded, swallowing back his emotions.

“Yes, sir.”

“AJ, we need to see what’s beneath those city streets. Use whatever we have to find those fucking tunnels and let me know where they’re going.”

“ Roger that. ”

“Hayes? I know you want to go, and we’re going to let you. But you have to watch that hand, son. If it gets damaged any further, there’ll be no coming back from it,” said Luke. Hayes nodded.

“If I lose her, there will be no coming back from it. I don’t give a fuck about my hand.”

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

“Where are you taking me?” asked Victoria. The rope tied around her wrists was rubbing the skin raw, her fingers aching from attempting to pull free.

When the doorbell rang, the bodyguards ordered her to the bedroom and to hide in the closet. She did as they asked, but it didn't matter. When she heard the weapons being fired and the men yelling at one another, she knew they weren't there for Hayes. They were there for her.

Immediately, she tapped her comms, but there was no response. Was it possible that these men were jamming her communications? She ensured her tracking was on, then held her breath as a man opened the door to the closet.

“Hello, beautiful. You're going to make me rich.”

One of his men hit her across the face, knocking her out. The next thing she remembered was being dragged through the dark tunnels.

“Hey! I asked you a question. Where are you taking me? What do you want?” she repeated.

He turned with fire in his dark brown eyes and sneered at her.

“Do not speak to me in such a tone again. If you do, I won't care how brilliant you are, I will kill you and leave you for the rats. Or better yet, sell you to the highest bidder.”

Victoria felt her stomach roil, then she straightened, pretending to be braver than she

was feeling. She simply glared at him, then felt him tug at her arms once again.

The only thing Victoria could do to remain sane was to think of everything she could do to get a signal to those above. With her tracker on and with the comms device maybe working, maybe not, her hands were tied. Literally.

“Your boyfriend surprised me,” said Aamani. “His lieutenant bragged about his intelligence and his connection to my nemesis, the Voodoo men.”

Victoria said nothing, hoping to keep her expression blank. He laughed at her, shaking his head.

“But when he told me that he found letters written to a beautiful girl. Victoria. I knew that I had something more special. Something equally as brilliant.”

“You don’t know that I’m brilliant. I could be dumb as a box of rocks.”

“I highly doubt that,” he laughed. “No, he went on and on in his letters about how brilliant you were, how beautiful. He was right, at least about that. Yet he never mailed the letters. I wonder why?”

“We weren’t right for one another,” lied Victoria.

She was shocking herself at how easy it really was. The women had told her stories of being kidnapped, taken by hostiles, confronted by killers, and how they lied, schemed, and maneuvered their way out of things. She could do this. She could do the same.

“You love one another. I can tell these things. But he did anger me by getting away. When I went to find him and saw those tiny footprints, I knew it was a woman. A very intelligent, resourceful woman. I don’t care for women with those characteristics

myself.”

“I’m sure you don’t. It’s never good to have a woman who’s smarter than you.”

He turned so quickly, backhanding her, Victoria didn’t have time to move. Her body slammed against the hard rock of the tunnel, and she felt the blood dripping from her mouth.

“Do not speak to me in such a manner.”

“If you’re going to kill me, just do it. That should make the Voodoo Guardians happy,” she said through tears.

“Kill you? My dear, I need you. Desperately.” He yanked her to her feet once again and began pulling her along the dirt floor.

“You are going to help me infiltrate their communications systems, both theirs and those they sold to the government. You’re going to help me get into the aviation systems, the computer systems, all of it. ”

Victoria stopped, pulling back on the rope. She started to laugh, and Aamani came toward her once again. She threw her shoulders back and stared at him.

“Do it. Hit me again. I can’t do what you’re asking. I don’t have the skill. Even if I did, even if I somehow figured it out, they would have everything changed by the time I was able to find a way in. You will never get in.”

Aamani stared at her, wondering if what she said was the truth or if she was just leading him along. She could be right about the speed at which they would change the systems and outsmart him again. But he had to try. This country belonged to him, and he would rule it one way or another.



“Either way, I get what is locked inside that brain of yours,” he said with disgust, staring at her youthful body. Just her fair complexion and hair turned his stomach.

“I have nothing in my brain worth knowing,” she mocked.

“Well, I have a drug that says we’ll find out if that’s true. A little serum and you’ll tell me your childhood phone number and address and your social security number. A little more and I’ll break every code your filthy company has.”

“What is it with men like you?” she frowned, shaking her head. “Are you not happy just having a regular job? Living a regular life with a wife and children?”

“Do you have any idea what my country has been through? Do you understand what my people have been subjected to?”

“No. I can’t honestly say I know it all. I know what I’ve read, what I’ve researched, but I don’t know it all. What I do know is that violence begets violence. Either the Voodoo Guardians will come for you, or the Iraqi government will. It won’t matter who. You won’t survive.”

“You know nothing of my abilities.”

“And you know nothing of mine. I don’t know about communications systems, or flight systems, or anything else. I’m a schoolteacher. Yes, I teach math, but I teach middle-school geometry.”

“You’re lying,” he said, staring at her.

“I’m not lying,” she said stoically. “I can talk about angles and parallelograms and hexagons. But that’s all.”

“You’d better hope that’s not true, or you’re going to wish you’d paid more attention in class.”

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

Hayes and the others stood in the private room of the bodyguard who had survived. He was just waking from his second surgery and in and out of consciousness.

“My apologies,” he whispered, staring at Hayes.

“It’s not your fault. I’m so sorry this happened to you,” he said, staring at the man, obviously in pain. “Did you see the men?”

“Yes. It was Aamani. I know his face. The man who knocked on the door was dressed in a palace guard’s uniform. When my colleague opened the door, they began firing.”

“Was Victoria hurt?” asked Mo.

“No. No, sir,” he said, shaking his head. “I ordered her to lock herself in the bedroom closet, but I think they found her.”

“They found her,” frowned Luke. “We’re tracking her whereabouts now, and hopefully, we’ll have a lead on her location. Once we have that, we’re tracking him down and killing him.”

“I have notified the Iraqi government of what has transpired here,” said Omar.

“Was that wise?” asked Hayes. “No disrespect, sir, but what if they go after him and don’t care if they harm Victoria?”

“I have told them that the girl is important to me and my family. If harm should come

to her, it would be seen as a grievous error and insult to my family. She will be alright. But they also know that I intend to send in my own team.”

“All of us?” asked Eric to be sure he was following.

“Yes. All of you, my friends. I will send extra men with you, provide weapons and transportation should you need it, although I doubt that you will.”

“Sheikh Omar, you’ve been generous and kind,” said Hayes. “I’m sorry we brought this to your doorstep.”

“My son,” he smiled, gripping Hayes’ shoulder, “your fiancée enchanted me the moment I met her. Such a rare jewel should be treasured.”

“That’s my intention, sir. I just have to get to her.”

“Everyone, listen up, ” said Hiro , “AJ and I have followed her tracker for the last hour. It’s been intermittent, going in and out, which isn’t normal. The trackers should work even at two hundred feet below sea level. That means she could be at that depth or deeper.”

“Okay, so where could that be?” asked Cam.

“Your thoughts on the market were right. In biblical times, the sea level in that area was lower. Over time, sandstorms, climate change, constant construction, all of those things have built up what is considered sea level. I think they are walking through biblical tunnels.”

“Where do they go?” asked Luke.

“I believe I can help with that,” said Matthew.

“Grandpa?” asked Luke. The men all stared at him, wondering how in the world Matthew could possibly know where Aaman would take Victoria.

“Just listen to me. The ancient city of Ur was located on the Euphrates River in what is now southern Iraq. Its ruins can be found near Nasiriyah. There were legends that said Abraham and others built underground roadways to help them get to the rivers. Those roadways could still exist in the form of tunnels.”

“But, Grandpa, that could be hundreds of miles long,” said Luke.

“ Yes, it could be. I suppose that means you’d better get moving.”

“Luke, this is Doug. We just wanted all of you to know that we’ve already reconfigured and formatted all the software systems for communications, flight systems, and everything else we created. They won’t get into anything.”

Hayes stared from one man to the next, then asked the question they were all thinking.

“Well, that’s great, but if they can’t get into it, what are they going to do with Victoria?”

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

Victoria looked around the room, staring at the various worktables and machines.

This wasn't just any room. This was a room that had been used many, many times before.

Taking a quick inventory of the items on the tables, she realized that this room was designed to build IEDs, bombs, and other devices.

“What are you doing?” barked Aamani.

“I'm looking. What is this?” she asked, wrinkling her nose.

He glared at her, hoping to make her break, but she was as determined as he was. She knew what this felt like. She'd been in this situation before.

Men and women determined to intimidate children into doing their dirty work. Forcing them to create their war machines, weapons, and invasive equipment. She remembered the schools, the faces of angry men and women intimidating the children, forcing them to complete complex problems.

“If this is a game you're playing with me, you will regret it. I need what's in that head of yours, and if you don't give it to me, I'll just chop it off.”

“Again, you're threatening me for something I don't even understand. Hayes and I aren't even dating. I never received any letters that he wrote. Besides, we're more like brother and sister.

“You were right to go after him, you know. He’s the real genius. In fact, if you really need the help, I could ask him to come and get me.”

“Do you think I’m a fool?” he asked, gripping her upper arm and jerking her sideways. She held in the expletive she wanted to let go. Her face was already hurt from being hit several times. “If you call him, the entire team comes for you.”

“You really don’t understand this, do you?” she said innocently. “Just take me to some place of your choosing, in the open, and make him meet you there. Then you can see everything around you.”

Aamani knew there was some truth and intelligence to what the woman was saying. But something inside of him was telling him that she was smarter than she pretended. He would get whatever he could get from her brain and then kill her, forcing O’Neal to come for her body.

“I understand more than you think,” he said, still holding tight to her upper arm. “My people have been dying because of these men for decades.”

“No. Your people have been dying for decades, for centuries, because all you understand is war. You can’t comprehend peace or unity because you’ve never seen it, never experienced it. It’s so foreign to you that you don’t know what it looks like,” she said calmly.

“And you do?” he growled. “You believe that you’re the saviors of the world, rushing in to help the underdogs. All you do is anger the rest of the world. You cannot save everyone. You cannot save this country. You may not even be able to save your own.”

“Maybe not,” said Victoria quietly. “But at least we try. We’re not perfect, none of us are. But we don’t intentionally kill others so that we can justify a better life. We

defend the weak, we defend what is ours.”

“And you kill without thought.”

“We kill when others seek to kill us,” she said with more wisdom than he expected.

Releasing her arm, he paced back and forth in front of her. He was acutely aware of the fact that his men stared at him, wondering what he would do. Some spoke English, others did not. But no doubt, those who did would repeat the entire conversation when in private, to their friends.

Aamani moved toward a table covered in a tarp and pulled it back.

Beneath the cover were components from a complex piece of communications equipment designed by G.R.I.P.

At least, it was complex when it was created ten years ago.

She knew that even if she fixed it for him, it would not serve a purpose.

“What is all that junk?” she asked.

“You know what it is, and if you don’t repair it, make it workable in the next twenty-four hours, I will kill you.”

Turning, he walked out of the cave-like room and slammed the door. One man remained inside, taking a seat at the door. Another was seated outside the door. She heard him give orders to never leave her alone, but to feed her twice a day.

“How generous,” she muttered to herself. She heard the crackling in her comms piece and knew that they were trying to reach her, but she was too far below the surface.



She wasn't sure how far, but she knew it was deep.

As they'd walked, she'd felt the continued decline in the pathways. She walked around the small space, feeling the wall. It was supported with old-fashioned techniques, using mud bricks and timbers.

When she reached the back wall, she noticed a hanging blanket and ran her fingers over it. It was a door. The blanket was covering a door. She filed that away in her mind, then touched the back wall. Her fingers brushed the earth, cold, damp earth.

Damp. The wall at that end was damp. She was near water. This tunnel led either to water, beneath water, or beside water. Either way, it could be her rescue or her death.

Only time would tell.

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Hayes picked up the weapon with his uninjured hand, maneuvering it easily, loading it, and unloading it. As a SEAL, they'd practice this very thing many times. If you were injured in the field, you should be able to use either hand to shoot, but also to reload. Even just one-handed.

"Hayes, son, you could stay here and wait," said his father.

"I can't do that, Dad," he said, looking at Hoot.

"She's here because of me. She's here because I encouraged her to be brave or live without me.

Live without us. I did this. I forced her hand, making her leave our damn home.

Had I been kinder, nicer, she would have stayed on the property, and I would have been... "

"Dead," said Hoot. "You would have been dead. Bonds and Aamani would have found you, forced you to do their dirty work, and then killed you."

"Which is what they're going to do to her," he said with tears in his eyes.

"No," said Mo, walking closer to him. "No, they won't. We will get to her. All of us. We will find her, get her home, and kill Aamani. She's a brilliant young woman, and she knows what she's doing."

"I know that, Mo. I know that, but this is Aamani. He won't have the patience to wait

if she decides to stall.”

“Hayes, she’ll stall appropriately,” said Mo. “I know my daughter. Sometimes, I think I know her better than myself. I get a daughter just when I thought I would never have a child. She’s brilliant, but not just a high IQ. She has incredible survival skills.”

“I know that, sir. But this is Aamani we’re talking about.

He won’t care that she’s a woman. In fact, he’ll care less because she’s a woman.

I shouldn’t have written those letters. I thought I was figuring out how to ask her forgiveness, how to get her to understand where I was coming from.

It was easier to write it all down than to have to speak to her. ”

Mo nodded, chuckling along with the other men.

“This isn’t funny!” said Hayes.

“Hayes, it’s not funny, but it is ironic.

You figured out that you couldn’t live without the one woman you needed most. She figured out that she couldn’t live without the one man she needed most. You’ve reached the same conclusion, and now you know.

I’d say that’s a good start to the rest of your life,” said Mo. Even Hayes had to chuckle at that.

“I guess it is ironic. I just have to find her, sir.” Gator and Jak walked in carrying several maps of the area they believed Victoria had been taken.

“According to Hiro and AJ, the signal is in and out from this area in the city to the marketplace. It’s good for a few minutes as they walk through the marketplace, then it’s intermittent.

“It goes off, here and then here,” he said, pointing to the map.

“But that’s a desert area,” said Hayes.

“The whole fucking country is a desert,” said Luke. “But that is running parallel to the Euphrates River. If there is a tunnel that goes beneath the river, it might take her to the other side, which would likely come up here.”

He pointed to the spot on the map and frowned. It was a long shot without exact locations. But if all they had was a long shot. They’d take it.

Victoria stared at the equipment once again and admired her work. She’d put it all together, just as it should be. Of course, they didn’t know how it should look or how it should operate, but she’d figured something out.

They couldn’t rescue her if they didn’t know where she was. And they wouldn’t know where she was if she didn’t get the tracking signal through the dirt and potentially water.

So, she worked with what she had. Connecting the machine to her own trackers and comms devices, she turned the device on and then began tapping Morse code on her comms receiver.

There was no way to tell whether they were getting her messages or not unless they provide Morse code back. She felt, rather than heard, her guard walking behind her, watching her. Turning, she nodded toward the machine, and he shook his head.

“It’s almost ready,” she said.

He stared at her, frowning, and she repeated the phrase. Either he didn’t speak English, or he didn’t believe her. She wasn’t sure which, but she was going to play this charade to the very end.

As he walked away, she turned her attention back to the communications device and began tapping once again. Just as she was about to give up, she heard a faint tapping back. Her heart jumped, daring to hope that the device actually worked.

Tapping out her message once more, she waited for a reply.

Understood.Continue comms.

“Holy shit,” she whispered to herself. Connecting the device to a remote battery, she programmed it to continue the tapping, signaling the location. It would repeat every forty-five seconds until someone turned it off.

Now she had to get creative and kill time. Kill time or be killed. That seemed simple.

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Standing over the maps, praying for something that would lead them to the right area, the men talked about plans to find the entrance in the marketplace.

“But if someone there tells Aamani we are there or searching for him, we’re putting Victoria in more danger,” said Hayes. “We can’t know who works for him and who doesn’t.”

“That’s true,” said Mo. “In a place like this, with a man like Aamani, we need to just think of everyone as being on his side.”

“This is crazy,” said Hex. “We’re looking at miles of possible tunnels stretching in a hundred different directions. Do we have the data back from the Lidar scans on the drones?”

“Not yet, but once those are back, we should be able to identify clear routes and possible alternative entrances and exits,” said Luke.

“Hey!” said Jak, running into the room. “We just got a message from Hiro. Our girl truly is a genius. The equipment Aamani gave her to make functional was an older machine. She repaired it, connected it to our system, and tapped out Morse Code.”

“Are you fucking serious?” grinned Hayes.

“As a heart attack, dude,” he laughed. “It’s going to give us the chance to get a hard read off of it and a location.

She even programmed it to tap out every forty-five seconds.

She's going to make it functional for Aamani to use, allowing whatever he's trying to do to be fed back to our team. Fucking incredible!"

"I love her so much," said Hayes. He winced as he wiggled his fingers, and Cruz frowned at him.

"Let me take a look at the hand," he said.

"No. No, it's okay," said Hayes.

"Give him your hand, or I'll fucking sit on your chest," said Eric.

Hayes nodded, swallowing his fear. As Cruz unwrapped the hand, every man in the room sucked in a breath, realizing how painful it must have been for Hayes to hide.

"It's infected," said Cruz. "You really don't give a shit about using this hand again."

"We should get you back to Belle Fleur and the pond," said Hoot.

"No!" yelled Hayes. "No, I'm begging you, Dad. Please don't force me to leave. I'll do whatever Cruz tells me, but I'm not leaving until I see Victoria's beautiful face in front of me and I can tell her I love her and I can ask her to marry me again and..."

The entire room smiled at him, shaking their heads.

"Marry you, huh? I think you already asked her that," frowned Mo.

"Yes, sir. I'm a little confused and fuzzy. But I swear to God, I will never hurt her like this again. I don't know what will happen with my hand, but whatever it is, I will deal with it, with her by my side."

“So, are you asking for my permission?” said Mo with a serious expression.

“Yes, sir. I guess I am.”

“Well, then. I guess I’m giving you permission,” said Mo. “She loves you, Hayes. She always has. The two of you were meant to be together, and the world, as fucked up as it is, threw you two together in those damn schools. God help us all, you’ll have mega-genius children.”

Hayes could only laugh as Cruz extended the hand onto the table, carefully removing all of the dressings to see fully the extent of the infection.

“I think you got lucky,” he frowned. “I’m going to drain the wound, debride it, and I’ll need to re-suture it. I’m going to give you another antibiotic and some pain meds as well.”

“No. No pain meds. I need to be alert,” said Hayes.

“You need to be fucking alive, you dumb ass,” yelled Cruz. Hayes stared at him, his brows raised.

“I don’t see what the women see in you. You’re definitely not giving vibes of hot, sexy Latino.”

“Fuck you, kid,” he smirked.

Thirty minutes later, the team had their weapons, stealth netting and suits, two choppers ready to take off, and several potential locations for Victoria. With Hayes’ hand redressed, pain meds flooding his body, he was ready to find his girl.

As the men filtered out of the mansion toward the choppers, Omar stood with six men



armed to the teeth.

“Sir? What are you doing?” asked Luke.

“I’m sending six of my best men with you. They know the language, they are skilled warriors, and they have a purpose in killing Aamani as well. He is responsible for killing all of their families.”

“I’m sorry,” said Luke. “You’re obviously a welcome addition, but our priority is to get Victoria.”

“Understood, Luke,” he said, gripping his hand. “Survive the day, my friend, and go home to your family. Hug your fathers for me and tell them to come and visit us.”

“We’ll do that, sir,” said Cam, smiling at the man. “Thank you for all you’ve done for us. We won’t forget it.”

“I’m sorry it came to this, but I am repaying a debt a long time coming. I will never forget what your fathers did for my father. I would not be here without them. If you need more assistance, call, and it will be there.”

“We will,” smiled Eric, giving the man a big hug. “Can’t leave without my hug, Sheikh.”

“You are lucky that I like you,” he laughed. “It is forbidden to hug me unless I initiate it.”

“You know you like a good bear hug,” smirked Eric. He boarded the helicopter and waited for the rest of the team. When Hayes got to the steps, he looked at Omar and nodded.

“Thank you. For everything,” he said. The man nodded at him.

“I’m disappointed she will not be the wife of one of my sons, but I am happy that such a woman exists. Find her and cherish her.”

“That’s my plan, sir. That’s my plan.”

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

Victoria was surprised that Aamani hadn't returned to check on her yet. She'd been in the tunnel for at least five or six hours and working on the machine for that long. When the door opened, she expected to see him. Instead, it was a man with a tray of food for her and the guard.

Pushing one plate toward her, he took the other and began eating as if ravenous.

She stared at the food and realized that she was actually hungry.

The plate of flavorful rice, stuffed grape leaves, lean goat's meat, and flat bread was delicious and filling.

There were four bottles of water, of which she downed two immediately.

Then she regretted it. She needed to pee, and she didn't see a bathroom.

"Um, excuse me. I need to use the bathroom," she said to the guard. He stared at her as if not understanding her, but she was fairly certain he did. She crossed her legs, jumping up and down, and then repeated herself.

"I need a bathroom. Hamm?m," she repeated in Arabic.

The man's brows rose, and he stared at the woman, nodding. He opened the main door and waved for her to walk through. To the right of the door was another in the hallway. She'd walked right by it and didn't see it.

The guard opened the door, and odor hit her, causing her to gag and bend at the waist.

He looked surprised, then embarrassed.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry. I’ll figure it out.” He nodded at her as she entered the space.

Victoria wondered how long she would be able to hold her breath, and it wasn’t nearly long enough. The toilet, although that was a stretch, was nothing more than a metal bucket with a trash bag inside. Whoever had the job of emptying that must be on the naughty list.

When she was able, she took another deep breath and finished as quickly as possible.

When she opened the door, the guard was waiting for her, staring at her as if to see if she was going to puke. Instead, he handed her some hand sanitizer and smiled.

Victoria gratefully accepted the gift and rinsed her hands as quickly as possible, rubbing them together briskly. He pointed toward the room once again, and Victoria nodded. When she walked inside, he closed the door behind her, and she heard the lock engage.

He was gone, but she was there alone. Alone and possibly able to communicate.

Using the repaired device, she tapped out another code, asking if anyone could hear her. She was shocked when she got just three words.

Loud and clear

She wanted to cry. It actually worked. They knew she was alive and had an approximate location, although she guessed they were struggling with that since she was underground.

She needed to get closer to the surface, but she couldn't go back the way they'd come in. That's where all the guards were.

Moving to the back wall once again, she felt around for another door. At first, there was nothing except damp earth. Then, reaching beneath the tapestry on the wall, she felt the ridge of a wooden frame.

"Bingo," she said to herself. Hearing the key engaged in the lock, she put the tapestry down and walked back toward the table, fiddling with the device.

"My man tells me you've eaten. That's good. You may need your strength. Is it working?"

"It is, I think," she said, scratching her head innocently. "I mean, the only way is for you to test it. I'm not sure what you think you're going to hear."

"If you've done your job, I'm going to be able to tap into military communications in the area, find my enemies, and delete them."

"This isn't a game, Mr. Aamani," said Victoria.

"You're right," he said, staring at her. "It's life or death. Yours."

With the traditional garments wrapped around their bodies, the men split up into teams of three and headed into the marketplace. Hayes had his hand hidden beneath the robe, and his face covered as much as possible.

Vendors came out of their stalls selling everything from bootleg movies and CDs to boots, sweaters, jeans, and American military paraphernalia.

Occasionally, the men would stop, look at the items, and ask how much as if

bargaining with the vendor, and then walk away.

Eric stopped at a booth selling lamps, radios, and other electronic devices.

Inside was a young woman, no more than fifteen or sixteen years old.

Her face was covered from the nose down, but the black eye told him she was living a violent life.

When he stepped into the booth, another woman, without her face covered, walked in from behind the booth. Her face was far more devastating.

There were cuts stretching from her eyes to her mouth, her nose missing the tip. This wasn't an explosive or a car accident. This was intentional. When he looked at her hands, he noticed that three fingers were also missing.

She stared at Eric, looking him up and down.

"You are American?" she asked.

"I am," he said without hesitation.

"You shouldn't be here," she said. "This is not a good place for you."

"I've been in places like this before," he said. "Did your husband do that to you?"

"My husband is dead. It's my husband's brother who enjoys brutalizing women. Men and children as well. But women are enjoyable for him. We're weaker, not as smart."

"I don't know about that," said Eric. "My wife is the most brilliant woman I know." She stared at him, a small grin at the corner of her mouth.

“Your wife is a lucky woman. Perhaps you’d like to take something special home to her.”

Eric decided to take his chance. Something in his gut was telling him that this woman could be the key to everything. Let it be true.

“I need your help,” he said, staring from her to her daughter. “I’m looking for the entrance to a tunnel where Khalil Aamani is hiding. He may be hiding a friend of mine. A woman who needs help.”

The woman shook her head, stepping back from him. She covered her face as if to ward off the evil in front of her. When he looked at the daughter, her eyes went dark with hatred. He wasn’t sure if it was hatred for him or for her mother. Or, it could be for Aamani.

“Please. He will kill this woman if we don’t find her. If you’re worried about what will happen to you, I can help you get away.”

“Get away?” she asked. “Where? This is my home. The only place I’ve ever known. I live here with my daughter. My dead husband is buried only ten minutes from here. I have no family. I have no other children. There is nowhere for me to be safe and get away.”

“Wouldn’t you want to at least try?” whispered Eric.

The woman stared at her daughter, then back at Eric, shaking her head. He couldn’t force her to tell him where Aamani was hiding. He understood her fear and understood that if he couldn’t protect her, she would be dead by morning. He wouldn’t push her.

“I’m sorry,” she said to him. She then grabbed a small item from her table and placed

it in his hand. Eric didn't even look at it. He just nodded his thanks and walked away.

“Any luck?” asked Luke, staring at the big man.

“No.”



*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

Victoria was shocked when Aamani changed the frequency codes and tapped into the Kuwaiti military communications system. She picked up on some of the words, but not all. He laughed, nodding as he listened.

“Well done,” he said, staring at her. “Well done!”

“It was just a few screws,” she said, shrugging. “I’m not even sure what I did except put the puzzle back together.”

“You lie well for a woman,” he frowned. “Now, there is another project for you. You will connect another device I have to the communication systems of a security company you know well.”

“I don’t know their communication system,” she lied.

“You’d better figure it out. You have two hours, or you’ll be dead.”

“You can’t be serious! I don’t understand any of this,” she said with well-choreographed fear. He only stared at her.

“You will figure this out like you did the other one. Do it, or before I kill you, I will find your boyfriend and bring him here, cutting off body parts until you do your job.”

“No. No, I won’t let you do this.”

“Of course, there is still this remarkable serum that my friends in China have invented. It will force you to answer all of my questions honestly, or intense pain will

inhabit your body.”

She could only stare at him as he walked toward the door, turning, he held up two fingers.

When he was gone, she held up one finger. Only one to tell him how she felt.

“Anyone find anything?” asked Luke, staring at the group of men seated in the café.

“Nothing,” they all repeated, looking completely defeated.

“I thought I was close,” said Eric, “but she was terrified. She and her daughter both. Neither wanted to say anything. I did get a cute little trinket out of it.” He pulled out the small porcelain tray, wondering what it would even be used for.

It wasn’t big enough to eat off of, and it wasn’t anything special.

“Wait a minute,” said Gator, taking the dish. “I’ve seen that design. We walked past it a dozen times in the row we were working.”

Eric looked up and saw the young girl standing across the alleyway. He smiled at her, and she nodded, looking at the dish in his hand.

“It’s an image painted on a carpet,” said Gator.

“That’s it. That’s our door beneath the carpet,” said Luke. “Let’s go. Eric? Get the mother and daughter to safety. Whatever you have to do, do it.”

“Got it. Hex? Feel like a short flight?” Before Hex could answer, two of Omar’s guards were standing beside them.

“We will take the woman and her daughter, sir. We will take them to Dubai and get them to safety.”

“You guys are great,” said Eric. “Thank you.”

As the two guards took the woman and her daughter, the remaining guards, Eric, and the others walked toward the back of the market, finding the rug hanging on the wall. It matched the small dish exactly.

Looking around the market, they noticed several men watching them. If they pulled their weapons, this could be a bloodbath. Then one of Omar’s guards stepped forward and spoke rapidly.

“What is he saying?” asked Gator.

“He’s telling them that if they interfere, the hell and fury of Sheikh Omar will rain down on them. I believe our friend Omar is more powerful than we first thought,” said Hayes.

Although still glaring at the group of men, Eric pulled the tapestry aside and found the door. One by one, the men entered the tunnels.

“AJ? Hiro? We’re headed into the tunnels and might be out of range. If you can give any direction that we should go, now is the time.”

“Head down until you feel as though it evens out, then take the tunnel to the right, then immediately to the left. If we can get Victoria on the system again, we’ll tell her you’re on the way.”

The tunnels were damp, dark, but definitely well-traveled. Using their night vision goggles, they could easily see ahead if there was anyone coming toward them. It

made for slow-going since the tunnels seemed to be a bustling underworld city with men everywhere.

“We’ve got to get moving,” whispered Hayes. “If he finds out we’re in these tunnels, she’s dead.”

“Guys, can you hear me? If you can, you need to move now. Victoria found another exit and is on the run. In the opposite direction.”

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Victoria could hear the rushing of men in the tunnels, then voices yelling at one another. She moved swiftly toward the comms device and tapped out several messages.

Within moments, the response came through.

Run

“Damn,” she muttered.

Lifting the carpet, she opened the door, pushing it open, and stepped inside the tunnel.

There was a big step down, and she cursed, falling to her knees, feeling the water soak through her clothing.

She prayed that it was just water but knew in her heart it most likely was a mix of sewage as well.

She got up and began to run, not knowing what she was running to but knowing that she had to move now. Coming to a crossing of several other tunnels, she scanned each in the darkness, her eyes not adjusting very well. They all looked the same, and they all seemed to have water in them.

“Shoot,” she muttered. “What if I’m running into the river? I’m going to drown.”

She tapped her comms and didn’t get a reply, then moved toward one of the tunnel

extensions and did it again. As she moved from one to the other, she did it again. Then she heard the sweetest sound ever.

“ Victoria.Go left!”

“I hear you! I hear you!” she repeated. She ran to the tunnel at the left and then began hearing the voices of all the men she hoped to see again. But one in particular was the one she really wanted to hear.

“ Babe, I know you hear me. Just keep running. We’re coming toward you. We’re going to find you, just stay safe. I love you, Victoria. I love you!”

“I love you too,” she said breathlessly.

She continued to follow the instructions given through her comms device, then stopped briefly to catch her breath. She was exhausted. Then she heard her worst fear.

Actually, two worst fears. Footsteps and the distinctive hiss of a crocodile.

“Shit,” she said, shaking herself.

“Victoria. You’re on the right path. Keep going. I see the heat signature of the croc. He’s in another tunnel but could turn toward you. Just keep moving.”

She was grateful for the direction and trudged through the now knee-high water. Stopping to listen once again, she heard footsteps again. Some seemed behind her. Others seemed in front of her. Exhausted, frightened, and unsure of what to do, she just stopped, waiting to know her fate.

When the steps in front of her slowed, she knew she was about to meet her death.

“Babe? Victoria, it’s me, Hayes,” said the voice.

“H-Hayes,” she whispered. She ran toward him, plastering herself against his body and injured arm. He didn’t give a damn. He lifted her up, hugging her, kissing her.

“Honey, are you okay?” asked Mo.

“I’m okay, Dad,” she nodded, hugging her father. “Aamani is behind me. We have to keep moving.”

“You have to keep moving,” said Luke. “Hayes? Take her topside and get the fuck out of the tunnels. We’re about to give Aamani a little surprise.”

The men of Omar’s military handed Luke the two backpacks and smiled. Luke grinned at them, shaking his head.

“Oh, hell, no. You’re going to be a part of this. This is your revenge as well. Let’s go.”

Mo, Hoot, Hayes, Cruz, Gator, and Jak moved with Victoria toward the entrance, while the others stayed behind, planting the explosives in the tunnels. They could hear Aamani screaming at his men to find the woman.

“He’s coming this way,” whispered one of Omar’s men. “He wants to kill the woman himself.”

“Well, he’ll be terribly disappointed,” smiled Cam. “Let’s go, gentlemen. Once they’re past the side tunnels, blow the first switch. That will force them to move forward. When they’ve reached the ladder, blow it all.”

The men patiently waited for their moment, watching on the tracking devices that

showed them where the bodies were. As predicted, Aamani and his men passed the side tunnels. When they did, the first explosion rocked the entire tunnel system.

“Keep moving!” yelled Aamani. “It’s nothing. It’s just a small earthquake.”

“What if it’s the woman? What if she’s a witch?” asked one of the men.

They heard the echo of gunfire and knew that Aamani had sent a message to his team. Follow orders or die.

Finally at the ladder to the surface, they waited patiently for the men to appear. Beneath the stealth netting, Luke and the others could see nothing except his exit.

“There! We’re here at the exit, and that’s where she went. Find her!” Aamani yelled.

But before the men could move much further, the netting was removed to reveal five very large bodies blocking the ladder. Aamani stopped, trying to work out where the figures had emerged from.

“Khalil Aamani. Nice to meet you,” said Luke. He stared at the big man, then looked at the others beside him.

“Who are you?”

“You know who we are,” said Hex. “We’re here to settle a bit of a score. You tried to kill not one, but two members of our family. That doesn’t sit well with us.”

“The girl is valuable to you,” he smiled. “No matter. She’s lost in the tunnels and will die.”

“You don’t believe that because you know it’s not true. The girl is ours, just like the



SEAL is ours. They're both safe. You? Not so much."

Aamani stared at the two dark men beside the Americans.

He knew that they were from this region at the very least. He prayed they were not traitors, his own people going against him.

One man stepped forward, holding up a photo, and Aamani said nothing.

The other did the same, his mother, father, two sisters, and baby brother all in the photo. Now dead because of Aamani.

"I don't know those people," he said.

"They know you," said Luke. "Their ghosts know you. Bonds died for his treachery. Now, so will you."

Each man turned to grip the ladder, then Luke pressed the button, watching as the tunnel collapsed onto itself as they raced to the top of the ladder. Just as the last man saw the light of day, the entire thing fell in on itself.

A moment later, the sound of rushing water filled the air. The Euphrates found a new vein to pour her life's blood into.

"Let's move!" yelled Eric.

The trucks were waiting for them on the side of the road, but the water coming higher and higher on the dry desert told them that this was about to become a very wet place.

As they sped away, Victoria stared back at her prison and shook her head. Finally, she turned to Hayes and smiled.

“If it’s alright with you, I’d like to not leave home for a while.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

Lieutenant Leland Bonds was considered dead, lost at sea due to an unfortunate incident on the carrier. It was a shame that after surviving an ambush of his team that he'd met such a fate.

No one mourned him.

Khalil Aamani's body was found on the banks of the Euphrates. He was missing one arm, presumed taken by a crocodile. Several other bodies were found as well, but no one seemed to care much.

In Dubai, Noor and Mariyam, the mother and daughter who helped the team in the market, were safe in their new home, paid for by the sheikh. His own physicians were doing the plastic surgery to repair their damaged faces and bodies.

As it turned out, Noor was quite an artist, having created the small trinket dishes that she'd given the team. She was hired by the sheikh to mass produce them with images of his own beloved country.

They never once believed that the Americans would keep their promise but were thrilled that they had.

"Move your fingers back and forth," said Gabi. She watched as Hayes struggled to move the fingers. They wouldn't curl down properly into a fist, nor did he have any sensation in the tips of them.

"It's not good, is it?" asked Hayes. "I mean, I've been to the pond every day since we returned, you've done another surgery, and I still can't feel everything in that hand."

“No, it’s not good, but it could be worse. The hand is healthy and alive. We won’t have to amputate, but I’m not sure how the Navy will feel about this, Hayes.”

He nodded at her, looking up at his father and friends. There was a piece of him that would mourn if he were forced to leave the SEALs, but there was another piece that would gladly come home.

“What do I do now?” he asked.

“You’ll need to return to the Naval hospital in San Diego and see the surgeons there. They’ll reevaluate, with my notes as guidance, and make the final decision.”

“I’ll let Victoria know that I have to go for a few days,” he said, nodding at her.

“I’m going with you,” she said, walking into the office. She smiled at him, kissing him sweetly as she looked at Gabi. “Thank you, Gabi, for all you did. I’ll call you if anything changes in San Diego.”

“Go get ‘em, honey,” she laughed.

“Vic, you don’t have to do this. I know how hard this is for you,” he said.

“It’s not hard for me,” she smiled. “I love you, Hayes. I’ve proven to myself that I can survive the worst possible scenario. Although I’d seriously like to avoid that in the future.”

“Baby, thank you.”

“Let’s go. The Osprey is ready.”

Four days of tests, x-rays, therapy, and more tests, all for the Navy to tell Hayes that

he would need to be retired due to his disability.

“But he could do a desk job,” said Victoria. “He’s not disabled just because he can’t feel things in that hand. He’s more than capable.”

Hayes wanted to laugh at her fierce defense of him. His woman. The woman who refused to leave the property was now trying to encourage the Navy to retain him.

“Ma’am, we understand what you’re saying, but as a SEAL, he cannot continue with his duties,” said the doctor.

“I think that’s a ridiculous decision,” she said with her hands at her hips. Hayes laughed, hugging Victoria and kissing her in front of the doctor.

“It’s alright, honey. Let’s go home.”

“But,” she started. He kissed her again, quieting her.

“It’s really okay, Vic. We’re safe. You and me. We’re okay, and we’re going to be married. Let’s go have a nice dinner and spend the night at Faith’s mansion. We’ll head home in the morning.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, frowning at him. “We could call Kari and the others and see if they could fight it in court.”

“No,” he smiled. “I’m good. I served my time and then some. I nearly lost my life and yours in the process. I don’t think I have anything left to prove to anyone.”

Victoria nodded at him as he left the sprawling Navy medical compound. It was across the street from Balboa Park and the famous San Diego Zoo, allowing visitors to take breaks from treatments or appointments if they needed it.

After changing their clothes and heading out to dinner, they found themselves seated in the cool summer air of Coronado Island, enjoying juicy mushroom Swiss burgers with fries.

The soft music from inside the restaurant filtered into the night air, making them melt into their seats with relaxation.

“I thought I’d find you two here,” said the voice.

“Fucking hell,” muttered Hayes. “When did you get back, Wyatt?”

“Not long after you guys did,” he said, taking a seat. He kissed Victoria’s cheek and leaned back in his chair. “Sounds like everything went as planned.”

“Well, pretty much,” frowned Victoria. Hayes held up his hand and shook his head.

“Seriously? Fuck, I’m sorry, man,” said Wyatt.

“It’s alright. I thought I’d be more upset about it, but I’m really not. I’m okay with going home and making a different life.”

“I’m sure you are,” grinned Wyatt.

“Hey, Wyatt! Come on, dude, the girls are getting restless,” said a man at the door of the patio.

“Gotta run,” he winked.

“Girls getting restless?” frowned Victoria. “Wyatt O’Neal, you’d better watch yourself. You’re not a young man any longer, and I know what those girls want.”

“What is that, sweet Victoria?” he smirked.

“Happily ever after.” Wyatt stared at her with a horrified expression and shook his head.

“Fuck no! I’m going home.”

She laughed, watching as Wyatt took off in the opposite direction of his friends, and Hayes couldn’t believe it.

“What did I say?” she asked.

“I think you scared the hell out of him,” said Hayes. “Come on. Let’s get back to the house and pack up. Tomorrow, we start our new life together, and with any luck, by the end of the week, we will be Mr. and Mrs. Hayes O’Neal.”

“Before we start our life as Mr. and Mrs. O’Neal, don’t you think we should get something out of the way?” smirked Victoria. Hayes stared at her, tilting his head to the side. Then it hit him.

“Vic, we don’t have to rush this,” he said quietly.

“Hayes, I’ve been in love with you for almost ten years. I don’t think we’re rushing anything. Now, please, take me home and make love to me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he laughed.

Hayes thought it would be awkward on their first time. It was anything but awkward. It was beautiful and sweet. His brave Victoria stripped right there in front of him, showing her beautiful body to him in all its glorious nakedness.

When he stripped, Victoria trailed her fingers over every rippling muscle, feeling what would soon belong to her. They'd always had passionate kisses, but tonight, their kissing was filled not just with passion but also with love and promises of a future together.

Her sweet body molded to his own as he gently pushed forward, a little at a time, he moved further and further inside of her until one final push.

He stilled, allowing her to catch her breath.

True to her new bravery, she only smiled, rocking her hips back and forth, raking her nails over his back.

Hayes was happy with just one love-making session, but Victoria wanted more, and she went for it. Touching his body with a passion and knowledge that confused Hayes.

"I see your wheels turning," she said breathlessly, straddling his hips. "I've read every single one of Charlie's books. Every. Single. One."

"Fuck," he muttered.

"Yes. Fuck," she smiled.

"Baby, aren't you sore? We have a lifetime to keep going. I don't want to hurt you."

"I'm not hurting, Hayes. I'm so happy right now, I just want your body as close to mine as it can possibly be. And as it turns out, that's making love. You good with that?" Hayes laughed, rolling her over, and kissing down her neck, tweaking those beautiful nipples.



“Babe, I am more than okay with that. Open up, honey, I’m about to truly make you mine.”

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

The wedding of Victoria and Hayes took place beneath the massive tents of Belle Fleur, keeping the team from being completely drowned by the summer rain. It didn't stop a thing.

The food still came out, tray after tray of delicious dishes. The spirits flowed, both the liquid variety and ghostly variety. And the laughter seemed to never end.

"I'll spend the rest of my life trying to apologize for what I did," said Hayes.

"How about you spend the rest of your life making love to me instead," smiled Victoria.

"You know," he smirked, "I think I like your plan better."

It wasn't long after that Victoria and Hayes disappeared from their own reception. The rest of the wedding guests could not have been happier. It was wonderful to finally see them truly together.

"It's been a busy few weeks," smiled Kate, raising her glass to Ajei, Sophia Ann, and Gwen. "I'm glad that got taken care of."

"Agreed," said Sophia Ann. "There are a lot more we have to work with, so it's going to be a busy fall and winter, ladies."

"I think we can handle it," smiled Gwen. She looked at the couple laughing and hugging at the other table. Trevon and Millicent had only been married a few weeks, but they already looked blissfully settled and happy.

“They’re a wonderful couple,” smiled Ajei. “She’s pregnant.”

“Oh! That’s great!” said Sophia Ann. “Multiples?”

“No, thank goodness,” said Ajei. “That woman is going to have a twelve-to-fifteen-pound baby. If it were two, she’d kill him.”

“No matter,” laughed Kate. “We’ll make sure she’s just fine. All of them. Just like our mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and others. We’ll all be just fine.”

“To us,” said Ajei, raising her glass. In chorus, her co-conspirators and best friends smiled.

“To us!”

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:40 am*

“So, you’re a pilot,” giggled the young woman beside him at the bar. She was walking one long, claw-like nail up his arm, and it wasn’t having the effect he’d hoped it would. In fact, it was having the opposite effect.

“Uh. Yeah,” he said, pulling his arm back.

She sneered at him and then scooted closer. He pushed back, and she glared at him. She couldn’t be more than twenty-two or twenty-three, but she was definitely trying to mark her territory.

“I heard the Navy pilots earn extra money when they’re deployed,” she smiled.

And there it was. He’d seen it and experienced it before, but this one was pretty blatant. He stared at her, frowning with a strange expression.

“Where would you hear that? I make about twenty bucks an hour. That’s all.”

“Yeah, right,” she snorted. He stared at her, and she frowned. “No way!”

“Sorry. That’s why I live in my van,” he lied.

“God, you’re so pathetic! I know you’re lying. My girlfriend dated a pilot, and I know what they make.”

“Then you shouldn’t have asked a question that you already knew the answer to.” He stood, pushing the beer toward the bartender, then walked to the bathroom. He hoped the woman would get the hint.

By the time he returned, she was already working a little scam on some stupid tourist. He sat down, reaching for the beer, and the bartender reached for it as well, causing it to spill.

“Damn,” he muttered.

“Sorry,” she said louder than she needed to. “Let me get you another one.”

“No, it’s alright. I don’t need another.”

“Yes, you do,” she said, staring at him. “And I’ll explain why.”