



Pressure Point (Lantern Beach Blackout: Detonation #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: When a woman emerges from Lantern Beach's maritime forest with wounds, no memory, and no identification, she desperately wants to know who she is. But she remembers nothing—not her name, her past, or why someone would try to kill her.

Blackout operative Atlas Manning's protective instincts kick into overdrive the moment he encounters the injured woman. He takes her to the local clinic, but when a professional assassin targets her there, the woman's amnesia becomes the least of his worries.

As Quinn's fragmented memories begin to surface, they paint a disturbing picture. Flashes of violence and references to mysterious targets suggest she may not be the innocent victim she appears to be. When she exhibits combat skills that rival Atlas's own, he realizes this woman is far more dangerous—and valuable—than anyone imagined.

As pressure builds from all sides and a deadly hurricane approaches the island, Quinn must decide whether to run from her past or face the truth—even if it destroys the very man who saved her.

Total Pages (Source): 47

CHAPTER

ONE

The morning sun filtered through the canopy of live oaks and loblolly pines as Atlas Manning drove down the narrow road leading away from Blackout headquarters.

Spanish moss draped the ancient trees like funeral shrouds, creating a tunnel of green that made the maritime forest feel primeval and alive.

He was heading to the store for a routine supply run—nothing that required his particular expertise. But a hurricane was brewing out at sea, so everyone was pitching in to batten down the hatches, as the saying went.

Though it was only mid-July, the storm season this year was especially active. A Category 2 storm had hit the Bahamas just two weeks ago.

He didn't mind doing a few errands. The solitude gave him time to think, and with the weight of not knowing Sigma's next plan, he needed the mental space to process. The terrorist group was planning something, but Atlas and his colleagues didn't know what.

He and his teammates needed to figure it out before it was too late.

The road curved ahead, following the natural contours of the island's landscape. Atlas had driven this route dozens of times and knew every bend and straightaway.

Which was why the flash of movement from the tree line made him instantly alert.

A figure burst from the forest, stumbling onto the asphalt directly in front of his black SUV.

A woman.

Atlas slammed on the brakes, and the vehicle slid on the sandy residue coating the coastal road.

The SUV stopped just feet from her, close enough that he could see the woman clearly through the windshield.

She was maybe in her late twenties, with long, dark hair that hung in wet tangles around her face. Her clothes—jean shorts and a light-blue tank top—were soaked and clung to her slim frame.

But it was her eyes that caught his attention. They appeared wild and terrified.

As if she'd been running for her life.

The woman stared at him through the windshield for a heartbeat. Then she looked back from where she'd come. Looked at him again.

Her expression transformed from desperation to caution.

She ran to the passenger side of the SUV and yanked on the handle.

Atlas unlocked the door. "Get in."

She collapsed into the passenger seat, breathing hard, water dripping from her hair

onto the leather upholstery.

“Please,” she gasped. “Someone’s chasing me. I don’t . . . I can’t . . .”

Atlas scanned the trees where the woman had emerged. The Pamlico Sound stretched on the other side, probably a quarter mile away. But there were no homes or buildings nearby.

Just wilderness.

He searched for movement, listened for sounds that didn’t belong.

But the forest appeared still.

Despite that, the hair on the back of his neck rose.

Someone was watching them. He was certain of it.

“Are you hurt?” He kept his voice calm while his gaze continued to sweep the woods.

“I don’t know,” she whispered, rubbing a hand over her forehead. “My head . . . everything’s fuzzy. I can’t remember . . .”

She was going into shock. Her pale skin, trembling hands, and the way she seemed to have trouble focusing made that clear. But his tactical awareness screamed warnings.

The forest felt wrong. Too quiet.

Like predators were holding their breath, waiting as they lurked there.

As much as Atlas wanted to find whoever had scared the woman, her health and

safety were more important.

“We need to move.” He shifted the SUV into Drive. “Hold on.”

As he accelerated down the road, Atlas checked his mirrors.

No figure emerged from the forest. No shadowy movements appeared within the trees.

But the feeling of being watched persisted, crawling along his spine like a cold finger.

Whoever had been chasing this woman was still out there. Still hunting.

And Atlas had just made himself part of the quarry.

The inside of the SUV felt like a sanctuary, but she couldn't stop shaking.

Her wet clothes stuck to her skin, making her feel cold despite the warm morning air circulating through the truck's cracked windows.

Why am I so cold? Why are my clothes soaked? Why do my lips taste like salt?

She pressed her back against the passenger seat, trying to ground herself in something solid. The man beside her—tall, dark-haired, with the kind of alert posture that suggested military training—kept glancing in his mirrors as he drove.

His tension was palpable, and it did nothing to ease her own fear.

“What do you see?” She followed his gaze to the side mirror. “Is someone following us?”

“Not yet.” His voice sounded calm but watchful. “But someone was back there. I could feel them.”

The words sent a fresh wave of terror through her.

Someone was chasing her. She’d been certain of it.

But who? And why?

She tried to reach back into her memory, searching for any explanation for how she’d ended up running through a forest with wet clothes and a pounding headache.

But there was nothing. Just fragments of sensation.

The feeling of being hunted.

The sound of her own ragged breathing.

The desperate need to reach civilization.

“I can’t remember anything.” She pressed her palms against her temples. Her headache was getting worse, and the sharp pain made it hard to think clearly. “I don’t know why someone was chasing me. I don’t even know how I got into the woods.”

The man—she realized she didn’t even know his name—glanced at her with concern.

“What’s the last thing you do remember?”

She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate. But the harder she tried to grasp her memories, the more they seemed to slip away like water through her fingers.

“Nothing.”

She opened her eyes to find him watching her with a mixture of sympathy and wariness.

“I can’t remember anything.”

And now she was in a truck at the mercy of a stranger.

A tremble raced through her at the thought.

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CHAPTER

TWO

Why can't I remember? I must have been in water somewhere. My clothes are soaking wet.

As she and the stranger continued down the road and away from the woods, she attempted to control the panic that tried to claim her muscles, that tried to set her mind spinning.

Panicking would do her no good right now.

The dampness of her tank and shorts was becoming more uncomfortable as the adrenaline began to fade. The fabric felt heavy against her skin, and she smelled something in the fibers—seawater maybe?

She licked her lips. The salty taste remained.

But also something else. Something chemical she couldn't identify.

Her feet were bare and coated with sand.

Sand? Had she been on a beach? How close was the beach anyway?

“Your head.” The man nodded toward her temple. “You’re bleeding.”

She reached up and touched the spot he'd indicated, wincing when her fingers found a tender, swollen area seeping blood. She hadn't even realized she was injured.

She supposed that explained the headache.

She put the visor down and glanced in the small mirror.

She gasped at the unfamiliar face that stared back. Dark, wild hair. Frightened blue eyes. Dried blood at her temple. Dried sand on her cheeks.

What had happened to her?

"I'm Atlas, by the way." The man's tone turned gentler. "Atlas Manning. And you're safe now, okay? I'm going to help you figure this out."

"Atlas." She tested the name, finding something solid and reassuring about it. "Thank you. I'm . . ."

She hesitated. Her mind was blank.

"I—I don't know what my name is." Terror filled her at the realization. How could she not remember her name? Her past? Anything about herself other than the terror she felt?

"That's okay," Atlas reassured her. "We'll figure it out together."

The kindness in his voice almost brought tears to her eyes. She had no reason to trust this stranger, no memories to guide her judgment.

But something about Atlas made her feel safe in a situation that had suddenly become distressingly uncertain.

As they drove down the road, she tried to piece together the fragments of sensation that were all she had left.

Running. Fear. The sound of pursuit behind me.

And before that . . .

Water. I was in water.

But try as she might, she couldn't remember how she got there or why. All she knew was that something terrible had happened, something that had left her with no memories and a head wound that suggested violence.

And somewhere behind them, in the green shadows of the forest, she felt certain someone was still hunting her.

Someone who most likely wouldn't give up.

The Lantern Beach Medical Clinic smelled like antiseptic and sea salt—a combination that always reminded Atlas of field hospitals in places he'd rather forget.

But the facilities fit the island vibe.

Nestled off the coast of North Carolina, Lantern Beach was a slender barrier island accessible only by ferry.

Its isolation was part of its enduring charm.

The narrow strip of land, barely twelve miles long and two miles across at its widest point, sat embraced by the vast Atlantic on one side and the sheltered waters of the Pamlico Sound on the other.

Originally established as a humble fishing community in the late 1800s, the island had remained relatively undiscovered until tourists began arriving in the 1970s, forever altering its character while somehow preserving its soul.

Life on Lantern Beach moved according to nature's rhythms rather than the insistent pace of the mainland.

Locals collected their mail from PO boxes rather than home delivery.

They exchanged news at the local market, and they conducted business with a relaxed efficiency that frustrated newcomers but defined the island's character.

Sandy lanes and gravel roads connected the scattered community of vacation cottages and year-round homes, where the boundary between past and present seemed as fluid as the tides themselves, and serious crime had been unknown for thirty years . . . until the past several years.

Atlas watched as Dr. Autumn Spenser cleaned and bandaged the head wound of the woman he'd brought in. A moment later, she pronounced the damage superficial but concerning, given the apparent memory loss.

"Mild concussion, most likely," Dr. Spenser explained to her patient. "But the amnesia could be psychological as much as physical. Sometimes the mind protects itself from trauma by forgetting."

"I see." The woman nodded, her expression still pinched and pensive.

"The good news is that you're not dehydrated. Other than your head injury and some cuts and bruises, you seem healthy. We ran a tox screen just to make sure you weren't given anything to cause the memory loss. We're still waiting for those results."

“Thank . . . thank you. I appreciate your thoroughness.”

Atlas stood near the window, trying not to be intrusive as the afternoon sun slanted through the blinds. Yet he wanted more than anything to know this woman’s story, and she’d invited him to stay.

He knew there were tests to prove whether or not her amnesia was real. But he had no reason to think it wasn’t. This woman’s fear seemed authentic.

A knock sounded at the door, and Police Chief Cassidy Chambers stepped inside and introduced herself.

As Dr. Spenser stepped back, Cassidy began asking the woman questions about what had happened.

“I’m sorry.” Frustration rose in the woman’s voice every time she couldn’t answer a question. “I wish I could tell you more, but it’s all just . . . blank.”

Cassidy stepped closer, her blonde hair catching the light. “Not even fragments? Sometimes people remember sensations before they remember facts. The smell of fuel, the sound of an engine, feeling scared or cold. Does any of that seem familiar?”

The woman picked at the edge of the blanket draped over her legs. She frowned, her brow furrowed. “There’s something. But it doesn’t make sense.”

“Anything could help,” Cassidy said.

“I remember rain, and the feeling of being rocked back and forth. But also . . .” She hesitated, glancing at Atlas. “Voices. Angry voices. And the feeling that I needed to run.”

Cassidy and Atlas exchanged glances.

This woman hadn't just survived a storm.

He felt certain foul play was also involved.

CHAPTER

THREE

“I think that’s enough for now.” Cassidy closed her notepad. “Atlas, could I speak with you in the hall a moment?”

Atlas nodded then looked at the woman sitting in the hospital bed. “I’ll be right back. Dr. Spenser is just down the hall if you need anything.”

Something flickered in those blue eyes—relief? Gratitude? Whatever emotion it was made his chest tighten. He didn’t know the woman, but this situation brought out all of his protective instincts.

She needed someone watching out for her in her vulnerable state right now, and God had literally put her in his path.

In the hallway, Cassidy kept her voice low. “Tell me again how you found her.”

Atlas leaned against the wall and recounted the story again.

“I definitely feel like foul play could be involved here,” she murmured, a knot of concern forming on her brow.

“I agree. Did you send your guys out to check the woods?”

“They’re searching them now. So far, nothing. I thought maybe she’d been in a

maritime accident of some sort and swam ashore. If that's what happened, there's no evidence of it. We'll keep looking." She paused. "Do you think the proximity to the Blackout headquarters is a coincidence?"

He swallowed hard. He wanted to say he hadn't thought of it.

But that wasn't true. It was definitely a consideration, given all the assignments they were working on. Any number of people could want to target them.

"It's best to consider all the possibilities," he finally said. "Especially after everything that's happened. Especially with Sigma still out there."

Sigma was a shadowy terrorist organization whose true genius lay not in the sophistication of their weapons, but in the manipulation of their operatives.

The group recruited skilled former military and intelligence personnel by convincing them they were working for a classified government program, fighting domestic terrorists and protecting national security.

These unwitting operatives genuinely believed they were serving their country when they carried out missions actually designed to destabilize American institutions and sow fear among civilians.

The group was led by an unknown mastermind who had deep knowledge of psychological warfare. Sigma exploited the very patriotism and sense of duty that made these men and women excellent soldiers, turning their greatest strengths into weapons against everything they thought they were protecting.

The organization's recent focus on Blackout suggested a larger plan to eliminate key defense capabilities while maintaining plausible deniability.

After all, Sigma's operatives truly believed they were hunting real terrorists, which made these very operatives impossible to turn or extract information from when captured.

"I still think we need to give her the benefit of the doubt," Atlas said.

"Absolutely," Cassidy agreed. "I don't know who she is, but she's obviously scared. I can't blame her for that."

"Can you run her prints? Look through missing person reports?"

"I plan on it, but it will take some time, especially with the hurricane approaching. It makes people go crazy."

Atlas swiped a hand through his hair. "I already talked to Ty. I'm going to stay here with her a while longer."

Ty Chambers was his boss—and he was also married to Cassidy.

"That's nice of you," Cassidy said. "She needs someone, and she seems to trust you."

Atlas glanced back at the room where the mystery woman waited. There was another image he couldn't get out of his mind.

"Those wounds on her wrists . . ." He swallowed hard. "I don't like the look of them."

"Me neither." Cassidy frowned. "Keep your guard up. Your protective instincts are one of your strengths, but they could also be used against you."

As Cassidy walked away, Atlas remained in the hallway another moment, staring at

the closed door leading to the woman's room.

Cassidy was right to be cautious. Every aspect of training he'd received, every hard-learned lesson from his CIA days told him to be wary of the woman who'd appeared from nowhere with no memory and suspicious injuries.

But when he thought about those blue eyes, about the way she'd trusted him completely despite not knowing his name or who he was, logic seemed less important than instinct.

His instincts were telling him that whoever this woman really was, she needed Atlas's protection more than he needed to protect himself from her.

The silence in the exam room felt heavier after Atlas and the police chief left.

She pulled the thin blanket higher around her shoulders, though the chill she felt had nothing to do with temperature.

She'd answered everyone's questions as honestly as she could. But each "I don't remember" felt like another door slamming shut on her identity.

How could a person vanish from their own mind? How could every memory, every connection to who she was simply disappear? Was it from the concussion?

The doctor didn't seem to think she had that severe of an injury.

Even as she lay in the hospital bed feeling lost and empty, something else stirred beneath the confusion—an alertness that seemed wrong for someone in her current state.

Her body felt coiled, ready to spring into action at the first sign of a threat.

She flexed her hands and winced. Now that the immediate shock had worn off, she was beginning to catalog her injuries more carefully.

The knuckles on both of her hands were scraped and swollen. Her wrists bore both bruises and what looked like rope burns—thin red marks that circled her skin like bracelets.

How did I get these?

She examined the marks more closely.

Someone had tied her up, she realized. There was no other explanation that made sense.

The awareness sent ice through her veins.

She lifted her hospital gown slightly, checking her ribs where a persistent ache had been bothering her. Dark bruises bloomed across her left side—the kind of marks that came from kicks or punches.

Someone had hurt her. Deliberately.

Had she escaped from someone? Was that why she'd been running through the forest? And if so, was this person looking for her right now?

Fear crept up her spine. But alongside it came something else.

Survival instinct.

A cold, calculating part of her seemed to kick into gear automatically, assessing threats and planning responses. She found herself noting the room's exits, the

potential weapons within reach, the blind spots where an attacker might hide.

Why am I thinking like this? Is this normal for me? Or is something more than natural instincts kicking in?

The questions would haunt her until she had answers.

CHAPTER

FOUR

A knock sounded at the door, and a moment later Atlas stepped back inside.

Despite her growing confusion about her own identity, seeing him immediately eased some of the tension in her shoulders. Something solid about him made her feel anchored even when everything else seemed to be shifting.

“How are you feeling?” He settled into the chair next to the bed.

“Confused. And scared. Atlas, I’ve been looking at my injuries more carefully, and I . . .” She couldn’t finish her statement.

His green eyes sharpened. “You think someone did this to you?”

She showed him her wrists, then carefully lifted her shirt to reveal the bruising on her ribs.

“I don’t know what other conclusion I should draw. It looks like I was in a fight or . . .” She swallowed hard. “Or someone was hurting me, and I was fighting back.”

Atlas remained quiet, studying the marks with the trained eye of someone who’d seen violence before.

When he looked up, his expression was gentle but serious. “You’re right. Those

aren't injuries from an accident."

The confirmation should have terrified her. Instead, it brought an odd sense of relief.

At least she wasn't going crazy.

"Where am I exactly?" she asked.

"You're on Lantern Beach, a small island off the North Carolina coast."

The name didn't ring any bells. It felt just as foreign as her identity.

"So what happens now?" The question that had been gnawing at her finally emerged.

"If I'm not from here, if I have no identification, no memory of who I am . . . where do I go? What do I do?"

The vulnerability in her voice surprised her. She didn't feel like the kind of person who admitted weakness easily. Yet here she was, completely dependent on the kindness of a stranger.

Atlas leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, closing some of the distance between them. "Dr. Spenser wants to keep you here a few more hours for observation. After that, we'll figure things out. One step at a time."

"But I have no money, no insurance, no way to pay for any of this—" How did she remember those things even? She had no idea of her name, but she remembered she needed insurance to pay for her medical needs?

It seemed ironic, but she supposed the brain was a mysterious thing.

"Don't worry about that." His voice carried a quiet authority that made her believe

him. “I’ll make sure you’re taken care of.”

A lump formed in her throat. “That’s so generous of you, and I don’t want to alienate the one person who’s been kind to me. But who are you even?”

He offered a compassionate, lopsided smile. “Like I said earlier, I’m Atlas Manning. I work for a private security firm called Blackout.”

“Private security firm?” What exactly did that mean?

“We do contract work for the government as well as individuals. Most of us are former military.”

Something sparked in her eyes. “Are you?”

“I served several years before working for the CIA.”

Her gaze widened. “The CIA?”

He nodded but offered no more information. Instead, his eyes steadily held hers. “And I promise you, I’ll keep you safe while we figure out what happened to you.”

I’ll keep you safe.

The words settled into a place in her chest that felt hollow and aching.

When was the last time someone had made her that promise? She couldn’t remember, obviously, but something deep inside her responded to the certainty in his voice.

“Why?” she asked softly. “Why are you helping me? You don’t know anything about me. I could be anyone.”

She needed to know. She needed certainty about something .

Atlas stayed quiet a moment, and she sensed he was wrestling with something internal.

Finally, he said, “Because whoever you are, whatever brought you here, you deserve to have someone in your corner. And because . . .” He hesitated then seemed to make a decision as he lowered his voice.

“Because when I look at you, I see someone who’s been through a nightmare but hasn’t broken. That’s worth protecting.”

Unexpected tears pricked her eyes. “Thank you.”

“Get some rest.” Atlas stood. “I’ll stay close in case you need anything. And as soon as you’re out of here, we’ll start working on getting your life back.”

As he headed for the door, a terrible thought struck her. “Atlas? What if I remember, and I don’t like what I find out? What if there’s a different reason I can’t remember? What if I’m someone . . . bad?”

He paused at the threshold, looking back at her with those steady green eyes. “Then we’ll deal with that if it happens. But I don’t think you’re the villain in this story.”

“How can you be so sure?”

A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Because villains don’t usually worry about being villains.”

She couldn’t argue with that. But she knew she’d still worry until she remembered who she was and where she’d come from.

After he left, she settled back against the pillows, her mind churning despite her exhaustion. Outside, she could hear crickets and the gentle rustle of wind.

Noises that should have been soothing. Instead, they felt ominous.

Somewhere out there, answers waited.

The question was whether she'd survive long enough to find them.

CHAPTER

FIVE

Atlas had planned to check on the woman one more time before heading back to Blackout headquarters. He wanted to see the woods himself. Investigate what could have happened.

But instead of leaving, he'd gone back into her room and found her sleeping. He'd anchored himself in the uncomfortable plastic chair beside her hospital bed. Something had told him to stay longer.

Maybe it was the way she'd looked so lost when she'd asked where she would go. Maybe it was the defensive wounds on her knuckles and bruises on her ribs that spoke of a fight for survival.

Or maybe it was simply the right thing to do.

When he was a kid, his grandmother used to read him Bible stories. The story of the Good Samaritan had always stuck with him—the idea that sometimes you helped someone not because you knew them, but because they needed help.

It was a philosophy that had served him well in his military career, his time with the CIA, and now his work with Blackout.

He studied the woman another moment.

She slept fitfully, her dark hair spread across the white pillowcase like spilled ink. Even unconscious, she didn't look peaceful. Her hands clenched and unclenched periodically, and her breathing occasionally hitched as if she were running from something in her dreams.

Atlas found himself studying her face, trying to reconcile the vulnerability of her amnesia with the combat-ready alertness he'd glimpsed earlier. She was beautiful, but it was the kind of beauty that could be dangerous. It made men like him want to protect her even when logic suggested caution.

His phone buzzed with a text from Ty Chambers.

Status report on the woman?

Atlas typed back:

Still no memory. Staying with her until she's discharged.

Ty replied:

Be careful. Something feels off about the timing of her being here.

Atlas frowned at the message. Ty was right to be suspicious.

For two months, Sigma had been eerily quiet. After coordinated attacks involving bombs and the infiltration of Blackout, the terrorist organization had simply . . . vanished.

No chatter on intelligence networks, no new incidents, nothing.

In Atlas's experience, silence from an enemy was often more dangerous than noise.

His phone buzzed again with another text from Ty.

Cassidy's guys searched the woods. So far, nothing.

His jaw tightened. He didn't believe this was as simple as someone randomly chasing her.

Atlas was composing a response when soft sounds drifted from the woman beside him.

He glanced over, expecting to see her shifting restlessly in another nightmare. But her breathing remained even, her body still.

Then he heard it clearly—a whispered phrase in what sounded like Russian.

Atlas went still as he listened to the fluid syllables flowing from her lips.

“Nyet, vy ne mozhete zastavit menya eto delat. Ya ne budu. Slishkom mnogie postradayut.”

He recognized enough to know she was speaking with the fluency of a native speaker, not someone who'd picked up phrases from a language app.

Atlas hit a button on his phone and began recording, his mouth dry.

But he thought he could translate.

No, you can't make me do it. I won't. Too many will be hurt.

Why would she say something like that?

The woman's voice grew more agitated, and the foreign words came faster. She seemed to be arguing with someone, her tone sharp and defensive.

Then, clear as day, she said in perfect English, "The target is protected. I need more time."

Atlas's blood turned to ice.

Target.

He ended the recording, his heart pounding harder.

She fell silent again, her breathing evening out as she settled deeper into sleep. But Atlas couldn't unsee what he'd just witnessed, couldn't unhear those words.

The target is protected.

Was Blackout the target? Was he?

What if this was all an act?

Atlas studied her sleeping face, searching for any sign of deception. But she looked so vulnerable, so genuinely lost.

Either she was the best actress he'd ever encountered, or the amnesia was real and her unconscious mind was revealing secrets her waking self didn't remember.

Neither option was particularly comforting.

Atlas leaned back in his chair, his protective instincts warring with his training.

Every rational part of his mind said he should wake her up, demand answers, treat her as the potential threat she might be.

But when he looked at her wounds, considered the way she'd trusted him so completely, rationality seemed less important than the certainty that whatever the woman had been involved in, she was as much a victim as a participant.

The target is protected.

Atlas just hoped he wasn't making the biggest mistake of his life by choosing to be her protector instead of her interrogator.

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CHAPTER

SIX

Consciousness returned slowly, like surfacing from deep water.

She blinked against the afternoon light streaming through the clinic's windows, disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings until memory—what little she had—came flooding back.

Lantern Beach. The woods. Atlas.

She turned her head and found him still there, but something had changed since her nap.

The warmth in his green eyes had been replaced by something more guarded, more professional. He studied her with the careful attention of someone trying to solve a puzzle.

“Hey.” Her voice still sounded rough with sleep. “You’re still here.”

“I try to be a man of my word.” His tone was neutral, giving nothing away. “How do you feel?”

Before she could answer, Dr. Spenser knocked and entered, clipboard in hand.

“I wanted to check on you again.” The doctor approached the bed, pulling out a small

flashlight. “Follow the light with your eyes, please.”

She complied, acutely aware of Atlas watching every movement.

“Looks good. I’d still like to keep you for observation a while longer, but I expect to discharge you sometime today.”

When the doctor finished the examination, she asked, “What exactly happened to my head? I mean, what kind of injury is it?”

Dr. Spenser glanced at Atlas, then back to her. “The pattern of the injury suggests something heavy and hard was deliberately struck against your head.” Dr. Spenser’s expression was gentle but serious. “It appears to be blunt force trauma.”

The clinical description sent a chill through her bones. “So someone attacked me.”

The doctor nodded almost apologetically. “Yes, that would be my professional assessment.”

She tried to reconcile that information with the blank space where her memories should be. Instead, she flinched at the sharp pain echoing through her skull.

“And I still can’t remember anything about it,” she finally said. “You said that the amnesia might be temporary. How temporary?”

Dr. Spenser pressed her lips together and looked down at her notes, her fingers drumming against the clipboard before she caught herself and stopped. When she looked back up, her expression carried the kind of careful neutrality doctors wore when the prognosis wasn’t good.

“There’s no set timeline for these things,” she finally said. “It could be hours, days . .

.”

“Or never,” she finished quietly. “It might never come back.”

Her voice caught at the thought. How would she even go on without her memory? It didn’t seem possible.

“I don’t want to give you false hope or false despair.

” Dr. Spenser’s voice sounded soft with compassion.

“Memory recovery is unpredictable. Sometimes a trigger brings everything back at once. Sometimes memories return in fragments over months or years. And sometimes . . .” She shrugged apologetically.

After Dr. Spenser left, silence stretched between her and Atlas. She felt his new wariness like a physical presence in the room.

What had changed in the time since they’d last spoken?

He’d discovered something he hadn’t told her, hadn’t he?

“You found out something.” She studied Atlas. “About me. What is it?”

Atlas remained quiet for a long moment, seeming to weigh his words. Then he asked, “Do you know why you spoke in Russian while you were sleeping?”

“What?” She startled. “Russian? Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Her mind raced. Was she Russian? She didn't have an accent.

Her gut told her she wasn't.

But then why . . . ?

Instead of making more sense, things just seemed even more confusing than ever.

She shook her head. "I have no idea. What did I say? Did you understand it?"

Atlas nodded. "You said, 'No, you can't make me do it. I won't. Too many will be hurt.'"

Her head began to spin. "I have no idea what that means. Did I say anything else?"

"In English, you said, 'The target is protected. I need more time.'"

"I . . . I don't like the sound of that."

Atlas's stony expression made it clear he didn't either. "What's the last thing you remember before running into the road?"

She closed her eyes, reaching for anything that might be lurking in the shadows of her mind.

"Fragments. Rain on windows. The feeling of being trapped. Was I being held captive? It's the only way to explain the marks on my wrists, right?"

His eyes sharpened. "That seems like the most plausible scenario."

"What if someone was holding me against my will, and I somehow managed to get

away? What if that's why I can't remember—because whatever happened was so traumatic my mind just . . . shut down?"

The possibility felt both terrifying and oddly logical. It would explain the defensive wounds, the way her body seemed to remember how to assess threats even when her mind remembered nothing else.

"That could be correct," Atlas said as if choosing his words carefully. "But it would also mean whoever was responsible might still be looking for you."

A lump formed in her throat at his words.

He was absolutely right.

CHAPTER

SEVEN

The thought of someone holding her captive made her stomach clench. “Maybe it’s better not knowing then. Maybe some memories are meant to stay buried.”

Atlas’s eyes narrowed. “Do you really believe that?”

She met his gaze and saw something there she couldn’t quite identify. Suspicion? Concern?

Or was it something deeper?

“I don’t know what I believe.” Her voice cracked. “I don’t know who I am or where I belong. I don’t know if I have family somewhere wondering where I am or if I’m someone people are better off without. All I know is that sitting here feels like being suspended in limbo.”

Atlas leaned forward slightly. “What do you want to do?”

“I want answers. Even if they’re terrible. Even if they change everything. I need to know who I am.” She took a shaky breath. “Will you help me find those answers?”

Something flickered across his face. Doubt, maybe. Or calculation.

She braced herself for the “no” she was certain she’d receive.

Then his expression softened. “I’ll see what I can do.”

It wasn’t the wholehearted agreement she’d hoped for. But at least it wasn’t the outright refusal she’d expected.

Right now, with no memory of her past and no clear path to her future, something—anything—was enough.

Even if she couldn’t shake the feeling that Atlas was keeping secrets of his own.

The afternoon had stretched endlessly in the small clinic room. Though the shades were drawn, she sensed the sun was now setting.

Dr. Spenser had officially discharged her, but Atlas had asked her to wait in the room while he made some calls to secure accommodations.

He’d been gone an hour already.

Part of her feared he wouldn’t come back.

She wouldn’t blame him if he didn’t. This was . . . a lot.

But Atlas was the only hope she had right now. Atlas and . . . God?

Did she believe in God? Did she trust in Him?

Her gut told her yes. And if that was true, she needed to trust Him now too, in the midst of this trying situation.

While Atlas was gone, she lay on the narrow bed. She’d been given some black sweats, flip-flops, and a pink scrub top to wear since her clothes were now evidence.

She stared at the ceiling tiles above her and tried to make sense of the fragments swirling in her mind.

Every time she closed her eyes, fleeting images flickered behind her eyelids like broken film strips. Rain. Darkness. The sensation of being hunted.

Underneath it all was the persistent feeling that time was running out.

Time was running out for what?

She shifted restlessly, her ribs protesting the movement. The bruises there were deepening, painting her skin in shades of purple and yellow that told a story she couldn't remember.

But her body remembered something. Every muscle felt coiled, ready to spring into action at the first sign of danger.

And, apparently, she could speak Russian. But why? Nothing was making sense.

As she leaned her head back against the bed, the feeling of being watched crept over her again.

She sat up slowly, her senses sharpening despite the lingering effects of her concussion.

A soft scraping sound came from outside her window. Metal against glass, like someone trying to jimmy the lock.

Her heartrate spiked.

But alongside the fear came something else.

A cold, calculating alertness that seemed to emerge from somewhere deep inside her.

Without conscious thought, she observed the room's contents: a metal tray of medical instruments, a heavy ceramic water pitcher, the IV stand that could serve as both weapon and shield.

How do I know how to think like this?

She glanced at the window, unable to see it with the shades drawn.

But she knew one thing for certain: someone was sliding it open with barely a whisper of sound.

She forced herself to remain still, to appear asleep while tracking the intruder's movements through slitted eyes. A figure dressed in dark clothing slipped through the window with practiced stealth, landing silently on the linoleum floor.

He was medium height and build, wearing a ski mask that obscured his features.

In his right hand, he gripped a knife with a serrated edge that caught the light from the cracked bathroom door. He crept closer to her bedside, and she braced herself to act.

"Time to finish what we started, Quinn." His voice carried a slight accent she couldn't place.

Quinn?

The name hit her like a physical blow. But before she could process it, the man stepped toward her bed, his knife raised.

Instinct took over.

She grabbed the metal tray from the bedside table and swung it in a wide arc.

It caught her attacker across the temple.

He staggered but didn't go down.

"You should just do this the easy way." He lunged at her again, his knife poised to attack.

She ducked, but the blade caught the sleeve of her scrub top. The fabric tore, and the blade sliced the skin beneath.

Ignoring the pain, she leaped from the bed and backed toward the door, her mind racing.

"You can't run forever," he snarled. "I was given a mission, and I don't fail."

Her body seemed to know exactly how to move. How to keep the bedside table between herself and the knife. How to position herself for maximum escape routes.

But her conscious mind screamed with confusion.

Is Quinn my name? Who are "they"?

The attacker lunged again.

She shoved the rolling table at him. Then she grabbed a handful of medical instruments from a nearby tray and hurled them at his face.

Scissors and forceps scattered across the floor as he ducked and weaved.

But his movements were calculated.

He lunged at her once more.

He was herding her away from the exit, wasn't he? Backing her into the corner where she'd have nowhere to run?

Even as she strategized her next move, panic raced through her.

"Atlas!" The name tore from her throat before she could stop it.

CHAPTER

EIGHT

Atlas had finished his phone call and was halfway down the clinic's main corridor when he heard the woman scream his name.

The terror in her voice cut through him like a blade.

He sprinted toward her room.

His training kicked in as he approached the doorway, every sense heightened.

Atlas burst through the door and found the woman pressed against the far wall. Blood gushed from a cut on her arm, while a masked figure advanced on her with a knife. Medical instruments lay scattered across the floor like fallen stars.

“Get away from her!” Atlas roared.

The attacker spun toward him, and Atlas caught a glimpse of dark eyes through the ski mask—cold, professional, utterly without mercy.

For a split second, the three of them stared at each other. Then the man seemed to calculate his odds against Atlas's considerable size.

He chose flight.

The man hurled the knife toward the woman's chest. As he did, the woman dove sideways.

The blade embedded itself into the wall where the woman had just been standing.

That had been close.

If her instincts hadn't been so good . . .

Atlas shoved that thought aside.

The man darted toward the open window and leapt outside.

Atlas swept his gaze over the woman's face. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, though her eyes were wide with shock and adrenaline. "I'm okay. Go! Don't let him get away!"

Atlas hesitated for a fraction of a second. Every instinct screamed at him not to leave her alone again.

But she was right.

They needed answers, and the would-be killer was their only lead.

Atlas launched himself through the window, landing hard on the clinic's landscaped grounds.

The masked figure was already sprinting across the parking lot toward a dark sedan with tinted windows.

Atlas pushed himself harder, his longer strides closing the distance.

He was maybe twenty feet away when the man reached the car, yanked open the door, and dove into the passenger seat.

The sedan's engine roared to life, and Atlas caught a glimpse of the license plate as the vehicle peeled out of the parking lot: North Carolina tags ending in 847.

He pulled out his phone and called Cassidy.

"We need an APB," he said the moment she answered. "Dark blue sedan, NC plates . . ." He rattled off the partial number. "Armed intruder who just tried to kill the woman from the woods."

"What? Is she?—"

"She's alive. But Cassidy, whoever she is, someone wants her dead badly enough to send a killer after her."

"I'm on it."

Atlas was already jogging back toward the clinic. "I'd like to take her to Blackout headquarters. It's the most secure location on the island."

There was a pause. "Atlas, you remember what happened the last time we thought headquarters was secure? Sigma got in. They compromised your systems."

The reminder hit him like a cold slap.

Two months ago, Sigma operatives had breached Blackout's security, stolen classified information, and nearly killed Raven Newton with a pressure-sensitive

bomb on the grounds.

Raven was a historical authentication specialist for the International Cultural Heritage Protection Agency and one of the leading experts in historical artifacts and weaponry in the US. She specialized in warfare artifacts from WWII through the Cold War era.

She'd been called in to investigate a supposed WWII bomb relic that she discovered was actually a modern fake. She and Jake Laudner, Atlas's team leader, had rekindled their former relationship while working together to expose Sigma.

Atlas's jaw hardened with determination. "That won't happen again. Not on my watch."

He ended the call and stomped inside, headed back to the woman's room. He found her sitting on the edge of the bed. A nurse had come in to treat her, and the woman now held gauze to her arm. Blood flowed from a cut the man had made.

Her face was pale but composed, and Atlas noticed she'd positioned herself with clear sightlines to both the door and window.

Like someone trained in tactical awareness.

Was he reading too much into this?

He wasn't sure.

But he needed to be on guard, just in case.

CHAPTER

NINE

Atlas pushed aside the thought of the woman being a trained operative as she turned toward him.

“Did you get him?” Fear crackled in her voice as she stared up at him from her bed.

“No, but I got a partial license plate. Cassidy’s running it now.” Atlas paused beside her.

He noted that the knife was still in the wall. Cassidy would no doubt keep that as evidence also—though it looked fairly ordinary in Atlas’s estimation.

The nurse moved the gauze to examine her wound. The cut was shallow but clean—the kind of precise slice that came from a very sharp blade.

His throat tightened at the sight of it. “How did this guy get in?”

“Through the window.”

“How did he know which room you were even in? The shades are drawn.”

“I have no idea.”

He rubbed his jaw. “We need to get you somewhere safe.”

“The police station?”

Atlas shook his head. “The man who attacked you appeared to be a professional. Police stations have too many access points, too many people coming and going. I’m taking you to my company’s headquarters.”

The woman was quiet a moment, studying his face as the nurse put antiseptic on her wound. “You’re not telling me something. What is it?”

Atlas met her gaze, seeing intelligence there that amnesia couldn’t erase. “My company is being targeted by a terrorist organization called Sigma. There’s a possibility your appearance here is connected to that.”

“You think I’m one of them.” It wasn’t a question. “A terrorist.”

“I think you’re in danger, and right now that’s all that matters. But I need you to trust me. Because whoever sent that man into your room isn’t going to stop after one failed attempt.”

“Quinn,” she said quietly.

Atlas went still. “What?”

“The man who tried to kill me—he called me Quinn. Does that name mean anything to you?”

Quinn. Atlas’s mind raced through mental databases of known operatives, both friendly and hostile. The name didn’t tickle any part of his memories.

“Not offhand,” he said finally. “But we’ll figure out who Quinn is. I promise.”

As soon as the nurse finished bandaging the woman's cut, Atlas prepared himself to leave with Quinn.

Everything about this situation screamed danger—not just for Quinn, but potentially for everyone at Blackout.

However, when he looked at the trust in her eyes, when he remembered the way she'd called his name when death came for her, the choice was already made.

He would keep this woman safe, even if it meant putting himself at risk.

Even if Quinn turned out to be someone he should be questioning instead of protecting.

Atlas got Quinn settled into a guest room on the third floor of Blackout headquarters.

It was a comfortable suite that overlooked the Pamlico Sound. He'd chosen it specifically because the water view seemed to calm her.

"There's a panic button by the bed." He showed her the discreet red switch. "And my suite is just down the hall. You won't be alone."

Quinn nodded, though her shoulders hunched forward protectively, creating a barrier between herself and the world. Every few seconds, she rolled them back as if trying to force relaxation, but the tension crept back immediately.

The attack at the clinic had shaken her more than she wanted to admit.

"Our operatives live here as well as their spouses and children," Atlas explained. "My friend's wife said she'd stop by and bring you some clothes and toiletries. I'm sure you probably want to take a shower. She can wait in the room for you if you'd feel

more comfortable.”

“I appreciate that.”

“There are also some snacks and drinks in the kitchenette. Help yourself.”

“Atlas?” She turned from the window where she’d been watching the sun set over the sound. “Thank you. For everything. I know this complicates things for you.”

You have no idea, he thought.

“I’m going to leave an agent stationed outside your door in case you need anything. In the meantime, get some rest. We’ll have more answers tomorrow.”

For some reason, he didn’t want to leave.

But he had no choice.

She needed to rest.

And he needed to investigate.

He prayed he hadn’t just invited danger into their home.

CHAPTER

TEN

Twenty minutes later, Atlas made his way toward the conference room on the ground floor. Ty Chambers, Colton Locke, and Cassidy were already there, sitting across from each other at the polished oak table.

The room's soundproof walls and electronic countermeasures made it the most secure space in the building.

Before sitting with them, Atlas grabbed a cup of coffee and a granola bar from a snack area. He couldn't forget to eat. Too much was riding on him staying sharp and alert.

"How is she?" Ty asked as Atlas walked toward the table.

"Shaken but steady. Whoever she is, she's got good instincts." Atlas pulled out a chair and sat down. "The would-be killer called her Quinn. Name mean anything to either of you?"

Colton frowned, his fingers already moving across his laptop. "Running the name through our databases now. Could be an alias, could be real. We'll see what comes up."

"Did she fit any missing person alerts?" Atlas continued.

“No,” Cassidy answered. “Her prints didn’t turn up anything, the knife is a fairly popular one with no prints, and the car you saw at the clinic? It was stolen.”

Atlas ran a hand over his face. “So every lead has turned up nothing?”

“Pretty much,” Colton muttered, staring at the computer. “And I don’t see anything on anyone named Quinn.”

“What about the woods?” Atlas asked. “Did your guys find anything useful?”

Cassidy shook her head. “No, if there were any signs of a struggle, they’re gone now. Covered up.”

“So we’re dealing with someone who knows what they’re doing.” Atlas’s jaw tightened as he said the words.

“Or someone connected to an organization with serious resources.” Colton gave them a knowing look.

The unspoken name hung in the air between them: Sigma.

“Any updates on Sigma activity?” Atlas asked the question, though he suspected he already knew the answer.

He took a long sip of coffee as he waited for their response.

“Hudson is looking into it. They’ve been radio silent for two months,” Ty confirmed. “Not a whisper on any intelligence channels. It’s like they just vanished.”

“That worries me more than if they were actively causing trouble.” Colton’s brow furrowed. “In my experience, when terrorists go quiet, they’re planning something

big.”

Atlas leaned back in his chair, processing the implications. “So we have a woman with no memory who could possibly be connected to Sigma and is the target of a professional killer. And I’m bringing her into our secure facility. Maybe this is a bad idea.”

A memory of Noreen hit him.

His colleagues had been put at risk because of his decision. He couldn’t let that happen again.

Yet he couldn’t walk away from someone in need either.

“When you put it like that, it does sound insane,” Ty admitted. “But you know what they say—keep your friends close and your enemies closer. If she’s a threat . . .”

“We’ll know soon enough.” Colton’s jaw tightened at the words. “Her amnesia won’t last forever. And people have a hard time maintaining false identities under stress.”

“How long do we let her stay?” Atlas asked the question that was weighing on him most heavily.

Ty and Colton exchanged a look.

Finally, Ty said, “We’ll know when it’s time for her to leave.”

It wasn’t much of an answer, but Atlas understood the subtext.

Things might turn ugly.

He hated the thought, but he couldn't deny reality.

"There's something else." The words felt as if they were fighting Atlas as they left his lips. He looked down at his hands, then back up at them. "While Quinn was asleep, she spoke in Russian. Then she said something in English about 'the target is protected' and how she needed more time."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees.

"You record it?" Colton asked.

Atlas nodded, pulling out his phone and playing the Russian words.

"Can you translate?" Cassidy asked.

"I thought I understood her, but I doublechecked to make sure my Russian wasn't rusty. It wasn't. She said, 'No, you can't make me do it. I won't. Too many will be hurt.'"

"That sounds . . . suspicious." Colton cocked his head and gave Atlas a knowing look.

"We'll have our language specialists analyze it," Ty said. "See if we can determine what dialect of Russian and its regional markers. Might give us a clue about her identity."

"Just remember, this woman may be a victim," Colton said. "But she could also be the most dangerous person who's ever set foot in this building. Don't let your protective instincts cloud your judgment."

Atlas wanted to argue, to defend Quinn's innocence.

But he couldn't. Not when the evidence was mounting that she was far more than a simple amnesia victim. Her language ability. Her survival skills. Her instincts.

"I'll be careful," he promised.

"We know you will," Colton said. "But Atlas? If it comes down to a choice between her safety and the safety of this team . . ."

"I understand," Atlas cut him off.

Because he did understand, even if he didn't like it.

As the meeting broke up, Atlas made his way back toward the guest quarters. His mind churned with questions with no good answers.

But when he thought about Quinn being alone in that room, probably staring out at the dark water and wondering who she really was . . . his heart took over.

Whatever the truth turned out to be, he wasn't going to abandon her to face it alone.

Not until he had proof that he should.

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

The guest quarters were more comfortable than anything Quinn could have hoped for. There was a small sitting area with a couch and reading chair, a kitchenette stocked with basics, and a bedroom with windows that overlooked the sound.

But comfort couldn't ease the restless energy that had been building since the attack at the clinic. Who had that man been?

She hadn't been able to see his face. But were his movements familiar? His voice?

She didn't know—and she hated not knowing.

At least she'd been able to take a shower. Just as Atlas had said, a woman named Raven Newton had brought her some clothes.

The woman was pleasant, and Quinn appreciated her efforts. Plus, it felt good to be clean. Her hair was still wet, air drying right now.

She wondered if she was the type to usually style her hair or wear makeup. She wasn't sure. She felt like she wasn't.

She paced to the window, pressing her palms against the cool glass.

The day's clouds had finally parted, revealing a moon that hung like a silver coin

above the dark water.

Moonlight painted a shimmering path across the water, and somewhere in the distance, she could see the lights of boats slowly cruising through the night.

Quinn.

The name echoed in her mind like a bell tolling. It felt familiar—but not familiar like coming home. Familiar like remembering a nightmare.

As she stared at the moonlit water, something shifted in her mind. The careful walls that had been holding back her memories trembled, and suddenly?—

Moonlight on water. No, moonlight on ice.

It was cold outside.

She held a gun in her hands as she stared at a nondescript building on the frozen tundra in front of her.

A comm device was pressed to her ear. In her other hand, an encrypted phone displayed photos of a family—a man, woman, and two young children.

“The target is still active.” Her voice sounded cold and professional as she said the words. “I need more time.”

“There’s no time, Quinn. You need to eliminate the threat. Now.”

She looked down at the photos again.

The family looked so happy, so innocent. The father worked for the government.

He'd stumbled onto something he shouldn't have seen. Standard protocol was elimination before he could pass the information along.

But something about the children's faces . . .

"I'm just following orders," she whispered to herself.

But the words felt like ash in her mouth.

She'd never been one to just follow orders.

Quinn jerked back from the window, and the memory dissolved like smoke. But the taste of ash remained, along with a sick certainty that made her knees weak.

The target.

Elimination.

Just following orders.

She pressed her hands to her mouth, trying to hold back the bile rising in her throat. In the memory, she hadn't been the victim—she'd been the predator. She'd been hunting someone, someone with a family, someone with children.

What kind of person am I?

The amnesia had felt like a curse, but now she wondered if it might be a mercy.

What if the memories hiding in the dark corners of her mind were too terrible to bear?
What if the real Quinn was someone who deserved to be forgotten?

She thought about Atlas. About the way he'd looked at her with such gentle concern. About the way he'd risked his life to protect her.

If he knew what she might have done, what she might be capable of . . .

He wouldn't be looking at her that way.

And that realization caused a hollow feeling to circle in her chest.

It made no sense, but she hated the idea of disappointing this man she barely knew.

Another fragment surfaced. A training facility somewhere hot and dusty. An instructor's voice. "Emotional attachment is a weakness that will get you killed, Quinn. Think of yourself as a weapon. Weapons don't have feelings."

You're a weapon? Her gut twisted at the thought.

But weapons can be broken, she thought with a shiver.

If she was a weapon, then she'd misfired.

Quinn jumped when she heard a soft knock at the door.

"Come in." She hastily wiped tears she hadn't realized were falling.

Atlas stepped inside and paused. He studied her as if sensing her distress.

Finally, he said, "I just came to check on you before you turned in for the night. Are you all right? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Maybe I have. Part of her desperately wanted to share the memory with him—with

someone who could possibly help her sort through everything.

But doing so didn't feel safe.

Something internal told her to keep quiet.

Besides, she was certain it would change the way he looked at her, and she couldn't bear that right now.

"I'm fine," she finally said. "Just tired."

Atlas moved closer, his expression still concerned. "Quinn, what happened? Did you remember something?"

The kindness in his voice almost broke her.

How could she tell him that she might be exactly the kind of person he'd spent his career fighting against? How could she explain that the woman he was protecting might be a killer?

Nausea roiled in her stomach at the thought.

"It was nothing," she lied. "Just fragments. Confusing images that don't make sense."

God, forgive me for the untruth . . . I'll come clean later. I will.

Atlas studied her face, and she had the uncomfortable feeling he could see right through her deception. But after a moment, he simply nodded.

"Memory recovery can be traumatic," he said. "If you want to talk about it . . ."

“I don’t.” The words came out sharper than she intended, and she ran a hand through her tangled hair. “I’m sorry, I just . . . I think I need some time alone. And tomorrow . . . I’d like to go back to the woods near where you found me. I want to see if that stirs up any memories.”

“I can arrange that.” Atlas walked to the door and hesitated. “Quinn? Whatever you remembered, whatever you think you might have done—it doesn’t change the fact that someone tried to kill you today.”

His words caused her throat to go dry. She didn’t know what to say. Both gratitude and guilt filled her—and she didn’t know which one to cling to.

“Good night, Quinn.”

“Good night, Atlas.” The words seemed to croak from her throat.

After he left, Quinn sank onto the couch, his words echoing in her mind. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that Atlas was wrong.

Looking out at the moonlit water, she wondered if some sins were too dark for even amnesia to wash clean.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

Atlas knocked softly on Quinn's door at eight the next morning.

He half expected to find her still asleep after the trauma of yesterday.

Instead, her voice called out clearly, "Come in."

She was not only awake but dressed in clean clothes—white linen pants and a soft blue T-shirt that brought out her eyes. She'd pulled her dark hair back in a simple ponytail, and though she looked tired, there was something more alert about her this morning. More present.

He paused just inside the doorway. "How did you sleep?"

She stood near the window, her arms crossed and her body stiff. "Better than expected."

"Glad to hear that. Are you hungry? The cafeteria serves a decent breakfast. I thought I could walk you down there."

"I could use a bite to eat." She paused and frowned. "It's strange—I don't even know what I like to eat, but my body seems to know it needs fuel."

"Makes sense. Let's get you some food."

As they walked down the hallway toward the stairs, Atlas found himself studying her.

Her movements this morning seemed more grounded. She seemed more confident than the lost woman he'd found on the road. But the haunted look still remained in her gaze.

"How are you feeling today?" he asked as they descended the main staircase. "I know yesterday was overwhelming."

Quinn was quiet as if considering her response.

"It's all so weird," she said finally. "It's like being untethered from everything that should anchor a person. I have no known past, no connections, and no sense of where I belong in the world. It's . . . unsettling."

"Like being a ship without a harbor," Atlas murmured. "Drifting on currents you can't control, searching for a safe place to drop anchor."

She glanced at him with surprise, then smiled—the first genuine smile he'd seen from her. "You have a way with words. That's exactly how it feels."

His colleagues often teased him about his tendency toward poetry, calling it impractical for a former CIA operative. But Atlas had learned that poetry was anything but impractical. It was the most efficient way to understand what drove people, what they feared, what they longed for.

In his line of work, knowing how someone's heart worked was often more valuable than knowing how their mind worked. But something about Quinn made him want to find the right words, the ones that might help her feel less alone.

Stay focused, he reminded himself as they reached the ground floor. Whatever

connection you think you feel, remember what she said in her sleep. Remember that someone wants her dead for a reason.

But when she smiled at him like that, focus became much more difficult than it should be.

For years, Atlas had been a romantic at heart. But he thought that side of him had died.

If he knew what was smart, he would keep it that way.

The cafeteria was larger than Quinn had expected, with floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over a well-maintained lawn leading down to the water.

Round tables dotted the space, and a serving line offered everything from fresh fruit to made-to-order omelets.

The smell of coffee and bacon caused her stomach to growl.

She gravitated toward eggs, bacon, and wheat toast—choices that felt automatic rather than conscious. As she and Atlas settled at a table near the windows, she realized she had no idea if these were foods she actually enjoyed or just what her body craved for recovery.

She glanced around before she started to eat. Twelve other people—most of whom carried themselves like Atlas—were eating at various tables. A woman with two children also sat at a table, watching as her kids slurped down some cereal.

She smiled at the sight of them. Something about seeing children here made the place feel more homey—safer even.

“This is a beautiful facility.” She glanced around the modern but comfortable space. She hadn’t gotten a good look at it last night. She’d been too distracted. “Tell me more about Blackout.”

Atlas cut into his omelet using the side of his fork. “As I told you earlier, Blackout is a private security firm. We do executive protection, threat assessment, and specialized tactical operations, to mention a few. We employ about fifty people.”

“And you’ve been here how long?”

“Six months or so.”

Something about the way he said the words made her think there was more to that story, but she didn’t push. “What did you say you did before coming here? You worked for the CIA?”

Atlas paused, his fork halfway to his mouth. “That’s right. I did psychological warfare and intelligence analysis as well as fieldwork.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “What exactly did that involve?”

Atlas slowly chewed on a bite of his omelet as he chose his words.

“The intelligence analysis side involved building psychological profiles—predicting how targets might react under pressure, identifying which of our own people might be vulnerable to enemy manipulation, reading micro-expressions and body language to detect deception during interrogations.”

“In plain English?”

He met Quinn’s eyes. “Basically, I learned how to get inside people’s heads and use

what I found there as a weapon. I found their weaknesses and developed strategies to exploit them.”

She could only imagine. “That sounds . . . intense.”

“It’s not something you can just turn off when you come home.”

His words somehow made her feel vulnerable, like he’d be able to read things in her that she didn’t even know about herself.

And it sounded dangerous—for her, at least.

“I see,” she murmured. “What about the psychological warfare?”

He paused, his expression growing darker. “Sometimes that meant deprogramming captured assets who’d been brainwashed. Other times it meant creating disinformation campaigns designed to make enemy operatives doubt their handlers or turn against their own organizations.”

“I can’t imagine . . .” It sounded brutal.

“Being in the CIA wasn’t as glamorous as the movies make it seem.” Atlas offered a slight smile. “In fact, it was a pretty lonely profession most of the time. It’s hard to maintain relationships when you can’t tell people what you do or where you’ve been.”

For some reason, his words resonated with her. The loneliness he described, the isolation of a life lived in shadows—it felt familiar. Too familiar.

Have I lived that kind of life too?

“Are you freer to speak details about your current job?” Quinn asked before taking a sip of coffee.

He shrugged. “Usually, world peace isn’t at stake so there’s more freedom. But discretion is always wise.”

“Makes sense.” She took the last bite of her toast, surprised to find she’d cleaned her plate without really tasting the food. She’d been hungrier than she realized.

Atlas studied Quinn’s face, some kind of thought brewing inside him. “Quinn, I could try some memory recovery techniques with you. Controlled stress responses, environmental triggers—ways to safely access what’s been buried without forcing it.”

“Of course. Whatever we need to do.”

Something that almost looked like relief fluttered through his gaze. “Okay . . . great. I can put together a plan.”

She swallowed hard, knowing this was a good thing yet still fearing it at the same time. “So . . . what now?”

“I thought you might want to take a walk and get some fresh air. I could show you around the grounds. Then if you still want to go back to the woods where I found you, we can.”

“I’d still like to do that.” She stood then paused as every muscle in her body seemed to come alive at once. “I’m hoping it will stir some memories.”

The thought of what she might discover about herself made her nervous system flip into a different mode.

Her eyes automatically swept the room, noting exits and potential threats. Her hands tingled with the urge to reach for weapons she didn't remember learning to use.

“Quinn?” Atlas watched her with sharp attention. “What is it?”

She blinked, and the hyperawareness faded slightly, though it didn't disappear entirely. “I'm not sure. I just feel . . . wired, I guess. Like my body is getting ready for something.”

Atlas's expression was carefully neutral, but she caught the flicker of concern in his green eyes. “Ready for what?”

“I don't know.” She flexed her fingers, trying to shake off the feeling. “Self-defense maybe? Or an . . .”

The word that came to mind was attack , but she couldn't bring herself to say it aloud.

Instead, she forced a smile. “It's probably just nerves and being in a new place with armed security around. My body's probably just being cautious.”

Atlas nodded, but she sensed he was filing away her reaction for later analysis.

“That's understandable,” he murmured before motioning toward her with his hand. “Come on, let's get that fresh air.”

As they headed toward the exit, Quinn tried to ignore the way her body remained coiled and ready, like a weapon waiting to be utilized.

She tried not to think about why the sight of Atlas's colleagues—clearly trained operatives—made part of her want to assess their capabilities rather than feel safe in their presence.

Most of all, she tried not to wonder what kind of person developed those instincts and what that might say about who she really was.

But with each step toward the door, the certainty grew that she was walking toward answers she might not want to find.

What if her amnesia was the chance to start fresh? To forget a life she didn't admire?

But was a fresh start like that really possible? Considering everything that had happened with her so far, she doubted it.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

The morning air carried the sharp bite of an approaching storm, and Atlas noticed Quinn shiver as they stepped outside. The wind whipped her dark hair around her face, and she had to push it back with her hand.

“The weather’s certainly dramatic today.” She raised her head, looking up at the gray clouds scudding across the sky.

“A hurricane is brewing out in the Atlantic. It’s still a few days out, but we’re keeping an eye on it.”

Her eyes widened. “Should I be nervous?”

“We’re well-prepared for storms here. We’ve got hurricane protocols, backup generators, the works.” He gestured toward the main building. “And if it looks like it’s going to be really bad, we evacuate nonessential personnel to the mainland.”

“Good to know.” She glanced up at a flock of birds. “The birds are fleeing. Maybe they know something we don’t.”

“Maybe.”

They walked along a paved path that wound through the grounds. A razor-wire fence surrounded three sides of the property, and armed guards paced the perimeter.

They passed the training course, complete with climbing walls, tire runs, rope traverses, and tactical shooting ranges.

“Looks intense.” She paused to study the course.

“All the employees here come from different backgrounds, but we all need to stay sharp and in shape. We use it for team-building activities also.”

“I see.”

Atlas watched Quinn’s face as she took in the equipment. Her expression was analytical, like she was assessing difficulty levels rather than just observing.

Next, they walked past the helicopter landing pad. Beyond that, a small gazebo sat near the water’s edge, surrounded by sea oats that swayed in the wind.

“Not what I expected from a security company,” Quinn said as they approached the gazebo. “This area is actually quite peaceful.”

“It is . . . usually.”

Atlas couldn’t forget the attack that had taken place here a couple of months ago. Things could have turned out so differently. He thanked God it hadn’t.

Remembering it kept him alert. He couldn’t afford to let down his guard—not only because of Quinn but because of Sigma. The organization was dangerous, and he fully expected to encounter them again.

It was only a matter of when.

They paused near the water, and Atlas studied Quinn’s profile as she gazed over the

Pamlico Sound.

The wind caught her hair again, and something flickered across her face—a shadow of memory or recognition.

As quickly as the look appeared, it was gone.

But Atlas had been trained to notice micro-expressions, and the brief tightening around Quinn's eyes told him something had triggered another fragment.

“What was that?” he asked gently.

Quinn blinked and turned to him. “What was what?”

“You remembered something just now. I could see it in your face.”

For a moment, he thought she might confide in him.

She opened her mouth. Hesitated.

Then her expression shuttered, and she shook her head. “It was nothing. Just . . . the water reminded me of something, but it's too vague to make sense of.”

Atlas wanted to push, but he saw Quinn's walls going back up.

Whatever she'd remembered, it had disturbed her enough that she wasn't ready to share it.

He wouldn't press her for answers. Not yet.

The memory had hit Quinn like a physical blow, sharp and immediate.

The same cold tundra as earlier. But this time, she was on some kind of base or something. She wasn't sure.

A man in an oversized coat walked toward a car, unaware he was being watched.

In Quinn's hand, a cell phone displayed his photo and the words: Terminate with extreme prejudice.

Her finger hovered over the speed dial that would alert her boss the job was done. All she had to do was follow this guy back home and wait for the right moment . . .

But then a little girl ran from another car up to the man, a woman following her. The girl launched herself into his arms. "Daddy!"

The target—because that was what he was, just a target—spun her around, both of them laughing.

And Quinn hesitated.

The memory dissolved as quickly as it had come, leaving Quinn shaken and nauseated. She'd told Atlas it was nothing, but that was a lie.

Each recovered fragment painted a clearer picture of who she might be, and none of it was good.

Am I an assassin?

Her stomach clenched at the thought.

She glanced at Atlas, taking in his strong profile and the way he unconsciously positioned himself between her and any potential threats.

He'd been nothing but kind to her, protective and patient even when she couldn't give him any answers.

How can I tell him I might be exactly the kind of person he's trained to take down?

But even as the thought formed, another part of her mind whispered warnings.

Atlas was former CIA, a psychological warfare specialist.

Wasn't it convenient that he'd been the one to find her? Wasn't it suspicious that he'd been so quick to trust her, to bring her into his secure facility?

What if this is all an elaborate interrogation technique? You can't be too trusting. These people could have you right where they want you. Pretending to be friends, all while being more aware of your true identity than they let on.

Quinn didn't want to believe that, but she had to be smart.

She studied Atlas's face as the wind tousled his dark hair. The concern in his eyes appeared genuine.

Either he was the most skilled actor she'd ever encountered or his concern for her was real. She wasn't sure which possibility scared her more.

An unexpected rush of attraction hit her, and her breath caught. Standing there in the morning light with the wind in his hair and a protective stance, Atlas looked like something out of a romantic poem. He was the kind of man a woman could fall for completely.

But am I even free to fall?

The thought brought Quinn up short. Was she married? Did she have a boyfriend somewhere wondering where she was?

Her left hand was bare of rings or even suntan marks where a ring might have once been. Her gut told her she was unattached.

But could she trust her instincts when everything else was so uncertain?

She didn't know the answer to that question.

All she could do was pray for wisdom.

Quinn turned as she heard someone call Atlas's name.

Four men approached from the main building.

Atlas's posture shifted into professional mode when he spotted them. "My colleagues."

Quinn studied them as they came closer.

The first man was tall and broad-shouldered with dark hair and an intensity that suggested military training.

The second was more compact but moved with the fluid grace of someone comfortable with combat.

The third was thin but sturdy with curly hair.

And the fourth had the strong jawline of a military poster boy.

“Jake,” Atlas said as they approached. “Hudson. Maverick. Kyle. How’s it going?”

“We need to talk.” Jake’s gaze flicked to Quinn with barely concealed suspicion. “Privately.”

Atlas hesitated, clearly torn between his duty to his team and his reluctance to leave her alone.

She placed her hand on his arm, feeling the strange need to reassure him. “It’s fine. I’ll just . . . enjoy the view.”

“Stay where I can see you,” Atlas said.

Though his pitch was gentle, underlying steel hardened his tone.

His words weren’t really a request. They were a command.

The men moved about twenty feet away, close enough that Atlas could keep a close eye on her but far enough that their conversation wouldn’t carry. Quinn noted the tension in their body language, the way they kept glancing in her direction.

They didn’t trust her. That was probably smart of them.

She didn’t even know if she should trust herself.

As she watched Atlas speaking with his teammates, that strange sensation gripped her muscles again. Her body felt as if it were preparing for action, though she wasn’t sure why.

Her eyes began cataloging escape routes—the dock, the training course, the tree line bordering the property to the south.

Why am I planning on how to leave? These people are helping me.

Even as she told herself that, some deeper instinct whispered that Atlas's colleagues were right to be suspicious. Whispered that when the truth finally came out, she might need those escape routes more than she wanted to admit.

The wind picked up, bringing with it the scent of rain and the promise of rough weather ahead. Her gut clenched at the thought.

Was she afraid of storms? Had she been through one before?

She wasn't sure.

Somehow, Quinn didn't think the approaching hurricane would be the most dangerous storm she'd have to weather.

Maybe the most dangerous storm was the one fighting for domain inside her.

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

“What’s going on?” Atlas asked his colleagues as soon as they were out of Quinn’s earshot.

The tension radiating from his teammates was unmistakable.

The air between them felt charged, like the moment before lightning struck.

Even the wind seemed to hold its breath as the men arranged themselves in a loose semicircle, their usual easy banter replaced by the silence that preceded difficult conversations.

They hadn’t come out here and found Atlas by accident. They needed something from him, or they needed to tell him something important.

Hudson’s jaw was tight as he spoke. “Maverick and I were assigned to look into Sigma. We just got back.”

The two men had been tasked with doing a deeper dive into Sigma and to follow up on a couple of leads.

“We’re still unsure who Sigma’s leader is, where they’re headquartered, or how many people they have working for them,” Maverick said.

“There’s a lot of scuttlebutt around them,” Jake added.

“Like what?” Atlas asked.

“I went in search of several people who’ve recently left government jobs,” Hudson said. “I wondered if they’d been recruited by Sigma.”

“And?” Atlas prodded.

“And . . . I wasn’t able to find them, which further makes me question their possible involvement.”

“That’s disappointing.”

“There’s good news.” Maverick raised a finger in the air.

“In a manner of speaking, at least. I’ve been monitoring encrypted communications and noticed a spike in coded messages using specific phrases like ‘oncoming storm,’ ‘pressure release,’ and ‘final countdown.’ The timing and frequency suggest these are operational codes building toward a specific date or event. ”

“It sounds like they’re planning something that may be taking place soon,” Atlas murmured.

Jake’s gaze zeroed in on Maverick. “Can you monitor those communications for anything about Quinn?”

“I was just thinking about that. It’s a good idea, just in case she might be—” Maverick stopped before finishing his question, almost as if he’d thought better of voicing his thought aloud.

“Do I think she might be one of them?” Atlas finished.

Maverick glanced at Hudson, who raised his eyebrows.

No one had to say anything. He knew what they thought.

Atlas’s jaw tightened. He didn’t want to believe that.

Hudson stepped closer. “Think about it, Atlas. A woman with amnesia turns up near our headquarters right when we’re investigating Sigma? A woman who speaks Russian in her sleep?”

“But as far as we know, there’s no link between Sigma and Russia,” Atlas reminded him.

“We’re only skimming the surface on what we know about Sigma,” Jake said. “They could have ties with the country for all we know. We can’t rule anything out at this point.”

Atlas opened his mouth to refute the statement, but then he shut it again.

Jake was right.

Atlas glanced back toward where Quinn stood silhouetted against the gray sky. A moment later, he said, “She’s been hurt. You saw the defensive wounds, the head trauma. Someone tried to kill her yesterday.”

“Or someone made it look like they were trying to kill her.” Hudson’s words contained no emotion, but the implications were still clear. “Sigma’s good at psychological manipulation. What better way to get an operative inside our defenses than to make us want to protect her?”

Atlas wanted to argue, but the logic was sound. Everything about Quinn's appearance raised red flags. He'd be a fool to deny that.

He glanced at her, at how her brow was still furrowed with confusion as she stared out over the water.

He let out a pent-up breath and shook his head. "Even if that's true, keeping her close is still our best option. If she's innocent, she needs protection. If she's not . . ."

"Then we'll know soon enough," Jake agreed. "Just promise us you'll be careful. We know how you operate, Atlas. You see someone who needs protecting, and you throw yourself into it completely. But this time, your protective instincts might get you killed."

His throat tightened. He knew what his friends were getting at.

Noreen.

Three years ago, he'd been engaged to a fellow CIA operative. Atlas had thought she was the love of his life. When she was captured during a mission, Atlas had moved heaven and earth to rescue her, going against orders and risking his life.

He'd later discovered she'd been turned and was feeding their enemies information about CIA operations. She'd been forced to take leave from the job in the aftermath. So she'd had to use Atlas to gain the information she needed.

But the worst part wasn't just her betrayal—it was how completely she'd played him.

Noreen had used Atlas's love and protective instincts against him.

Every kiss had been calculated. Every whispered confession of love had been

designed to lower his guard. She'd known exactly which emotional buttons to push because manipulating him had been her mission ever since her rescue.

The intelligence she'd gathered from their relationship had led directly to the deaths of three operatives and the failure of a major counter-terrorism operation.

Atlas's psychological profile, his tactical preferences, his team's standard operating procedures—she'd fed it all to enemy handlers while he'd believed he was protecting the woman he loved.

He'd never forgive himself for being so completely fooled. For letting his heart override his training. For being the kind of man who could be turned into a weapon against his own people simply by someone pretending to love him.

The worst part was that even now, three years later, he wasn't sure he'd recognize the signs if it happened again. When you truly loved someone, you wanted to believe in them completely—and that kind of trust was exactly what made the betrayal so devastating.

Atlas looked back at Quinn again, taking in her graceful profile as she gazed out over the water. She looked peaceful, almost waiflike as she stood on the shore.

But his colleagues were right—he'd been trained to look beyond surface appearances. He couldn't forget that. Even hurricanes could appear deceptively calm at their center, while harboring devastating winds just beyond the eye.

"I'll be careful." Even as Atlas said the words, he wondered if it was already too late for caution.

When it came to Quinn, his professional objectivity seemed to have taken a permanent vacation—and that was unacceptable.

Quinn tried not to be too obvious as she watched Atlas and his colleagues, but their body language was easy enough to read from a distance.

Tense. Suspicious. And those glances in her direction told her exactly what they were discussing.

Her.

She couldn't blame them. If she were in their position, she'd be suspicious too. A woman with no memory appears out of nowhere, gets targeted by an assassin, and needs protection from a private security firm that deals with top secret matters.

Even without her fragmented memories, she knew how that looked.

The rhythmic thrum of helicopter rotors in the distance caught her attention. She shaded her eyes against the sky as the sun filtered in and out of the clouds.

A black aircraft moved across the water, probably half a mile out. Something about the sight of it caused the muscles across her back to tighten with concern.

"It's one of ours," Atlas called out as if sensing her worry.

She nodded an acknowledgement of his words.

But she kept watching.

The people onboard must be doing training exercises. It seemed the kind of thing a security firm like Blackout would conduct regularly.

But something about the helicopter's movement pattern appeared wrong. Too erratic, too aggressive for a routine training flight.

Quinn's muscles tensed. An instinct she couldn't name screamed warnings, telling her to get ready.

Ready for what?

The helicopter banked sharply.

Quinn's training—or whatever it was—kicked in before her conscious mind could process what she was seeing.

She had to move—now!

Wasting no more time, she lunged toward a guard walking past her.

She yanked a rifle from his hands.

Her grip found the familiar weight and balance as if she'd been born holding firearms. Without conscious thought, she dropped to one knee, brought the weapon to her shoulder, and tracked the helicopter's movement through the scope.

“Quinn!” Atlas yelled. “What are you doing?”

She didn't answer—maybe because she wasn't sure what exactly she was doing.

Instead, her breathing steadied into the controlled rhythm of a trained marksman. The aircraft banked left, for a split second exposing the pilot's compartment.

Quinn's finger found the trigger.

Then she fired three shots in rapid succession.

CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

As if in slow motion, Atlas watched in stunned silence as Quinn fired with the precision of a trained sniper.

“No!” His leg muscles strained as he darted toward her.

His gaze shifted to the copter, and his lungs froze.

Quinn’s shots had found their target with deadly accuracy.

The helicopter’s engine coughed, sputtered.

Then it died.

The aircraft began to spin as it lost altitude, black smoke pouring from its engine compartment.

He had to stop Quinn before she did anything else.

Atlas launched himself at her, tackling her to the ground.

He wrenched the rifle from her hands before she could turn it on his team.

She didn’t resist. She only stared up at him with wide, confused eyes as if she were

waking from a dream.

“What . . . ?” She blinked rapidly. Her gaze darted from Atlas to the weapon he now held, then back to his face. “What just happened? Did I . . . ?”

Her voice carried genuine bewilderment, like someone who’d just been woken up and told they’d been sleepwalking.

But Atlas had seen the way she’d handled that rifle—the textbook stance, the controlled breathing, the calculated precision of each shot.

That wasn’t beginner’s luck or adrenaline.

That was years of training.

A splash echoed across the water as the helicopter crashed in the sound and exploded into a tremendous ball of fire.

Through the smoke and spray, a parachute drifted toward the sound.

The pilot had ejected and made it out.

Atlas’s colleagues ran toward the scene, phones and radios already in hand as they called in the incident. If that was one of their guys, they needed to help him.

Atlas shifted on the ground toward Quinn, who sat up now, pressing her palms against her temples as if trying to hold her thoughts together. Her hands shook—whether from shock or the aftermath of whatever had just possessed her, he couldn’t tell.

Who are you?

The question burned in his throat, but he didn't voice it. Because the terrified confusion on Quinn's face looked genuine. She appeared as shocked by her actions as he was.

And who have I allowed into our midst?

The woman sitting in the sand before him had just taken down a military aircraft with three precise shots. The woman who claimed to remember nothing had moved like a seasoned operative, reacted like someone who'd spent years in combat zones.

Atlas's psychological warfare training screamed warnings. Everything about this situation seemed wrong.

Quinn's perfectly timed appearance. Her convenient amnesia. The hitman who'd found her so quickly. This helicopter attack that had given her the perfect opportunity to reveal her true capabilities.

Quinn looked up at him, a haunted look in her gaze. "Atlas, I don't understand what just happened. I saw the helicopter, and then I just . . . moved. It was like my body knew what to do even though my mind didn't."

His chest tightened at the raw vulnerability in her voice.

Was she a woman whose training had been buried so deep that only mortal danger could bring it to the surface?

The possibility was terrifying.

Atlas stood at the edge of the Blackout compound, watching the controlled chaos unfold around the crash site.

Emergency vehicles lined the shore of the Pamlico Sound—Coast Guard boats, police cruisers, and an FAA investigation team. The FBI was on the way as well as the NTSB. It wouldn't surprise him if the Department of Defense also showed up.

The aircraft's wreckage was being pulled from the shallow water, and what they'd found made his blood run cold.

Despite how it had initially appeared, the helicopter hadn't been one of theirs.

Someone had deliberately chosen an aircraft that would blend in with Blackout's fleet—same model, similar paint scheme.

It looked close enough to fool anyone who didn't look too carefully.

But the real discovery was in the wreckage itself: traces of C-4 explosives, rigged to detonate on impact with . . . whatever the target had been.

If Quinn hadn't brought the aircraft down over the water, the explosion could have taken out their headquarters.

She may have saved dozens of lives.

Had that been their plan? To drop the explosives here?

If not at Blackout, then where?

The pilot they'd fished from the water was unconscious and unresponsive, currently under guard at the Lantern Beach Medical Clinic. Dr. Spenser was keeping him stable while they waited for federal agents to arrive.

Atlas's gaze drifted to the gazebo near the water's edge, where Quinn sat with Sarah

Blackmore keeping watch. Blackmore was one of Colton's most trusted operatives—former Secret Service, unflappable, and armed. If Quinn was a threat, Blackmore would handle it.

But Quinn didn't look like a threat. She looked small and lost, her arms wrapped over her chest as she stared out at the water where pieces of the helicopter still floated. She'd been like that since the shooting—quiet, withdrawn, as if she were afraid of her own shadow.

Or afraid of what she'd just revealed about herself.

Atlas couldn't stop replaying the incident. The way Quinn had grabbed that rifle. The practiced efficiency with which she'd checked the chamber and flipped the safety. The professional shooting stance, the controlled breathing, the deadly precision.

That level of skill didn't come from a weekend at the gun range. It came from years of training, countless hours of practice, and muscle memory carved deep enough to survive even amnesia.

Who trained you, Quinn? What's your story? And whose side are you on?

"Atlas."

He turned and saw Colton striding toward him, his expression grim but thoughtful. The Blackout cofounder looked as if he'd aged a decade in the past few hours.

"We finished the preliminary assessment." Colton stopped beside him. "As we suspected, that helicopter was loaded with enough explosives to level our main building. If it had hit its target . . ." He shook his head.

Atlas nodded, though the knowledge did nothing to ease the questions churning in his

mind. “Were we the target?”

“That’s still unclear.”

“Any idea who was behind it?”

“Working theory is Sigma, but we won’t know for sure until the pilot wakes up. If he wakes up.” Colton’s jaw tightened. “What I want to know is how a woman with supposed amnesia recognized a hostile aircraft and neutralized it with three perfect shots.”

“I keep asking myself the same question.”

“And what answer are you coming up with?”

Atlas was quiet for a long moment, watching Quinn through the gazebo’s weathered slats. She’d turned slightly, and he could see her profile—the delicate line of her nose, the way her dark hair caught the brief sliver of sunlight as it peeked through the moody clouds.

She looked fragile, not like someone who could take down military aircraft.

In the distance, the clouds churned. If he didn’t know better, he’d think that the storm was coming faster now.

Maybe it was the emotional storm here on Lantern Beach that gave him that feeling.

“I think Quinn is exactly who she says she is,” Atlas said finally. “Someone who doesn’t know her own past. But I also think that past is a lot darker than any of us imagined.”

Colton studied him with sharp eyes. “You still trust her?”

Atlas thought about the way Quinn had looked at him after she’d taken the helicopter down—the genuine confusion and fear in her blue eyes. The way she’d asked what had happened as if she’d been watching someone else pull that trigger.

“I think she saved our lives today,” he said. “But I also think we need to be very careful about what we do next.”

Because whether Quinn was friend or foe, one thing was certain: She was far more dangerous than any of them had realized.

And they hadn’t even uncovered all of what she was capable of.

CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

Quinn had been relegated to the gazebo with a guard standing by.

She'd been there for three hours at least. Someone had brought her water and a sandwich, which she was grateful for. Though the breeze was strong, when the wind settled the mid-July heat overwhelmed her.

She'd been questioned by uncountable people, including the FBI. She'd told each of them the same story: She hadn't realized what she was doing. Her instincts had kicked in. Everything was all a blur.

She knew her explanation seemed unlikely, but it was the truth.

Swallowing hard, she looked at the guard beside her, a woman who'd said very little. Quinn knew she wouldn't get any information from the woman.

Then her gaze drifted to the FBI agents gathered on the shore.

Would she be arrested? Taking down an aircraft had to be a felony, right?

However, everyone had acknowledged that she'd stopped a catastrophe from happening. The more they investigated, the more authorities realized that helicopter had been coming to do some serious damage.

But shooting down an aircraft was nothing that could be easily dismissed, and she knew that. If she'd been wrong or if her aim had been off, she could have killed an innocent man. There was still so much she was confused about as well.

She continued to watch the people milling around, talking and theorizing about what had happened.

At first, Quinn had just been a curiosity to everyone here.

But now they glanced at her as if she were a threat.

Maybe she was.

But something inside her had made it clear that helicopter was about to harm people who'd helped her. She couldn't let that happen.

She wasn't sure how she knew that information. But she had. It must have been buried somewhere deep in her mind.

Had she been a part of planning the mission? Was that how she knew about it?

As she leaned back against the gazebo, her gaze wandered across the landscape to Atlas.

He stood on the beach with several of his colleagues, all of whom looked out over the water where the helicopter had gone down.

Some of the wreckage had already been retrieved. The woman guarding her had explained that the sound was shallow, which had made it easier to investigate the remains. And the water had cooled the fire, which also helped them examine the wreckage sooner.

She'd seen the pilot being taken away in an ambulance with an armed guard.

Maybe they'd get some answers from him. Maybe they'd even get some answers about who she was from him.

She had no idea.

One of the men with Atlas—one who appeared to be in charge—stepped away from the group and paced toward her. He was tall and broad with brooding eyes and a five o'clock shadow.

He paused by the gazebo and leaned against it, his eyes serious and his jaw hard.

She waited for him to speak.

Finally, he said, "I'm Colton Locke, cofounder of Blackout."

"Impressive place you've got here."

"Your skills are impressive. Possibly deadly."

"Understood." She nodded slowly. "Call me Quinn."

"I don't know whether to be impressed or frightened by what you did earlier."

"If it makes you feel better, neither do I."

Something softened in his gaze as if he appreciated her honesty. "I just heard from the lead investigator that the FBI isn't going to arrest you."

Her breath caught. "Are you sure?"

“You saved us. But there will probably be more questions as the investigation continues.”

“I understand.”

“I’m going to let you keep staying here,” Colton said, his jaw still firm. “But I just want to make it clear that at the first sign you’re a danger to any of my men, women, or their families, I’ll personally see to it that you get the punishment you deserve. Am I clear?”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. He was protective of those who worked for him. She couldn’t blame him.

“Crystal,” she murmured.

“I can’t help but think that if your memories return, you could clear up a lot of the uncertainty about your intentions.”

“I’d say that’s an accurate assessment.”

Colton shifted and crossed his arms. “Atlas mentioned something about taking you back to the woods where he found you.”

Her eyes widened. She’d figured that was off the table.

“Yes, we talked about it,” she said. “We wondered if being there might trigger a memory. But that was before . . .”

Colton narrowed his eyes. “I’m still going to allow him to do that. Answers about your identity would help all of us. Don’t make me regret it.”

“I won’t.” Quinn’s throat burned with emotion as she said the words. She meant them. She really did. “I won’t.”

As Atlas stood on the shore watching the recovery crew work on the water, Colton returned to his side.

He held his breath as he waited to hear what Colton had concluded. Would he order Atlas to get Quinn off this property? He could understand if that was the decision.

But he hoped it wasn’t. Having her leave was more of a liability than keeping her here.

“I told Quinn you’d take her back to the site where you found her,” Colton started. “You okay with that?”

Surprise washed through him. He’d assumed Colton would want to keep her under lock and key until they had more answers. That he’d consider her a threat at worst. A potentially useful obligation at best.

“Absolutely.”

“Great. We need to know who she is now more than ever.” He paused. “Do you want me to send someone with you?”

Atlas considered the implications before shaking his head. “I don’t think she’ll talk if someone else is there.”

Colton gave him a pointed look. “She’s dangerous.”

“She won’t hurt me.” He believed the words. He had nothing definitive to go on, just a gut feeling—a gut feeling he trusted.

“If you say so.” Skepticism ran through his voice.

Atlas nodded toward the remains of the copter, shifting the subject before Colton changed his mind. “Do we have any idea who that helicopter belongs to?”

“We’re looking into it. It’s a short list. Could be military, certain federal agencies, or even a well-funded terrorist organization.” Colton’s gaze flicked to Quinn, then back to Atlas. “Like Sigma.”

The name hung in the air between them, heavy with implication.

Maverick jogged to them, tablet in hand. “Guys, I just got the preliminary data from the remains. It’s the same kind the US military uses on training missions.”

Atlas’s gut clenched. He didn’t like the sound of that.

Colton’s eyes narrowed at the news. “Any signature elements?”

“I’m still analyzing everything.” Maverick gave him a reassuring nod. “I’ll let you know when I have any answers.”

Around them, the organized chaos continued as Blackout operatives secured the grounds.

Atlas should be focused on the tactical situation, on the fact that their supposedly secure facility had just been attacked.

Instead, he found himself thinking about Quinn with growing unease.

What if bringing her here was a huge mistake?

What if Sigma was playing a game so sophisticated that even he, with all his psychological warfare training, had been completely taken in?

Because despite the growing evidence that Quinn was far more than she appeared, despite every logical reason to treat her as a threat, some part of him still wanted to believe in the lost woman who'd looked at him with such trust.

Even if that belief might be exactly what got him killed.

CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

An hour later, Atlas guided Quinn through the maritime forest, starting at the spot where he'd first found her.

The canopy filtered the gray afternoon light into shifting patterns of shadow and brightness, and Spanish moss swayed like ghostly curtains in the breeze that carried the promise of the approaching storm.

Atlas needed to see Quinn's reaction when she returned to the place where her story began. He needed to watch for any tells, any micro-expressions that might reveal whether her amnesia was genuine or an elaborate performance.

Because after that perfectly executed takedown of the helicopter earlier, he could no longer ignore the possibility that everything about Quinn seemed to be a lie.

She walked slightly ahead of him, moving through the underbrush with a grace that appeared too practiced for someone who supposedly had no memory of outdoor training.

Every few steps, she paused to examine broken branches or disturbed earth.

Her eyes tracked details with the methodical precision of someone conducting a forensic analysis.

Almost like she'd been trained to read a crime scene.

"Anything look familiar?" Atlas watched her face more than listened to her answer. Would he see any deceit?

Quinn shook her head. But he caught the way her pupils dilated slightly when they passed a particular cluster of pine trees.

Her breathing changed too—became shallower, more controlled.

Whatever memories were locked in her mind, this place was stirring them.

The question was whether she'd admit it.

Suddenly, Quinn stopped.

Her hands clenched into fists at her sides, and for a moment, her composed mask slipped entirely.

Pain. That was what he saw in her expression. Raw, devastating pain that made his chest tighten with sympathy despite his suspicions.

Her trauma appeared to be genuine.

More than anything, he wanted to find answers for her—and for himself.

Atlas studied the ground around them, looking for any evidence that might have been missed by Cassidy's guys in yesterday's search. But the forest floor revealed nothing.

There were no footprints in the sandy soil, no broken vegetation to indicate a struggle, no discarded items that might provide clues to Quinn's identity.

It was almost too clean.

Like someone had sanitized the scene.

Meanwhile, Quinn was keeping secrets—secrets that might provide them with some answers.

Even if her amnesia were real, there were still things she wasn't telling him.

He needed to find out what those things were.

“Quinn.” Her name came out rougher than Atlas had intended. “We need to talk.”

She turned to face him. Something in his tone must have warned her that this wasn't going to be a gentle conversation.

Her posture shifted subtly—weight balanced on the balls of her feet, hands loose and ready. Combat stance disguised as casual alertness.

There. That's the tell I was looking for.

Atlas stepped closer, deliberately invading her personal space. He wanted to see how she'd react when pressed.

He needed to know whether the lost, vulnerable woman was her natural state or if this was another layer of camouflage.

“I know there's something you're not telling me,” he started. “Something you remembered that you're keeping to yourself.”

Quinn took another step away from him. As she did, her back hit the rough bark of a

live oak.

They stood close enough that Atlas could see the flecks of gold in her blue eyes. Close enough that he could feel the warmth radiating from her skin.

He swallowed hard.

Their nearness was dangerous on multiple levels.

But he didn't step back. This close, he could read every micro-expression, every tell that might reveal whether Quinn was victim or predator.

I know there's something you're not telling me. How would she respond to that?

"I don't know what you mean." Her pulse visibly hammered in the hollow of her throat. "What do you think I know exactly?"

"You knew that helicopter was a threat before it hit the water." Atlas's voice was soft but implacable. "Your reaction time was professional grade. Military ready. And that's not something you develop overnight."

Quinn's breathing had become rapid and shallow. But her eyes remained steady on his. "I told you, I just had a feeling?—"

"Stop." His voice sounded hoarse as he said the word. "Quinn, I've been trained to spot deception. Whatever game you're playing, whatever you're hiding, I will figure it out."

Something flickered in her gaze.

Fear, maybe. Or calculation.

For a heartbeat, Atlas thought she might try to run. Or fight.

Instead, she seemed to collapse inward, her shoulders sagging with what looked like defeat.

“You’re right,” she whispered. “There are things I’m not telling you. But not because I’m lying about the amnesia. It’s because I don’t know.”

Quinn’s heart hammered against her ribs as the rough bark of the oak tree pressed into her back.

Atlas stood close, so close she could see the green flecks in his eyes, could feel the heat radiating from his body.

His proximity made her feel . . . trapped.

The word sent alarm bells through her nervous system, and she fought the urge to react. Even with her scattered memories, her body knew exactly how to get out of this situation.

A knee to his solar plexus, followed by an elbow strike to his temple. He’d be unconscious before he hit the ground.

The knowledge terrified her more than Atlas’s suspicions did.

What kind of person am I that violence is my first instinct?

Atlas searched her face with the intensity of a predator studying prey. He suspected her. She saw it in every line of his body, heard it in the careful control of his voice.

And the worst part was, he was right to suspect her.

“I’ve been having flashbacks.” Quinn’s voice was barely audible above the wind rustling through the Spanish moss. “Fragments of memories that don’t make sense. Training scenarios. Conversations. Arguments. Missions.”

His pupils dilated slightly. Maybe with surprise. Or maybe as a confirmation of the suspicions he’d already formed.

“What kind of missions?” His voice sounded carefully neutral.

But Quinn caught the subtle shift in his stance.

He was preparing for her to bolt or attack.

Smart man. If she were in his shoes, she’d be equally cautious.

She licked her lips before saying, “I don’t know. The memories are like broken glass—sharp pieces that cut when I try to examine them too closely. But they all have one thing in common.”

“Which is?”

Quinn met his gaze. “They all involve violence. And in every single one, I’m not the victim.”

There. She’d let him see the fear that ate her alive from the inside.

Now the question was—what would Atlas do knowing that? Turn on her? Shame her? Or help her?

Quinn could hardly breathe as she waited to find out.

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

The words hung between them like a confession.

Atlas stared at Quinn, calculating whether the woman pressed against this tree was prey or predator.

“Please, believe me,” Quinn whispered, desperation in her voice. “I’m telling you the truth. I have no idea who I am or where I came from. But I know enough to realize that I could be the enemy. And I don’t blame you if you decide to send me away or arrest me.”

He studied her face, searching for any sign of deception. What he saw there was fear—raw, genuine terror that she might be exactly what his colleagues suspected.

They stood close enough that he could feel her rapid breathing. Close enough that he could see the tears she fought not to shed.

The smart thing would be to step back, to treat her like the potential threat she’d just admitted to being.

But something in her voice, in the way she’d offered to leave rather than put him in danger, made him hesitate.

This is how good operatives work, an internal voice warned. They make you want to

protect them.

Atlas forced himself to step back, though every instinct screamed at him to either comfort her or restrain her.

Or kiss her.

What? He couldn't kiss her. He wasn't sure where the thought came from.

Still, the space between them felt charged with more than just suspicion.

"You can stay." His voice came out rougher than he intended.

Relief flooded Quinn's features, quickly followed by wariness. "But?"

"But my colleagues aren't as trusting as I am." Atlas ran a hand through his hair, trying to organize his thoughts. "Hudson especially thinks you're a Sigma operative sent to infiltrate us."

Quinn's eyebrows rose. "I noticed some tension between you and your team. Is that why?"

"Partly." Atlas glanced back toward the path that led to Blackout headquarters. "We were all hired around the same time—five new operatives to expand Blackout's capabilities. But there have been . . . inconsistencies. Small things that don't add up."

"What kind of inconsistencies?"

Atlas hesitated. He shouldn't share too much. After all, she could be here under deceitful circumstances.

But she'd been honest with him—he owed her the same courtesy. In fact, maybe his own honesty would encourage hers. But he'd be careful about the depths of details he shared.

“Someone's gone through my personal belongings,” he told her. “And there have been security breaches that required inside knowledge.”

Understanding dawned in Quinn's eyes. “You think one of your teammates is working for Sigma.”

“It's possible.” The admission felt like a betrayal, but Atlas couldn't deny the evidence. “Sigma's good at turning people, making them believe they're working for the right side while actually serving the enemy.”

They began walking again, following a path that wound deeper into the forest. The approaching storm made the air feel heavy and electric, as if the atmosphere itself held its breath.

In a couple of days, things could look very different here on Lantern Beach.

“Who do you suspect?” Quinn narrowed her eyes as she studied his face.

Atlas stayed quiet a long moment. “I don't want to suspect any of them. These are men I've trained with, bled with . . .” He shrugged. “I don't want to think any of them could betray us.”

The path began to slope downward, leading them toward the Pamlico Sound. The smell of brackish water grew stronger with each step.

“Atlas?” Quinn's voice was soft, almost lost in the whisper of wind through the trees.

“Yes?”

“Thank you for trusting me when you have every reason not to.”

He glanced at her wide-eyed gaze and felt himself soften. “Don’t thank me yet. Trust has to be earned, and you haven’t had the chance to do that yet.”

“Fair enough.”

They walked in comfortable silence through the forest for a few minutes. Atlas felt the tension radiating from Quinn. Whatever memories this place had stirred, they weren’t pleasant.

“We’re almost to the water,” he said as the trees began to thin ahead of them.

Quinn nodded.

But the closer they got, the more her hands began to shake.

She was nervous, wasn’t she? Nervous about what she might remember.

Atlas would feel the same way if he were in her shoes.

The sound of lapping water grew louder as they approached the shoreline. With each step, Quinn felt the walls around her memories growing thinner.

Whatever had happened to her, whatever had led to her running through these woods yesterday, it was connected to this place.

She and Atlas emerged from the trees onto a small, sandy beach where the Pamlico Sound stretched out before them. The water was choppy now, stirred by the

approaching storms hitting them ahead of the hurricane. Whitecaps danced across the surface like scattered diamonds.

In the distance, she saw Coast Guard boats investigating the scene of the copter crash.

Quinn stopped at the water's edge, and the world tilted.

Nighttime. Somewhere industrial and cold under the cover of darkness.

This was it. The moment she'd been trained for.

She had no choice but to do this.

A man waited in the distance, and she strode toward him. However, when she reached him, she couldn't make out any of his facial features.

"Quinn, you're here. Good job." He picked up his radio before saying, "We can begin extraction protocol."

"Negative." Quinn's own voice sounded cold and professional as her fingers flexed in preparation for what she had to do. "Mission parameters have changed. The target knows too much."

The man squinted in confusion. "Quinn, you're not authorized to ? —"

The sound of a silenced gunshot cut through the air.

The man crumpled to the ground.

Quinn stood over the body, already reaching for her phone to report a successful termination. "Control, this is Quinn. The leak has been plugged."

Quinn gasped and staggered backward, the memory hitting her like a physical blow. She wasn't a victim, wasn't someone who'd been taken against her will.

She'd killed a man.

Her vision cleared, and she saw Atlas watching her with sharp attention.

"What did you remember?" His voice was controlled, but tension stretched beneath his words.

Quinn looked at him—this man who'd saved her, protected her, trusted her when he had every reason not to. She made a decision that went against every instinct her training had drilled into her.

She was going to tell him about her flashback—even if the information ultimately hurt her.

"I think I might be exactly the kind of person you've spent your career hunting." Her throat burned as the words escaped. "I think I'm one of the bad guys."

The words hung between them like a death sentence, carried away by the salt-tinged wind toward the storm-dark water.

She knew everything would change after this conversation and any safety she'd felt would be gone.

But even more devastating was the fact that she knew any affection she'd seen in Atlas's gaze would be erased.

CHAPTER

NINETEEN

Quinn's words hit Atlas like a physical blow, stealing the breath from his lungs.

I think I'm one of the bad guys.

He stared at Quinn, noting the stark vulnerability in her eyes. She stood perfectly still as if waiting for him to draw his weapon or call for backup. She'd resigned herself to her fate.

"What do you mean you think you're one of the bad guys?" His voice came out rougher than intended.

Quinn's hands trembled at her sides. "I remembered something. Here, on this beach. I think I . . ." She swallowed hard. "I think I killed someone. A man. My partner, maybe. I'm not sure. I shot him and reported it as a successful termination."

The clinical language sent ice through Atlas's veins. Successful termination.

That wasn't the vocabulary of someone forced into violence.

It was the cold efficiency of a professional killer.

Without thinking, he reached out and touched Quinn's hand.

The contact sent a shock up his arm. The jolt of connection had nothing to do with static electricity and everything to do with the woman standing before him. Her skin was soft, warm, real—so at odds with the confession that had just left her lips.

Quinn's breath caught at the touch, her eyes widening as if she felt it too.

Don't.

The warning slammed through Atlas's mind with brutal clarity.

Don't let yourself feel anything for her. Don't make the same mistake twice.

He jerked his hand back, but not before the memory of Noreen crashed over him like a rogue wave.

Noreen's laugh as she'd told him about the intelligence she'd been feeding to the enemy. The way she'd smiled when she revealed that every romantic moment between them since her abduction had been calculated, every whispered "I love you" a lie designed to make him more malleable.

"You always were too trusting, Atlas. It's what made you so easy to manipulate."

Atlas's jaw clenched as he forced the memory away. He couldn't afford to make the same mistake again. He couldn't let attraction cloud his judgment when lives were at stake.

But looking at Quinn now, he could see the genuine anguish in her expression as she waited for his verdict. He found it hard to reconcile her confession with the woman who'd trusted him completely from the moment he'd found her.

"Tell me about the flashbacks." Atlas stepped back to put physical distance between

himself and Quinn. “ All the flashbacks.”

Quinn wrapped her arms around herself, a defensive gesture that made her look smaller and more fragile. “I’ve gotten flashes of myself doing some missions and arguing with someone— as well as with myself—about whether or not they should be completed.”

“Keep going.”

Her voice grew quieter with each word. “And it’s always the same refrain—eliminate the threat, complete the mission, don’t let emotions compromise the objective.”

Something cold settled in Atlas’s stomach. “What kind of targets?”

“People.” Her voice strained. “Always people. Intelligence analysts, low-level operatives, anyone who knew too much or asked the wrong questions.” She looked up at him, her eyes bright with unshed tears. “Atlas, I think I might be an assassin.”

The confession sliced between them like a knife.

As they stood there on the beach, the breeze kicking up around them, Atlas studied Quinn’s face. He searched for any sign of deception, any tell that might indicate this was an elaborate performance.

All he saw was a woman terrified of her own past.

“You said you remembered refusing an assignment,” he reminded her.

Quinn nodded, hope flickering in her expression. “Yes. And the man I killed—I think he was my handler. Maybe I was trying to get out, and he tried to stop me.”

Or maybe that was exactly what Quinn wanted Atlas to think.

The thought felt like a betrayal, but Atlas couldn't ignore his training. Everything about Quinn's story was convenient.

It could very well be textbook psychological manipulation.

But if it was an act, why confess to being a killer at all? Why not maintain the innocent victim facade?

"What are you going to do with me?" Quinn's voice was barely audible above the sound of wind and water.

Atlas studied her face, noting the way she held herself—ready to run or fight, but not quite sure which was necessary. She was giving him the choice, he realized. Trust or betrayal. Salvation or condemnation.

The smart play was obvious.

Take her back to headquarters, turn her over to Colton and the team, let them handle the interrogation and threat assessment. Keep himself at a safe distance from whatever game she might be playing.

But looking at Quinn—really looking at her—Atlas found himself remembering something his grandmother used to say: Sometimes the right choice and the smart choice aren't the same thing.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the first fat raindrops escaped from the sky.

"We need to get back." He didn't answer her question because he wasn't sure he knew the answer himself.

“Of course.” She looked away as if disappointed.

As he turned away, he froze.

The hair on his neck rose. He knew that feeling. His instincts had been fine-tuned over the years to pick up on danger.

Someone was watching him, he realized. He and Quinn weren’t the only ones out in the woods right now.

And whoever else was here . . . they weren’t a friend.

CHAPTER

TWENTY

Quinn felt the tension radiating from Atlas as they turned to leave. His entire body suddenly coiled like a spring ready to snap.

The conversation they'd just finished—about her memories, about trust, about what came next—hung between them like smoke.

But something else had captured his attention.

She'd been too distracted by their talk to notice anything—which could be a fatal mistake. She felt like she should have known better.

Atlas's hand poised over his weapon.

She froze, her senses on full alert.

Fat raindrops continued to fall, pattering against the leaves above them with increasing intensity. But it wasn't the approaching storm that made the hair on the back of Quinn's neck stand up.

Someone's watching.

The realization hit her with the same instinctive certainty that had made her grab the rifle during the helicopter attack. Her body knew danger even when her conscious

mind couldn't explain how.

Quinn's breathing shifted into the controlled rhythm she didn't remember learning. Her eyes swept the woods around her, searching for shadows and movement.

That was when she saw it—a flash of dark clothing behind a cluster of pine trees, maybe fifty yards into the forest.

Her gaze darted toward more movement. The subtle shift of Spanish moss that suggested a person rather than wind was moving through the canopy.

A rock formed in her stomach.

She and Atlas weren't alone out here.

"Atlas," she whispered, her voice barely audible above the increasing rainfall.

"I know." His response was equally quiet, his hand now resting openly on his sidearm. "How many?"

The question came naturally, as if he expected her to be able to assess tactical situations. Which, apparently, she could.

Quinn let her gaze drift across the forest, noting the small signs that screamed of human presence to her trained eye. "At least two. Maybe three. They've got us in a crossfire position."

The words left her mouth before she could think about what they revealed. Atlas shot her a sharp look—part surprise, part confirmation of suspicions he'd been harboring.

Before either of them could say anything else, a bullet whizzed past her ear.

Bark exploded from the tree behind her as the round embedded itself in the trunk.

Quinn dropped to the ground.

Atlas had his weapon drawn and returned fire before the echo of the first shot faded.

She wished she had a weapon. Did Atlas have an extra?

Even if he did, she felt certain he wouldn't give it to her.

"Stay down!" Atlas barked.

Then he squeezed off three more rounds toward the muzzle flash in the distance.

But Quinn was already moving, rolling behind the dubious cover of a fallen log as another bullet kicked up sand where she'd been lying.

They were too exposed, their cover too limited, and an unknown number of hostiles with superior positioning surrounded them.

This was bad.

Atlas fired twice more.

Then Quinn heard a distinctive click.

Her blood ran cold.

That was the sound of an empty chamber.

What were they going to do now?

Click.

The sound of Atlas's firing pin hitting an empty chamber was the worst sound he'd ever heard.

He dropped behind the trunk of a live oak, fumbling for his spare magazine while bullets thudded into the wood around him.

The hostile fire wasn't letting up. If anything, it was intensifying.

Whoever was out there knew he was reloading and was taking advantage of the opportunity.

The tactical situation was deteriorating fast. Multiple shooters, superior positioning, and now he was temporarily out of the fight.

He caught sight of Quinn pressed flat behind a rotting log that wouldn't stop a determined squirrel, let alone high-velocity rounds.

A bullet splintered the trunk inches from his head, showering him with bark.

Atlas slammed the fresh magazine in place and chambered a round. But as he prepared to return fire, he realized their attackers had shifted position.

He and Quinn were being herded.

The shooters were pushing them deeper into the forest, where the thick canopy would muffle gunshots and bodies could disappear without a trace.

These weren't random attackers. They were organized, professional, and closing in fast.

Atlas squeezed off two quick rounds toward movement in the underbrush then made his decision.

They couldn't win a firefight against unknown numbers with superior positioning.

Their only chance was mobility.

He turned to Quinn as she sheltered behind the fallen tree. "We need to move! When I say go, we run for the SUV!"

She nodded, her face pale but determined. Whatever training lurked in her buried memories, those skills were keeping her calm under fire.

Atlas swept his weapon across the perimeter to force their attackers to take cover. "Go!"

He and Quinn sprang to their feet and broke from their positions. They sprinted through the forest as bullets whined around them.

Quinn moved with the fluid grace of someone who'd done this before. She stayed low, used trees for cover, and never ran in a straight line for more than a few seconds.

Behind them, the underbrush crashed as their pursuers gave chase. At least two sets of footsteps, maybe three, closed the distance with the relentless efficiency of trained hunters.

Atlas's SUV came into view through the trees—a black shape parked on the sandy road that suddenly looked impossibly far away. Between them and safety lay thirty yards of open ground with no cover except scattered palmetto bushes.

Atlas grabbed Quinn's hand as they reached the tree line. Her fingers were ice cold

but steady.

“The moment we break cover, they’re going to have clear shots.” He scanned the open space between them and the vehicle. “No cover, nowhere to hide.”

Quinn squeezed his hand, and her eyes met his with grim understanding. “How fast can you get us out of here once we reach the SUV?”

“Fast enough. If we make it that far.”

Behind them, the sound of pursuit was getting closer. Voices called to each other in what sounded like tactical coordination.

“On three.” Atlas tightened his grip on both Quinn’s hand and his weapon. “One . . .”

A bullet shattered the bark on the tree beside Quinn’s head.

“Go!” Atlas shouted, abandoning the count.

They burst from the trees at a full sprint.

Quinn’s hand gripped his as they raced across the exposed ground toward the SUV.

The crack of gunfire sounded behind them. The air felt displaced as rounds passed close enough to kill.

Twenty yards.

Fifteen.

Ten.

Quinn's breathing was controlled and even, despite their desperate pace. She wasn't panicking, wasn't slowing them down. If anything, she seemed to be pulling him forward, her legs finding reserves of speed Atlas hadn't expected.

Five yards from the SUV, the distinctive whistle of a bullet passing between them caught his ear.

His breath hitched.

That was entirely too close.

They reached the vehicle, and Atlas yanked open the driver's door. He shoved Quinn across to the passenger seat as another round of ammo spider-webbed the rear window.

He cranked the engine just as three men broke from the woods with their weapons raised.

Atlas threw the SUV into Drive and floored the accelerator, feeling the rear tires spin on the sandy road surface before finding traction.

More gunfire erupted behind them. But he and Quinn were moving now, putting distance between themselves and the kill zone.

In the passenger seat, Quinn was twisted around, watching their six through the damaged rear window.

"Are they following?" Atlas took the first curve fast enough to make the SUV's suspension protest.

"Not yet." Quinn's voice remained steady despite what they'd just survived. "But

Atlas? Those weren't amateurs. That was a coordinated assault by trained operatives."

"I noticed." Someone had found them in the middle of nowhere, set up a professional ambush, and tried to eliminate them both.

The question was whether he and Quinn would live long enough to figure out who.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

Quinn couldn't take her eyes off the road.

She expected to see another car appear. Gunmen.

Something.

But there was nothing.

That didn't stop her heart from racing.

That had been close.

Too close.

And it was her fault. Those men had been trying to kill her. She wasn't sure why the people she was working for had taken her captive—which she felt confident was what had happened.

Now they were after her again.

Atlas was on the phone, calling either the police or backup. Or both.

One thing was certain: He was trying to get her to safety.

Back on campus, behind the safety of the guarded gates, Atlas parked then turned toward her in the SUV. In the distance, investigators still stood on the shore. Blackout operatives lingered. Two vehicles raced from the facility—probably on the way to find the gunmen.

But Atlas . . . he was looking at her. Concern showed in the crinkles around his eyes and his tight expression.

Something about the look made Quinn's heart pound harder.

The feeling was more than just danger.

It was the fact that Atlas was in front of her.

She felt a surprising surge of emotion toward him. Of affection.

Certainly it was just a hero complex, just as she'd thought earlier. It was the only thing that made sense.

"That was close." His voice sounded throaty as he said the words.

"Yes, it was."

He studied her. "But you're okay?"

She did a quick physical assessment then nodded. "I'm fine. You?"

He nodded also. "Yeah, thankfully. Cassidy and her guys are headed out there. So are some guys from Blackout."

"But those men will be gone."

His jaw hardened. “I know. But maybe they left some evidence behind. Let’s get you inside.”

He opened his door and climbed out.

But Quinn didn’t miss the way he looked around first, just to be sure danger wasn’t anywhere close. Did he suspect these people could have invaded Blackout headquarters also?

The thought caused a shiver to race through her muscles.

She needed somewhere to feel safe. To give her thoughts time to process, and maybe more memories to return.

Atlas didn’t stop walking until they were inside. Standing in the lobby, he turned back to her. “Maybe you should get some rest. It’s been a long day . . .”

She could read between the lines.

He needed some time. She couldn’t blame him for that. He had a lot to process as well.

“That’s a good idea.” Her voice cracked as she said the words. She couldn’t help but continue to feel like this was her fault. How could she fix it and make things right?

She wasn’t sure she could.

“I’ll walk you to your room.”

As they stepped farther into the building, Quinn noticed everyone around her watching her with thinly veiled wariness. The warm welcome she’d received

yesterday had evaporated, replaced by the kind of professional caution reserved for potential threats.

They walked through the corridors, and Quinn noticed details that had escaped her attention before.

Security cameras at every junction. Card readers on doors that looked like simple office spaces. The way Atlas positioned himself slightly behind and to her right—close enough to react quickly if she made any sudden moves.

He was being cautious. She couldn't blame him. They had a lot to lose here. If an enemy infiltrated this place as Atlas suspected may have happened, the outcome could be dire.

“Here we are.” Atlas paused outside her guest quarters.

Quinn wanted to say more, but she wasn't sure what. Instead, she pushed a lock of hair behind her ear and nodded. “Thanks.”

His gaze lingered on her for what felt like a moment longer than necessary. Unspoken conversations stretched between them.

Finally, he looked away and took a step back. “Try to get some rest.”

She would. But what Quinn really wanted was for Atlas to touch her again. To hold her hand.

She wanted to feel that connection—not just with anyone.

With him. With Atlas.

It was probably the situation. It was setting her emotions on edge. Making her feel things she probably wouldn't ordinarily.

Or would she?

Atlas Manning was a fascinating man.

And off-limits.

Especially if she was an assassin. She had to keep that thought at the forefront of her mind.

For her sake and his.

Atlas waited until he heard the deadbolt slide in place.

Then he walked twenty feet down the hall to where Sarah Blackmore was already positioned in a chair with a clear view of Quinn's door. Colton must have sent her up here after Atlas had called.

"Standard protective detail protocols," he told her.

Blackmore nodded, though her sharp gaze suggested she understood this was about more than protection. "Copy that. No one gets in or out without your say-so."

Especially out.

"Cassidy may be stopping by," Atlas reminded her. "She's on the approved list."

Atlas made his way back outside, where the crash investigation continued despite the gathering dusk.

Portable floodlights had been set up around the shoreline, casting harsh white light over the wreckage recovery operation.

Coast Guard divers worked methodically through the shallow water while FAA investigators catalogued debris on the beach.

The scene looked professional, thorough. But Atlas knew they were missing a crucial piece of the puzzle—Quinn’s role in bringing down the aircraft.

Ty Chambers appeared at his elbow. “We sent a team out to check the woods. Everyone was gone.”

He wasn’t surprised. “I suspected as much.”

“Tell me what happened.”

Atlas ran through the details of the ambush.

Ty rubbed his jaw. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Believe me, neither do I. But if Quinn really was working for the enemy, would they have tried to kill her?” The question had been bugging him. He couldn’t make sense of it.

Ty shrugged. “Maybe if they think she flipped on them, and now they need to eliminate her.”

Atlas wanted to argue, but he couldn’t. Ty was right.

The attack today really proved nothing except that danger was still close—and not backing off.

“In the meantime, we checked the manufacturer’s serial number for the copter,” Ty said.

“And?”

“The helicopter was reported as destroyed during a Navy training exercise in Arizona.”

“What?” Atlas swiped a hand through his hair.

“Someone obviously snatched it and covered it up,” Ty finished. “That explains the sophisticated equipment onboard.”

“And since it was reported as destroyed, Sigma had time to set it up to look like one of ours.” Atlas tapped his finger against his arm as he processed the update.

“Exactly.”

Atlas’s stomach clenched. Quinn had saved dozens of lives today, possibly including his own. That had to count for something, didn’t it?

But what didn’t make any sense was motive. Why would she have saved them if she was here to destroy them?

“Any word on the pilot?” Atlas asked.

“Still unconscious,” Ty said. “Dr. Spenser says he took a hard hit when he ejected—possible traumatic brain injury. Even if he wakes up, there’s no guarantee he’ll remember anything useful.”

Convenient. The thought came unbidden, followed immediately by guilt. Atlas was

starting to see conspiracies everywhere, even in medical facts that had nothing to do with Quinn.

Footsteps sounded on the other side of him, and he looked over to see Colton approaching. His face appeared stony and tight.

“Atlas.” Colton’s voice cut through his brooding. “We need to talk. Conference room, five minutes.”

His tone left no room for argument.

Atlas watched his boss walk away, noting the tension in Colton’s shoulders. Whatever conversation was coming, it wouldn’t be pleasant.

As he and Ty followed Colton toward the main building, Atlas wrestled with the decision that had been eating at him since Quinn’s confession on the beach.

Part of him wanted to keep the revelations she’d shared to himself—to protect her from the suspicion and interrogation that would inevitably follow. She’d trusted him with information that could get her killed or imprisoned.

Didn’t that trust deserve some protection in return?

But another part of him—the professional part that had been drilled into him through years of military and intelligence training—knew that withholding critical information from his team was a betrayal of everything Blackout stood for.

People’s lives are at stake. Your feelings about Quinn don’t matter.

The reminder was harsh but necessary. Whatever was happening between him and Quinn, it couldn’t come at the expense of his colleagues’ safety.

By the time Atlas reached the conference room, his decision was made.

He was going to tell Colton and Ty everything.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

Quinn moved to the window and looked out over the water, where emergency boats still circled the crash site. The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the grounds, and operatives conducted what looked like a grid search along the shoreline.

For the first time since Atlas had found her on the road, Quinn allowed herself to really examine her situation. The comfortable guest room, the warm food, the protective atmosphere.

It had all seemed like a sanctuary when she was desperate and afraid.

But now she saw it with different eyes. The reinforced windows. The security system Atlas had shown her, which could just as easily keep someone in as keep threats out. The way her movements were being monitored and her reactions analyzed.

Am I a guest here or a prisoner?

Her pulse quickened as the question repeated in her mind.

The distinction was becoming uncomfortably blurred.

She sank onto the bed, exhaustion washing over her. The memory fragments that had been surfacing painted an increasingly dark picture of who she might be.

The possibility that she'd been fighting for the wrong side, that she'd hurt innocent people, made her stomach clench with nausea.

She thought about the way Atlas had looked at her after the helicopter incident—the gratitude warring with suspicion in his green eyes. He'd saved her life twice now, protected her when he had no reason to trust her.

And what if I'm here to betray him?

But if that was the case, why were those other men trying to kill her?

The thoughts were unbearable, but she couldn't shake them.

Every recovered memory suggested she was capable of deception, manipulation, violence. What if her amnesia was just convenient timing? What if some part of her subconscious mind was still following orders she couldn't remember receiving?

Quinn moved to the small desk and pulled out a piece of paper, ostensibly to write down her thoughts but actually to begin planning.

If her presence here was putting Atlas and his team in danger—whether intentionally or not—then she needed to leave.

The question was how. The place was highly guarded.

She sketched the layout of the building from memory, noting security checkpoints and patrol patterns she'd unconsciously observed. Quinn's guest quarters were on the third floor, with windows facing the sound. There was a thirty-foot drop to the landscaping below.

The distance was manageable if she was willing to risk injury.

The boat dock extended into the water about two hundred yards from the main building. If she could reach it without being detected, she might be able to commandeer one of the small watercraft she'd seen earlier. She'd have to wait until law enforcement left, of course.

But then what? Where would she go?

She didn't have an answer for that. But anything was better than staying here and potentially endangering people who'd shown her nothing but kindness.

As the rain continued to fall outside, Quinn made her decision. She needed to leave before the storm hit. Before the water became too rough.

She would wait until the facility settled into its nighttime routine, then slip away before anyone else could get hurt.

Before I remember something that makes me hurt them myself.

The thought chilled her to the bone, but she couldn't deny its possibility. If Quinn was the kind of person those memory fragments suggested, then the kindest thing she could do was disappear.

Even if it meant leaving behind the only person who'd made her feel safe in a world where she didn't even know her own name.

Especially because of that.

Outside her window, darkness began to gather like a storm.

Quinn prepared to vanish into it before her past could destroy the only future that mattered to her—Atlas's.

The thought sounded crazy, but she'd rather die or go to prison than ruin him.

Colton was already seated at the conference table when Atlas arrived, with Ty close behind. The soundproof walls that usually made Atlas feel secure now felt more like a cage.

"Close the door," Colton said without preamble.

Atlas complied, then took his usual seat across from the two men who'd become not just his employers but friends. The weight of what he was about to reveal pressed heavily on his chest.

"Quinn remembered something today," he said before Colton could start. "At the beach, in the same area she was running from when I found her."

Ty's eyebrows shot up. "Her amnesia's breaking? What did she remember?"

Atlas chose his words carefully. "She's been having flashbacks—fragments of what appears to be missions."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees.

"What kind of missions?" Colton's voice was carefully neutral.

"Eliminating targets. Quinn thinks she was an assassin." The words felt like lead in his mouth. "She thinks she remembers killing her handler—a man who was trying to stop her from leaving whatever organization she worked for."

Silence stretched between them, broken only by the sound of the AC kicking on.

"I don't like the sound of that," Ty muttered finally.

“She’s also the reason we’re all still alive,” Atlas pointed out. “That helicopter was loaded with enough explosives to level headquarters. If Quinn hadn’t recognized the threat and neutralized it . . .”

“You think that’s a coincidence?” Colton leaned forward, his expression sharp. “A trained assassin just happens to show up right before we’re attacked, just happens to have the skills to save us all?”

Atlas’s jaw tightened. “You think she’s working with whoever sent that helicopter?”

“I think the timing is awfully convenient.” Colton’s tone was measured but firm. “That pilot ejected just in time.”

“That’s true. But if she’s working for them, why are they trying to kill her?”

“Maybe they’re trying to kill you.”

His throat tightened at the theory—which was plausible. However . . . “Quinn has had plenty of opportunities to kill me if that’s what their objective is.”

“True. But think about it, Atlas. What better way to infiltrate our operation than to stage a rescue scenario? Make us grateful, make us trust her, then strike when our guard is down.”

“But why confess to being a killer if the goal is to maintain our trust?” Atlas countered. “Why not stick with the innocent victim story?”

Ty and Colton exchanged a look that made Atlas’s stomach clench.

“Maybe the innocent victim story wasn’t working anymore,” Ty said slowly. “Maybe she decided it was time to shift tactics.”

The words hit Atlas like a physical blow. They made sense—terrible, logical sense that fit with everything he'd been trained to recognize about sophisticated psychological operations.

"If she's coordinating this with someone, how are they communicating?" Atlas asked. "She has no cell phone or watch or anything else. And there's no phone in her room."

"True . . ." Ty muttered.

More silence stretched.

"She stays," Colton said finally. "But under full surveillance. I want to know what she's doing every minute of every day. And I want you to keep getting to know her. Continue to gain her trust. See if she'll open up completely."

His gut clenched. He didn't like deceiving people. But he understood where Colton was coming from.

"I can do that. But what if she tries to leave?" Atlas wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer.

Colton's expression was stone. "Then we stop her. By whatever means necessary."

His throat tightened. He didn't like the thought of that. Didn't like the thought of Quinn being injured.

But he had to stop thinking with his heart. It was a bad idea.

As the meeting broke up, Atlas remained seated, staring at the polished wood grain of the conference table. He'd done the right thing by sharing Quinn's confession—he knew that.

So why did it feel like the biggest betrayal of his life?

CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

A soft knock at her door interrupted Quinn's escape planning. She quickly slid the paper with her sketched layout under a magazine and called out, "Come in."

Police Chief Chambers stepped inside, her blonde hair pulled back into a bun. She wore civilian clothes instead of her uniform—dark jeans and a beige button-down that made her look more approachable than authoritative.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," Cassidy said as she stood in the doorway. "I wanted to check in and see how you're holding up after everything that's happened."

"Please, come in." Quinn gestured toward the small sitting area near the window. "I could use the company, honestly."

Cassidy shut the door and settled across from her at a narrow dinette table. Her manner was relaxed, but Quinn noticed how the police chief positioned herself with a clear view of both the door and Quinn's hands. Professional habits, probably.

Or professional caution. Ty had probably updated her on the situation, and now she was doing her due diligence.

"Have you remembered anything more?" Cassidy studied her—but not with distrust. More like concern. "Sometimes trauma can shake loose buried memories."

The question hit closer to home than Quinn wanted to admit.

The memories that had returned made her sick to think about. She'd told Atlas, and she hadn't made him promise not to share. She could only assume Cassidy knew.

Maybe it didn't matter. Not when Quinn still didn't understand what those supposed memories meant or whose side she'd been on.

"No." She kept her voice steady. "Still nothing concrete. Just . . . feelings, I guess. Like déjà vu but without the actual memories to go with it."

Cassidy nodded sympathetically. "That must be incredibly frustrating."

"It is." Quinn picked at the edge of the magazine, keeping her escape plan hidden beneath it. "Have you heard anything?"

"The pilot is awake, but he's not talking. He used to be Air Force until he retired two years ago."

"That's too bad."

"We had—well, I should say Ty had—some of his friends analyze the Russian you spoke that Atlas recorded, trying to pick up on any particular dialect."

She sat up straighter. "And?"

Cassidy frowned and shook her head. "We got nothing from it, unfortunately."

Her shoulders sagged with disappointment. "What about missing person reports? Did you find any fitting my description? Has anyone asked about me?"

“Nothing yet,” Cassidy admitted. “We’ve expanded the search to neighboring states, but so far, no one’s reported anyone matching your description as missing.”

The words should have been disappointing. Instead, they brought an odd sense of relief.

If no one was looking for her, maybe that meant no one would be hurt by her disappearance.

“I ran your fingerprints through the system,” Cassidy continued, her tone carefully neutral. “Nothing came up. No matches in any database—criminal or otherwise. I ran them through a second time, just to be sure. Still nothing, which means you most likely don’t work for the government.”

Quinn felt her eyebrows rise. “Is that surprising?”

“A little,” Cassidy said with a slight shrug. “Most adults have their prints somewhere in the system—employment background checks, professional licensing, military service. Even volunteer work sometimes requires fingerprinting.”

“Is there any reason the government might hide my identity?” she asked, remembering her skills and the Russian she could mysteriously speak.

“I suppose if it was a top-secret assignment.” Cassidy shrugged again.

Her words made sense, but Quinn wanted something more. “What about facial recognition?”

“Ran your photo as well. Still nothing. And your tox screen came back clean.” Cassidy leaned forward slightly, her expression growing more serious. “I have to ask—does that seem suspicious to you?”

The question hung in the air between them.

Quinn considered her answer carefully. “I don’t know what’s normal. But if you’re asking whether it worries me . . . yes. It does.”

Cassidy was quiet a moment, studying Quinn’s face. “I’m also concerned about your injuries. The defensive wounds, the rope burns on your wrists. Combined with no identification and no digital footprint . . .”

“You think I might have been involved in something illegal,” Quinn completed the thought that Cassidy was too polite to voice directly.

“I think you might have been a victim of something illegal,” Cassidy corrected. “But I also think there’s more to your story.”

Tears pricked Quinn’s eyes—tears of frustration and fear and a bone-deep exhaustion that went beyond physical tiredness. “I have no idea who I am. And honestly? That scares me more than not knowing where I came from.”

Cassidy tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“What if I’m not a good person?” The words tumbled out before she could stop them. “What if there’s a reason no one’s looking for me? What if I did something terrible, and forgetting is just . . . convenient?”

Though she’d already talked to Atlas about this, she wanted another perspective in case Atlas was placating her.

Cassidy reached across the small table and gently touched Quinn’s hand. “Hey. Whatever happened to you, whatever brought you here—you’re not responsible for the gaps in your memory. From what I’ve seen, you seem like someone who cares

about doing the right thing.”

“But how can you know that when I don’t even know it myself?” She wished she felt as certain.

“Because I’ve been watching you,” Cassidy said simply. “The way you worry about being a burden, the way you try to help even when you’re confused and scared. Those aren’t the reactions of someone without a conscience.”

The kindness in Cassidy’s voice almost broke Quinn’s resolve. But the memory fragments lurking in the shadows of her mind told a different story—one of cold calculation and professional violence.

“Thank you,” Quinn said softly. “For believing in me when I can’t believe in myself.”

Cassidy offered a gentle nod before rising to leave. “I’ll be in touch.”

“I’d expect nothing less.”

After Cassidy left, Quinn returned to her escape planning with renewed determination. The police chief’s faith in her only made the decision harder but also more necessary.

Because if Cassidy was wrong—if Quinn really was the kind of person those dark memories suggested—then the kindest thing Quinn could do was disappear before anyone discovered the truth.

Atlas balanced the dinner tray in one hand while he knocked softly on Quinn’s door. The meeting with Colton and Ty had left him with conflicting directives—earn her trust but stay vigilant. Get close to her, but remember she might be the enemy.

Simple enough, he thought wryly.

“Come in,” Quinn’s voice called from inside.

Atlas found her sitting by the window, staring out at the darkening sky. She’d changed into spare clothes Raven had brought—dark jeans and a teal T-shirt that made her eyes look even bluer.

But it was her posture that caught his attention. It was too straight, too alert. She looked like someone preparing for action.

“Thought you might be hungry.” He set the tray on the small table near her chair. “I managed to salvage some of Maria’s famous chicken and rice for you before the cafeteria closed.”

“That’s very thoughtful. Thank you.” Quinn’s smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. “You didn’t have to go to the trouble.”

Atlas studied her face as she moved to the table. The tension around her eyes, the way her gaze kept flicking to the window, the careful control in her movements.

She was planning something.

The realization hit him like ice water. Quinn was sitting here making polite conversation while her mind was clearly elsewhere, working through some kind of strategy.

Just like Noreen used to do.

The memory surfaced unbidden.

It was three months after Noreen's rescue that he'd discovered her betrayal. He remembered how she'd been sitting across from him at dinner in their favorite restaurant and had seemed distracted. She kept checking her phone, claiming she was worried about a sick relative.

Atlas had offered to fly out with her to provide support.

Only later did he realize she'd been coordinating her extraction with enemy handlers. She'd gotten the information she needed, and she was done with him.

The confrontation had happened two days later, when Atlas had walked into Noreen's hotel room to find her packing a suitcase with cold efficiency. No frantic rushing, no emotional breakdown—just the methodical preparation of someone completing a long-term assignment.

"Going to see your sick relative?" Atlas had asked, though something in his gut already knew the truth.

Noreen had looked up at him with eyes that were suddenly foreign, calculating. The warmth he'd fallen in love with had vanished like a mask being removed.

"There is no sick relative, Atlas," she'd said with casual cruelty. "There never was."

The words had hit him like a physical blow. But it was her tone that destroyed him—not angry or defensive, just matter-of-fact. As if their entire relationship had been nothing more than a tedious job she was finally finishing.

"Eight months," Atlas had whispered. "Everything we shared, everything we built together?—"

"Was exactly what I was paid to do." Noreen had zipped the suitcase closed with a

sound like a coffin lid slamming shut. “You were a remarkably easy mark, actually. All that protective instinct, all that need to save people—it made you so eager to trust, so desperate to believe in love.”

She’d moved toward the door but paused to deliver one final cut: “The intelligence you gave me led to some very successful operations. Your psychological profiles, your team’s tactical preferences, those security protocols you helped me ‘revise’—all of it was invaluable.

So thank you, Atlas. You were an excellent unwitting asset. ”

That was when Atlas had seen the truth in her eyes—not just betrayal, but genuine amusement. She’d enjoyed manipulating him. Had found satisfaction in watching him fall deeper in love while she systematically destroyed everything he’d sworn to protect.

“Why?” The question had torn from his throat like a confession.

Noreen had smiled then, cold and satisfied. “Because I’m very good at my job. And you, Atlas Manning, were the easiest target I’ve ever had.”

She’d walked out without looking back, leaving Atlas alone with the wreckage of everything he’d believed about love, trust, and his own judgment.

He’d reported what had happened. But Noreen had never been found.

To this day, she was still out there somewhere.

The way she’d looked at him that night—apologetic, almost sad—was exactly how Quinn looked at him now.

The only good thing that had come out of that entire situation was that he'd hit rock bottom—and, in the process, he'd grown a close friendship with one of his colleagues who'd introduced him to church.

After that, his life had changed from one that was empty and without purpose to one with a renewed passion. It had taken him some time to forgive himself, but he eventually had.

“Have a nice visit with Cassidy?” he started.

“She seems like a good woman.”

“She is. Everything okay?” Atlas kept his voice casual as he settled into the chair across from her. “You seem . . . tense.”

Quinn picked at her food, taking small bites that suggested she was eating out of politeness rather than hunger. “Just processing everything that's happened. It's been an overwhelming couple of days.”

Truth but not the whole truth. Atlas heard it in her tone.

“The memories that are coming back—are they helping at all?” he asked. “Giving you any sense of who you might have worked for?”

“Some.” Quinn set down her fork and met his gaze directly. “Atlas, can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“When you were CIA, did you ever have to do things . . . things that kept you awake at night?”

The directness of her question caught him off guard. “Why do you ask?”

“Because every time I get a flash of . . . whatever these flashes are, I wonder if the guilt I’m feeling is normal or if it means I was someone who enjoyed the violence.” Her voice grew quiet with vulnerability. “I need to know if good people can do terrible things and still be good people.”

Something twisted in Atlas’s chest.

Either Quinn was genuinely wrestling with moral questions about her past, or she was playing him with surgical precision.

“Good people can be forced into impossible situations,” he said carefully. “Sometimes there are no clean choices, only necessary ones.”

Quinn nodded, but her attention seemed to drift back to the window. In the reflection, Atlas caught the way her eyes tracked the perimeter lighting, noted the guard rotations.

She was trying to figure out an escape plan, he realized.

“I should let you get some rest.” Atlas stood, watching for her reaction. “We have a big day tomorrow. We’re going to see if we can recover any of your memories.”

Something flickered across Quinn’s expression—too quick to interpret but definitely a reaction.

“That sounds like a good plan,” she said. “Maybe we’ll finally get some answers.”

Atlas paused at the door, his hand on the knob. “Quinn? You know you’re safe here, right? Whatever you’re remembering, whatever you’re worried about—you don’t

have to face it alone.”

Her smile was soft and genuinely grateful. “Thank you, Atlas. For everything.”

As he closed the door behind him, Atlas felt his gut clench with certainty. Quinn was going to run.

The question was whether he should let her.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

Quinn waited until she heard Atlas's footsteps fade down the hallway before moving away from the table. She'd barely touched her food. Though the chicken and rice casserole was delicious, her stomach was too knotted with anxiety to manage more than a few bites.

She walked to the window and looked down at the grounds below. She was three stories up, with a clear view of the Blackout campus.

Since sunset, she'd been working on memorizing the patrol patterns of the guards outside. She'd studied the landscape. She'd been watching the weather. Rain steadily fell, which would make everything more slippery.

This is the right thing to do, she told herself for the hundredth time. The longer I stay, the more danger I put everyone in.

The attack in the woods had proven that whoever wanted her dead wasn't going to give up. If she really was the kind of person her memories suggested—someone trained to kill without hesitation—then staying at Blackout was putting innocent people at risk.

Plus, she'd seen children here. Families.

She couldn't hurt them or put them in danger.

Atlas's kindness, his protective instincts, his willingness to trust her despite every reason not to—it could get him killed if she remained.

Better to hurt him now than get him killed later.

She continued to watch, waiting for time to pass. She plotted out her moves. Devised backup plans. What-if scenarios. She'd even changed into some black clothes and boots that Raven had left in the bag of clothes she was borrowing.

Finally, at 11:47 p.m. it was time to act.

The guard rotations would most likely change at midnight. That would give her a small window when attention would be divided. She'd been watching the patterns for hours, noting the three-minute gap when the perimeter patrol passed the far side of the building.

If she was going to move, it had to be now.

She swallowed hard, knowing better than to second-guess herself.

Instead, she opened the window as quietly as possible, grateful the storm masked any small sounds. Rain drummed against the glass as she pushed it wide enough to fit through.

She glanced down.

The drop to the ground was manageable. In her fragmented memories, she'd fallen from higher places.

But the climb down would be tricky. The building's exterior offered minimal handholds, and one slip would mean either injury or discovery.

Or both.

But Quinn could do this.

She swung her leg over the windowsill, then paused as an unexpected pang of loss hit her. Leaving this room meant leaving Atlas.

Part of her wanted to stay, wanted to trust that whatever was growing between her and Atlas could survive the truth about her past.

But she'd seen the way his colleagues looked at her now—with suspicion and barely concealed hostility. She'd heard the edge in Atlas's voice every time new suspicions arose.

Whatever grace period she'd been granted was over.

It was time to go.

Quinn eased through the window and found her balance on the narrow ledge outside.

The rain made everything slippery, but her muscles remembered how to navigate treacherous terrain.

Hand over hand, she worked her way down the building's side, using window frames and architectural details as anchor points. The wind whipped her hair around her face, and she paused twice to wipe rain from her eyes.

Twenty feet from the ground, Quinn's left foot found the next window ledge—but the rain-slicked brick offered no grip.

Her boot skidded sideways, and suddenly she was falling.

She sucked in a breath.

Her fingertips clawed at the building's facade, catching the narrow concrete lip of a window frame. The rough edge bit into her palms as her full weight jerked against her shoulders.

Pain shot down her arms, and a groan escaped.

Below, the ground tilted and swayed, dark earth and scattered landscaping rocks waiting.

Her legs kicked uselessly, searching for purchase against the smooth brick wall.

Rain pelted her face, making it impossible to see clearly. Her fingers, already numb from cold and wet, began to slip on the concrete ledge.

One millimeter.

Two.

Quinn's breathing came in sharp gasps. Her shoulder muscles burned as they took her full weight. The fingertips of her left hand lost their grip entirely, leaving only her right hand anchored to the building.

Don't look down. Find the next handhold. You can do this.

Her boot scraped against the side of the building, finally catching a slight depression in the mortar. Not enough to support her weight, but enough to take some pressure off her aching fingers.

Slowly, fighting against the wind that wanted to peel her from the wall, Quinn walked

her feet up until she could grab the window ledge with both hands again.

Her heart hammered against her ribs as she hung there, gathering strength for the final descent.

Come on, she told herself. You've done this before.

She didn't remember doing it, but somehow she knew.

Quinn regained her footing and continued down. Finally, she dropped the last six feet to land in a crouch on the wet grass.

Staying low, she listened for any sign she'd been spotted.

Nothing but wind and rain.

She started toward the water, already planning her route. She'd grab a boat and head toward the mainland.

She didn't want to steal the boat, but she didn't have many other choices.

"Going somewhere?"

Quinn's heart slammed against her ribs as she spun toward the voice.

Atlas stepped out of the shadows near the corner of the building.

His dark clothing made him nearly invisible in the storm. Water dripped from his hair, and his expression was unreadable in the dim light.

A lump formed in her throat.

“How long have you been out here?” Quinn didn’t bother to deny the obvious.

“About an hour.”

Atlas moved close enough that she could see the mix of disappointment and understanding in his green eyes.

“I figured you’d try to leave,” he continued. “Question is, was I right to stop you?”

Atlas had been watching Quinn’s window and wrestling with his own instincts. Part of him had hoped he was wrong, that she’d stay put and trust him to protect her.

But the larger part had known she’d run.

Now, looking at her standing in the rain with guilt and determination warring in her expression, he felt the familiar tug of attraction that complicated everything about this situation.

“You can’t leave.” He stepped closer, rain pelting his face and dripping from every limb. “Not like this.”

Quinn lifted her chin, rainwater streaming down her face also. “I’m putting everyone here in danger. You saw what happened in the woods. Those men found me somehow. As long as I’m here, your team—and their families—are at risk.”

“And if you leave, you’ll be dead within twenty-four hours.” Atlas kept his voice low but firm. “Whatever organization you worked for, whoever’s hunting you—they have resources we can barely imagine. Maybe even military connections. At least here you have protection.”

“Do I?” Quinn’s laugh was bitter. “Or am I just a prisoner with better

accommodations?”

The question hit closer to home than Atlas wanted to admit. After tonight’s meeting with Colton and Ty, the line between protection and containment had definitely blurred.

“You saved our lives today,” he said instead of answering directly. “That has to count for something.”

Quinn edged closer, close enough for him to see the pain in her gaze. “What if that was just instinct? What if I’m exactly the kind of person who kills first and asks questions later?”

“Then we’ll deal with it.” The words came out rougher than he intended. “But running away isn’t going to solve anything. Your memories are coming back. They’re our best chance of understanding what we’re dealing with.”

“I need to remember , Atlas. Even though I don’t want to.” Her voice cracked. “Until I know who I really am, I’m a threat to everyone around me.”

Atlas found himself reaching for her. His fingers brushed her cheek to wipe away rain—or maybe tears. The contact sent electricity through him, that same spark he’d felt earlier multiplied by proximity and adrenaline.

“Maybe I can help,” he said softly. “If you’re willing to trust me . . .”

Quinn leaned into his touch, her eyes closing as if she were memorizing the sensation.

“Trust,” she whispered. “That’s the problem, isn’t it? How can you trust someone who doesn’t even trust herself?”

“Because sometimes trust isn’t about knowing everything. Sometimes it’s about choosing to believe in someone despite the unknowns.”

“There you go waxing poetic again,” she murmured. “And I have to say—I think it’s beautiful.”

For a moment, they stood there in the storm, the space between them charged with more than just the approaching lightning.

Quinn’s shoulders sagged slightly, the rigid tension that had been holding her upright finally releasing. Her hands, which had been clenched into fists at her sides, slowly uncurled.

She took a shaky breath and looked up at him—really looked at him—for the first time since he’d started speaking.

The guarded wariness in her eyes softened, like ice beginning to thaw at the edges.

She blinked once, twice.

Atlas saw her internal struggle playing out in the small movements of her face. The way her jaw unclenched. The way the tight line of her mouth relaxed.

She closed some of the careful distance she’d been maintaining. Her eyes never left his face.

It was as if she was searching for something—reassurance, perhaps, or confirmation that he meant what he’d said.

“Okay.” Her voice was barely audible above the increasing rainfall. Her chin lifted slightly, not in defiance this time, but in tentative trust. “Help me remember.”

The way she said it, with her head tilted slightly and her hands open at her sides, told Atlas everything he needed to know about her decision.

She was choosing to trust him despite her deepest fears.

When she spoke again, her voice was steadier but still fragile, like someone testing ice to see if it would hold their weight. “But Atlas, if the conditioning takes over again, if I become a threat?—”

“Quinn—”

“No, listen. If what we find is too dark, if I turn out to be someone who doesn’t deserve saving . . .” She met his gaze directly. “Promise me you’ll do what needs to be done.”

Atlas’s chest tightened. Looking at Quinn now—vulnerable and determined and trusting him with something that terrified her—he wasn’t sure he’d be able to keep that promise.

He swallowed hard.

“Let’s focus on getting you inside before you catch pneumonia,” he said instead. “We’ll figure out the rest tomorrow—if we’re not too distracted by hurricane preparations.”

“It’s still headed this way, huh?” A frown tugged down the corner of her lips, and she glanced at the sky. A gust of wind swept around her as if in response.

“That’s what it looks like.”

As they walked back toward the entrance to the building, Atlas couldn’t shake the

feeling that whatever they discovered about Quinn's past would change everything between them.

He just hoped they'd both survive the revelation.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

Quinn was still toweling her hair dry from her morning shower when a soft knock came at her door.

She left the towel on the sink and went to open the door.

Her heart pounded harder when she saw Atlas on the other side.

He looked entirely more rested than she felt despite their late-night encounter in the rain.

He held two paper cups of coffee, offering her one with a small smile. “Thought you might need this after last night.”

Quinn accepted the coffee, placing the cup under her nose and inhaling the rich aroma. “Thank you.”

He stepped farther inside, and she shut the door behind him. They paced toward the dinette area.

“What’s the plan for today?” she asked before taking a sip of her coffee. “More interrogation?”

“Actually, I was wondering if you’d like to take a drive through Lantern Beach with

me.” Atlas settled into a chair at her dinette. “See the island, maybe visit town.”

Quinn raised her eyebrows in curiosity and remained standing. “Why? I thought I was supposed to stay put under protective custody.”

“I’ll be protecting you. I just thought we could see if any locations trigger more memories. Sometimes familiar places—or faces—can unlock things that direct questioning can’t.”

It made sense, though Quinn couldn’t shake the feeling there was more to his suggestion. However, this could be one of his recovery techniques.

She glanced at her window, where gray skies still stretched. The wind had increased, and she’d noticed several smatterings of rain hitting the glass since she’d awoken. The outer bands of the storm were getting closer and closer.

“Why not?” she said before raising her cup of coffee to take another sip. “I could use some fresh air.”

Atlas’s expression shifted slightly, becoming more professional. “Great. First, however, I also need to tell you that there’s an agent here from the FBI who’d like to speak with you about yesterday’s helicopter incident. She’s taking charge of the investigation.”

Quinn’s stomach dropped. “The FBI?”

“I’m sure she just wants to ask you some routine questions.” Atlas sounded reassuring.

But she caught the way his hand tightened slightly around his coffee cup. He was also concerned.

Quinn stared down at the dark liquid in her cup, watching it tremble with the slight shake in her fingers.

The FBI.

What if this FBI agent recognized her? What if her face was in some database of wanted criminals or foreign operatives?

What if they didn't believe her amnesia was real?

But she knew she had no other choice.

She had to talk to the agent and take responsibility for her actions.

She drew in a long breath before nodding, and she hoped her voice sounded steadier than she felt as she said, "Okay. Let's get this over with."

As they walked downstairs together, Atlas noticed the charge in the air.

Some people were already leaving. Crews outside were putting out sandbags and securing the buildings.

The hurricane was quickly approaching and appeared to be headed directly toward them now.

He glanced at Quinn as they walked. Glanced at the khaki cargo pants she wore with a white T-shirt and standard-issue black boots that were provided to Blackout agents. Her long hair had dried naturally with some wave to it. She wore no makeup.

She looked naturally gorgeous. She didn't need stylish clothes or blown-out hair or thick makeup to show her beauty.

At once, another flashback of Noreen hit him.

He remembered standing in the debriefing room at Langley, watching Noreen's rescue footage for the third time. She looked so fragile on the grainy surveillance video, so broken after three weeks in enemy custody.

Atlas's chest had tightened with protective fury at what her captors had done to her.

"She's been through a living nightmare," his supervisor had said as he reviewed the medical reports. "Psychological evaluation shows significant trauma. She'll need time to recover."

Atlas had nodded, already planning how he'd help her heal. How he'd be patient with her nightmares, supportive during her recovery. He'd even requested extended leave to be there for her.

But looking back now, Atlas could see details he'd missed in his relief at having her back.

The way Noreen's eyes had been too alert during her medical exam, scanning the room with an awareness that didn't match someone who'd supposedly been broken by captivity.

The questions she'd asked about her rescue—not grateful inquiries, but precise inquiries designed to gather intelligence about operational methods and personnel.

"How did you find me so quickly?" she'd asked during one of their quiet dinners. "I thought I was lost forever."

Atlas had been so eager to share his heroic efforts that he'd detailed the entire operation—surveillance techniques, local assets, communication protocols.

Everything that had made her rescue possible.

“You risked your career for me,” Noreen had said, tears in her eyes that now seemed perfectly calculated. “Going against orders like that . . . Atlas, you could have been court-martialed.”

He’d held her close, feeling noble and protective. “I’d do it again in a heartbeat. I couldn’t lose you.”

What Atlas hadn’t realized was that Noreen’s “trauma” had been performance, her gratitude a manipulation, her love a weapon aimed directly at his heart.

She’d known him better than anyone and knew exactly how his protective instincts could be weaponized against his own people.

Atlas shook off the memory, feeling the familiar taste of betrayal in his mouth. The signs had all been there—he’d just been too blinded by love and guilt to see them.

“Atlas?”

Quinn’s voice pulled him from his thoughts. He blinked as he turned toward her, trying to mesh the present day with the past. “Yes?”

“Are you okay? You have a troubled look on your face.”

He shook his head. “I’m fine.”

But even as he said the words, he reminded himself to keep his distance.

Atlas didn’t like FBI Agent Vivian Hughes from the moment he laid eyes on her in the conference room. Her suit was too crisp, her smile too practiced, and her eyes

held the calculating coldness of someone who'd already decided Quinn was guilty of something.

The woman was probably in her early forties with ashy brown hair that came to her shoulders.

Colton also sat in on the meeting. Since it wasn't an official interrogation, Hughes didn't seem to mind the extra people present.

Agent Hughes looked up as they walked in, her gaze zeroing in on Quinn.

"Thanks for meeting with me, Ms. . . . ?" She paused expectantly, pen poised over her notepad.

"We're calling her Quinn until we can figure out her real name," Atlas interjected before Quinn could respond.

Agent Hughes's gaze flicked to Atlas with barely concealed annoyance. "And you are?"

"Atlas Manning, former CIA with top-level security clearance and currently a Blackout operative. I'd like to be present during this interview."

Hughes made a face. "That's not?—"

"Actually, I'd prefer to have Atlas here," Quinn said.

Agent Hughes studied them both a moment then shrugged. "Very well. Let's start with yesterday's incident with the helicopter. Walk me through what happened."

For the next hour, Atlas watched Agent Hughes try to poke holes in Quinn's story.

Her questions grew increasingly aggressive, clearly designed to trip Quinn up or trick her into admitting something incriminating.

“You claim you don’t remember any training, yet you executed a perfect tactical response under fire.” Agent Hughes shook her head, her motions stiff and disbelieving. “That seems . . . convenient.”

Quinn’s fingers stilled on the table’s surface. When she spoke, her voice was steady, almost clinical. “I don’t find anything about my situation convenient.”

Atlas noticed the way she held herself—spine straight, chin up. She looked like someone facing a firing squad while keeping their dignity intact.

The sight was impressive.

“Agent Hughes,” Atlas interrupted. “Quinn is cooperating fully. There’s no need for the hostile tone.”

Hughes scowled at him. “I’m simply trying to understand how someone with supposed amnesia demonstrates expert marksmanship and military tactics. Those skills don’t just appear out of nowhere.”

Atlas’s jaw clenched. “She’s explained she’s having fragmented memories?—”

“It’s okay, Atlas.” Quinn’s palm pressed against his forearm, her thumb resting just above his wrist where his pulse hammered.

The contact steadied him and unsettled him in equal measure—a contradiction he didn’t have time to analyze.

“Agent Hughes is just doing her job,” Quinn finished.

But Atlas saw the tension in Quinn's shoulders. Saw the way her breathing had become more controlled.

"Do you remember anything about your past?" Hughes continued.

She shook her head. "Not really. I keep feeling like memories want to emerge, but they don't. At least, nothing that makes sense."

"Like what?"

She swallowed hard, unsure how much to say. She didn't want to look guilty.

"She can't be held accountable for her dreams because they're just that—they're unreliable," Atlas said.

Hughes quirked an eyebrow. "So the memories—or dreams—you're having are suspicious."

Quinn hesitated before nodding. "I suppose. They don't make any sense."

"Tell me about them."

Quinn licked her lips and then shared an overview. Hughes's gaze grew tighter and more accusing with each new detail.

"Ms. Quinn," Agent Hughes finally said. "I need to be clear about something. You are not to leave this island without federal permission. Given the circumstances and your . . . your unique skill set, let's say, you're considered a person of interest in an ongoing investigation."

Quinn nodded, though Atlas caught the slight tightening around her eyes. "I

understand. But what if the hurricane comes?”

Hughes scowled. “Then we’ll make that call then.”

“Understood.”

Agent Hughes closed her notepad with a snap. “We’ll be in touch if we have additional questions.”

After the agent left, Atlas turned to Quinn, noting the way she’d gone still in her chair. “You okay?”

Quinn managed a tight smile. “Just peachy. Nothing like being told you’re essentially under federal surveillance to brighten your morning.”

Atlas reached across the table and covered her hand with his. A zing of electricity rushed through him, but he ignored it. “We’ll figure this out. I promise.”

The trust in her eyes when she looked at him made his chest tight with an emotion he wasn’t ready to name.

He knew he was getting himself in too deep. But despite the warning bells in his mind, he didn’t want to back off.

He prayed he wouldn’t regret that.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX

It wasn't until Quinn left the Blackout headquarters in Atlas's SUV that she felt as if she could finally breathe.

The FBI interview had rattled her more than she'd wanted to admit. If she was on the wrong side, then she deserved to pay the consequences of her actions. But the thought also terrified her.

She observed Atlas beside her as he drove. His eyes constantly checked the mirrors, noted approaching vehicles, assessed potential ambush points as if he was expecting trouble.

The weather didn't help matters any. The sky was heavy with gray clouds that seemed to press down on the island like a lid. The air felt thick and electric, charged with the promise of the approaching storm.

"The weather's getting worse," Quinn murmured, watching the trees sway in the gusty wind.

"The storm has a name now—Delilah. She's strengthened to a Category 3." Atlas took a turn that led them toward what looked like a small downtown area. "She's supposed to make landfall directly on Lantern Beach in two days, but we'll feel the outer bands earlier."

An odd flutter of recognition filled Quinn at his words, though she couldn't place why.

She looked out at the rugged, sandy streets they passed. The weathered buildings and bent trees spoke of a community that had survived countless storms. Still, being on this oversized sandbar during a Category 3 storm could be a death sentence.

A storm had probably created this island. A storm could take it out also.

"Any word on evacuations?" she asked.

"They're expected to make the call later today. Some people are leaving preemptively."

A few seconds of silence passed before Quinn asked, "Is there anything else you can tell me about Sigma? Do you have any idea what they're planning? I can't stop wondering if I'm somehow connected . . ."

Atlas's expression grew darker. "No concrete intelligence. But for some reason, they seem to be specifically targeting either Lantern Beach or Blackout. Maybe both. Blackout has made a lot of enemies over the years—that's the nature of the work we do.

But this level of focused attention feels personal. "

She rubbed her lips together in thought before saying, "I understand why they'd target Blackout operatives. But why Lantern Beach? What makes this island important enough to attack?"

"Honestly? I have no idea." Atlas's frustration was evident in his voice.

“This community seems so safe,” she murmured. “So removed from everything.”

“Is anywhere really safe?” Atlas sounded philosophical as he asked the question. “Sometimes the places that feel most secure are actually the most vulnerable because no one expects them to be targets.”

The words sent an unexplained chill through Quinn. It was as if somewhere in her buried memories she understood exactly what he meant.

Atlas pulled into a public parking lot near a small boardwalk lined with shops, restaurants, and an amusement area with a Ferris wheel. Despite the threatening weather, a few people hurried about on the boardwalk.

As Atlas parked, Quinn turned in her seat to study his strong profile, his wavy dark hair, his tanned skin.

Her throat went dry.

Why did he have to be so handsome and kind? The last thing she needed was this attraction she felt toward the man to distract her from the bigger, more important issues she faced right now.

“Come on.” Atlas turned off the engine. “Let’s see if anything here sparks a memory.”

She drew in a shaky breath and nodded.

This was what she needed to do.

But Quinn would be lying if she said she wasn’t nervous about what she might discover.

Atlas kept one eye on Quinn and the other on their surroundings as they walked along the weathered boardwalk.

The rain had driven most tourists indoors, leaving the normally busy area feeling almost deserted.

Some business owners were already putting boards over windows and sandbags out front in preparation for the storm.

At least the breeze made the oppressive July heat a little more bearable.

Beside him, Quinn's head turned at small sounds, and her eyes seemed to search for potential threats.

Whatever training lurked in her subconscious, it was still active.

"Anything feel familiar?" Atlas asked as they passed Beach Bound Books and Beans—a popular bookstore and coffeehouse owned by the mayor's wife.

"Not really." Quinn paused at an opening between the stores where they could see the angry ocean in the distance. "Though there's something about this area that feels . . . significant. I just can't place what."

They stood there a moment, Atlas giving her time to process. To watch the waves. To glance at the pier stretching out over the water.

Before he could say anything else, movement in his peripheral vision caught his attention.

A man in a gray windbreaker stood about thirty feet away, staring directly at Quinn. The intensity in his gaze caught Atlas's attention.

The man was middle-aged and unremarkable except for the way he seemed frozen in place, as if he'd seen a ghost.

Why was he staring?

"Quinn." Atlas kept his voice low. "Don't turn around, but there's someone watching you."

Quinn's posture shifted subtly into something more alert and ready. "Where?"

"Gray jacket, about thirty feet behind you."

She casually peered over her shoulder. "He doesn't look familiar—not that he would."

Atlas couldn't let this guy get away. He might have answers they needed, and he'd regret not asking. "I'm going to have a conversation with him."

"Be careful," Quinn warned.

"I will be."

Atlas turned and approached the man, trying to maintain the casual confidence of someone who wasn't looking for trouble but wouldn't back down from it either. As he got closer, the stranger's expression shifted from recognition to something that looked closer to fear.

"Excuse me." Atlas stopped just close enough to be conversational. "I couldn't help but notice you staring at my friend. Is there a problem?"

The man took a step back, hands raised peacefully. "No, no problem. I just . . . she

looks familiar, that's all. I was trying to place her."

His gaze wandered to the logo on the man's parka. The name of a news station stretched there.

"Familiar how?" Atlas kept his voice friendly but firm.

"She looks similar to someone I met a few years back." The man glanced nervously at Quinn, who'd turned and was now watching the exchange.

"I'm a meteorologist from Raleigh, and I'm here to cover the storm.

I'm waiting for my cameraman and trying to get a feel for the island before we start broadcasting.

Anyway, your friend looks like the woman who gave a guest lecture at a symposium on weather and climate. "

His breath caught. "Tell me more."

The man's shoulders relaxed slightly as he seemed to realize Atlas wouldn't attack him for staring.

"She was a brilliant scientist who specialized in predicting hurricane behavior and storm surge patterns. She was really passionate about her work. Your friend has the same bone structure, same way of moving. If she's not the same person, she could be her twin. "

Atlas glanced back at Quinn, noting how she'd gone still. She was close enough to hear the conversation, and she was definitely listening.

He turned back to the man. “What was this expert’s name?”

“I wish I could remember,” the man said. “I think she worked for NOAA. Or maybe it was the National Weather Service. Anyway, she was supposed to be one of the top people in her field. My apologies for staring. I didn’t mean to concern you.”

“It’s okay,” Atlas murmured. “Thank you.”

The man smiled. “It’s too bad your friend isn’t the woman I’m thinking of. With this approaching storm, I’d think an island like this could use her expertise.”

Atlas’s throat clenched.

Yes, they sure could use the expertise of a scientist who specialized in weather.

So was Quinn a trained operative?

Or was she a scientist?

Or was there any way she might be both?

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN

Quinn's world tilted as the stranger's words hit her.

I think she worked for NOAA. Or maybe it was the National Weather Service. Anyway, she was supposed to be one of the top people in her field.

How did that potential discovery mesh with her earlier thought that she was an assassin?

It didn't.

"Quinn?" Atlas was beside her now, his hand steady on her arm. "Are you okay?"

She blinked, realizing she'd been staring at the stranger with the same intensity he'd been watching her. "I . . . yes. It's just . . ."

She pressed her eyes closed another moment.

Weather expertise did not fit with the violent flashbacks she'd been having.

What if those memories weren't real?

The thought hit her like lightning. What if the flashbacks she'd been experiencing weren't recovered memories at all, but some kind of psychological defense

mechanism?

What if they were her mind's way of creating a dangerous persona to explain the violence she'd experienced?

Or what if she was a pawn in someone's psyops warfare?

Quinn glanced at the man Atlas had spoken with.

He remained where he was, looking at the ocean on the other side of the boardwalk. He pulled up the hood on his parka as the rain started to come down harder.

She hardly noticed the moisture. The way the edge of her pants legs were getting wet or her hair was beginning to curl.

None of that seemed important right now.

If she wanted to ask that man any questions, the time was now. She didn't want to miss this opportunity.

She stepped toward him. "Excuse me, I know this might sound strange, but could I speak with you a moment?"

The man hesitated before saying, "Of course. I'm just waiting for my cameraman to get here so we can start filming."

"You said I look like someone who specialized in hurricane prediction?"

The man nodded again and shifted as the wind pushed against them.

"That's right. Coastal storm patterns, storm surge modeling, hurricane intensification.

The speaker that day was brilliant. She had this theory about how certain atmospheric conditions could create what she called ‘pressure bombs’—storms that intensified much faster than traditional models predicted. ”

“You don’t remember her name or anything else about her?”

He frowned and shook his head. “No, I’m sorry, but I don’t.”

“How long ago did you say this was?”

“Probably two years. The symposium took place in Orlando, if that helps.”

Another jolt of recognition rushed through her, but she couldn’t put her finger on why. Nothing was making sense.

“Thank you so much,” she murmured to the man.

She turned back to Atlas, taking his arm and strolling away so the man couldn’t hear them. “I think I need to tell your team about this. Because if I’m a meteorologist instead of a trained killer . . .”

“Then everything we thought we knew about your situation just changed,” Atlas finished.

His expression was unreadable, but Quinn caught the way his shoulders relaxed slightly.

“I’ll call them,” he finally said with a nod.

A mixture of relief and terror filled her.

Someone had worked extremely hard to make her believe she was someone else entirely.

The question was why. And how had she learned her defensive tactics?

“There’s a restaurant just up the street.

” Atlas nodded in that direction. “The Crazy Chefette. They make the best grilled cheese sandwiches with peaches. We can go there while I make some calls, and we can talk this out more there. The rain is starting to come down harder, so we should get inside.”

As they walked toward the restaurant, Quinn couldn’t shake the feeling that they’d just encountered the first real clue to her identity.

She only hoped that the truth, when they finally found it, was something she could live with.

Quinn and Atlas found seats inside The Crazy Chefette. After a few minutes, they ordered.

She was going to try the highly recommended grilled cheese with peaches.

The air conditioning pumped through overhead vents, and a chill washed over her. Her damp clothing wasn’t doing her any favors right now.

Or maybe it was her thoughts that made her shiver. She couldn’t be sure.

As Atlas wrapped up his phone calls, she glanced at the window and noted how the sky looked even darker. The wind gusts continued to accelerate. The rain now came down in sheets, only to stop for a brief reprieve before starting again.

Around them, everyone was talking about the hurricane. Many tourists had already decided to go home early, just in case.

Probably smart. The ferries stopped operating once winds got above thirty-five miles per hour.

“What are you thinking about?” Atlas’s voice cut into her thoughts.

She blew out a breath and shrugged, absently playing with the straw in her glass of water. “Everything and nothing.”

He offered a lopsided smile. “Makes sense.”

“Will your colleagues tell the FBI this update?”

“I’m not sure. But probably—especially if the feds are still at Blackout.”

A few seconds ticked by.

“What if I am a scientist?” She watched his face. “What sense would that make?”

He slowly shook his head. “That’s a good question. I don’t really know. Most meteorologists aren’t great at shooting helicopters out of the sky.”

“Exactly.” She raked a hand through her hair.

He pulled out his phone and tapped the screen. “Let’s do our own online sleuthing and see if we can find out anything about you.”

She moved to the other side of the booth and sat beside him so she could see what he was doing.

He was researching scientists who worked for NOAA.

Quinn's heart pounded harder as she anticipated what he might find.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT

Atlas waited as the results populated his phone screen.

He'd decided to research the names of any scientists associated with NOAA. Maybe her name wouldn't pop up, but maybe her picture would.

It was worth a shot.

And he wasn't complaining about the fact that Quinn was now sitting beside him. That he could feel her body heat as their legs touched. That he could smell the flowery scent of her shampoo.

She could be attached, he reminded himself. Could have a boyfriend or husband.

He wanted to believe neither of those things were true. There was no evidence of a wedding ring. No one who'd reported her missing.

Still, he needed to be careful—for more than one reason.

“Anything?” Quinn murmured beside him, hope lilting her voice.

He scrolled through a list of staff members and associates, waiting to see a familiar picture.

There were none.

He did the same thing with the National Weather Service.

Still nothing.

He tried not to show his disappointment and offered a compassionate smile to Quinn instead.

If he was disappointed, he could only imagine how she might feel.

“That doesn’t necessarily mean anything.

Not every scientist who works for them—or who has worked for them—will be listed online. But it was worth a shot, right?”

“Absolutely.” She frowned while nibbling on her bottom lip. “The more I learn, the less things make sense. I mean, me being a scientist doesn’t fit any of the flashbacks I’ve had.”

“No, it doesn’t, does it?”

She let out a breath before moving back to the other side of the table.

Immediately, Atlas missed her closeness.

It’s better to keep some distance, he reminded himself.

Before he could think about it too long, their food came.

Perfect. Maybe eating would distract him—from both Quinn and from their

problems.

When their food came, Quinn bit into her sandwich and nearly groaned with pleasure. The combination of sharp cheddar, sweet fruit, and perfectly buttered sourdough tasted divine.

“This is incredible,” she murmured. “I can’t believe I’ve never had anything like this before.”

Atlas smiled, taking a bite of his own crab cake sandwich. “The Crazy Chefette is legendary around here.” He paused, studying his own sandwich with mock seriousness. “This crab cake is like poetry written in Old Bay seasoning—each bite tells the story of the sea, of watermen, and of tides.”

Quinn laughed, nearly choking on her sandwich. “Did you just wax poetic about seafood?”

“Maybe.” Atlas grinned, and for a moment the tension of the past few days seemed to lift. “My grandmother always said good food deserves good words.”

“Everything okay over here?” A warm voice interrupted them.

Quinn looked up to see a woman in her early thirties with long, blonde hair and a wide smile approaching their table.

“Perfect as always,” Atlas said. “Lisa, this is Quinn. Quinn, meet Lisa Dillinger, owner and culinary genius behind this place.”

“Welcome to Lantern Beach.” Warmth enveloped Lisa’s voice. “First time visiting?”

“Something like that.” Quinn shrugged, unsure how else to answer. “It seems like a

great place. Everyone has been so welcoming.”

“That’s island life for you. We take care of our own. Enjoy your food.” Lisa patted Quinn’s shoulder before moving on to check another table. “And stay safe during the storm. We’re probably closing up shop early and headed off the island. We’re hoping to make it through lunch service first.”

“Probably a good idea,” Atlas said. “This one looks like it could be a doozy.”

Quinn watched her go, marveling at the easy hospitality. “It’s remarkable how nice everyone is here. It’s like a different world from . . .”

She trailed off, realizing she’d been about to compare it to something she couldn’t remember.

“From wherever you came from?” Atlas suggested gently.

“Maybe.” Quinn took another bite, still deep in thought. “If I was here on some kind of mission—and not as a scientist—why would anyone target this place? It seems so peaceful, so removed from anything that would interest government agencies or terrorist organizations.”

Atlas was quiet a moment, his expression thoughtful. “Sometimes the most innocent-looking places hide the biggest secrets.”

She smiled. She was beginning to love it when he talked all fancy like that.

They ate in comfortable silence, waiting for Atlas’s phone to ring with updates from his team. They just might have the answers she’d been waiting for. Maybe her life would start to make sense.

She should feel relieved. Instead, anxiety danced through her muscles.

What if she didn't like what she found out? The question had been on repeat in her mind for the past few days. But how could she not obsess over that question? So much hinged on the answer.

Her fear was real. Too real.

After a few minutes of quietly eating, Quinn asked, "Do you see yourself staying here for a long time, Atlas? On this island, I mean?"

He shrugged, not quite meeting her eyes. "I'm not sure. It's a good job with good people. But I try to take things one day at a time."

"Do you have family to go back to?" The question felt natural, like something she genuinely wanted to know about him.

"I've got a pretty large family in Montana." Atlas's expression softened slightly. "Four brothers, three sisters. Everyone's doing their own thing—farming, teaching, running businesses. I have twelve nieces and nephews I love seeing when I go home for holidays."

A pang of something that might have been envy rushed through Quinn. "That sounds wonderful."

Atlas tilted his head slightly. "I wish I could ask you the same questions, but I know you don't have those answers."

Quinn reached into the blank space where her memories should be. "I know this probably sounds weird, but my gut feeling is that I don't have a close family, like I was alone before this happened. I mean, if I did, wouldn't they have reported me

missing?”

Atlas nodded, understanding in his eyes. “You would think.”

“But you’ve never been married yourself?” Quinn noted the way Atlas’s expression had grown more guarded at her question.

A shadow passed over his gaze. “No.”

The single word carried weight, suggesting history he wasn’t ready to share. But Quinn found herself pushing gently, curious about this man who’d become so important to her in such a short time.

“Have you ever been close to getting married?” She genuinely wanted to know. Her interest had moved beyond merely professional.

Atlas’s hand tightened slightly around his sandwich, and he licked his lips—a nervous gesture she was learning to recognize.

For a moment, Quinn wondered if she’d asked too much, if she’d crossed some invisible line.

Despite that, she refused to take the question back.

She wanted to know more about this man.

She knew that curiosity was dangerous. But she wouldn’t apologize for it either, especially since she felt as if she was living on borrowed time.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-NINE

Atlas stared at his sandwich, weighing how much truth he was willing to share.

Quinn's question had hit the exact nerve he'd been trying to avoid.

The comparison between her situation and Noreen's betrayal had been eating at him since the day he'd found Quinn running from the woods.

But looking at her now, seeing the genuine interest in her eyes, he made a decision that went against every professional instinct he'd developed.

He was going to open up, even if opening up was risky, for both his job and his heart.

"I was engaged once." His words came out soft and quiet. "To a woman named Noreen. But it didn't work out."

"What happened?" Quinn's voice was gentle, without the probing quality of an interrogation. She sounded genuinely interested in his life.

Atlas took a breath, choosing his words carefully.

"She wasn't who I thought she was. She sold her soul and her life and everything about it became a lie—including her loyalties and her feelings for me.

” The words tasted bitter on his tongue.

“I thought I knew her, that I could trust her completely. I was wrong.”

Quinn was quiet a moment as if absorbing his words. “She was a fool to cast aside someone like you. I bet she still regrets it to this day.”

His eyebrows flew up. He hadn’t expected her words. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“Her betrayal must have been devastating,” Quinn continued, almost as if she hadn’t heard him.

Devastating would be an understatement. “It was. But it taught me an important lesson about?—”

He was going to say about trusting people—something he should keep at the forefront of his mind now.

But the sharp ring of his phone interrupted the conversation, cutting it short.

Atlas reached for the device, but he hesitated before grabbing it. Would this phone call bring good news or bad?

He exhaled slowly through his nose then grabbed the phone. His jaw tightened as he read the caller ID.

“It’s Colton.” He glanced at Quinn as he answered.

Her eyes widened and she seemed to hold her breath with anticipation over what he might have discovered.

“I just wanted to give you an update,” Colton started. “We’re still working the meteorologist angle. Unfortunately, internet service on the island has been going in and out, and it’s making all of this take longer.”

“That’s unfortunate. Did you find anything?”

“Nothing concrete yet, but our guys are digging deeper into NOAA and National Weather Service personnel records,” Colton said. “We’ll let you know when we find out anything.”

Atlas tried not to show his disappointment. He’d really hoped Colton might have discovered something. But, as the saying goes, patience was a virtue.

Instead, he asked, “Any other updates? Any progress on the helicopter registration?”

“Still tracing the shell companies, but it’s going to take time. However, we did hear from Cassidy this morning about some unusual activity last night near the lighthouse.”

Atlas straightened in his chair. “What kind of activity?”

“A few people reported seeing lights on the beach around midnight, maybe vehicle headlights. Maybe boats. Someone also thought they heard some fireworks—but they could have been gunshots. It could be nothing, but given everything that’s been happening . . .”

“Has anyone checked it out?”

“The rest of your team is on their way there now.”

Atlas glanced at Quinn again as she watched him with sharp attention.

He nodded. “I can head there and take a look around. Quinn’s with me. Maybe something will trigger a memory for her.”

“Be careful,” Colton warned. “If someone was conducting operations on that beach last night, they might have left more than footprints behind.”

Bombs, Atlas mused. Colton was probably thinking of bombs. They seemed to be Sigma’s weapon of choice.

“Copy that.” Atlas ended the call and looked at Quinn. “Want to take a drive to the lighthouse?”

Quinn’s expression was immediately alert. “What’s at the lighthouse?”

“Maybe nothing. Maybe evidence of whatever’s been going on.” Atlas stood and threw money on the table for their meal, thankful they were mostly finished. “Either way, it beats sitting around waiting for answers that might never come.”

“You’re not going to get any argument about that from me.” She rose, clearly anxious to leave also.

As they headed for the door, Atlas couldn’t shake the feeling that whatever they found at the lighthouse would change everything.

He just hoped they were ready for what that change might bring.

Atlas parked the SUV near the weathered lighthouse that had stood sentinel over Lantern Beach for more than a century.

The white tower looked stark against the storm-darkened sky as choppy gray water stretched in the background. Rain continued to come down in spurts, and sand blew

with the wind.

Four familiar figures were spread across the beach, methodically searching the sand for any evidence of the previous night's mysterious activities.

"Looks like the cavalry's already here," Atlas murmured.

He'd already noted how Quinn's posture had shifted the moment she spotted his teammates.

She sat straighter, more alert, like someone preparing for potential conflict. "Maybe they'll find something that will give us some answers . . ."

"I'm not sure why Sigma would be out here or what they'd be doing," Atlas said. "There are plenty of other places where they could be doing their dirty work. Coming back would be gutsy."

They climbed from the SUV and made their way down the sandy path toward the beach. Atlas stayed close to Quinn, close enough to grab her if she tried to bolt but not so close as to make his supervision obvious.

Jake looked up as they approached. He held a metal detector in his hands as he searched for explosives. "Find anything interesting in town?"

"Maybe," Atlas said. "Someone thought they recognized Quinn as a meteorologist. We're still investigating."

He raised his eyebrows. "A meteorologist? Wasn't expecting that. Hopefully it's some progress."

Before Atlas could respond, he noticed Quinn had stopped walking. She stood about

ten feet from the lighthouse's base, staring up at the structure with an expression of growing confusion.

Her face had gone pale, and her breathing appeared shallow.

Whatever she was seeing or remembering, it was hitting her hard.

“Quinn?” Atlas moved toward her.

But Quinn didn't seem to hear him. She was lost in whatever memory had been triggered by this place, her eyes wide and unfocused as if she could see something the rest of them couldn't.

Atlas positioned closer to Quinn, ready to intervene if whatever she was remembering caused her to react badly.

Because if the lighthouse had triggered a flashback to her supposed assassin training, things were about to get very complicated very quickly.

CHAPTER

THIRTY

As Quinn stared up at the lighthouse, the world around her seemed to shift and blur.

She'd been here before. She was sure of it.

The certainty hit her like a physical blow, bringing with it fragments of emotion that didn't form a complete picture.

Salty air, the sound of waves against rocks, and underneath it all, a growing sense of urgency and fear.

But not fear for herself—fear for someone else.

The partial memory crystallized with shocking clarity.

An older man with gray hair and kind eyes, worry lines etched deep around his mouth. He wore a rumpled linen shirt and held a stack of weather data printouts. His hands shook as he spoke.

They were on a beach . . . except this one had palm trees that swayed with the strong wind.

“Quinn, I need your help,” he said. “The models aren't matching what I'm seeing in the field data. This newest storm . . . it's not behaving like anything we've predicted.”

Her voice was professional but tinged with growing concern as she responded. “Show me what you’ve found, Dr. Hartwell.”

Hartwell.

The name triggered another cascade of recognition. Maybe he was a colleague or a mentor.

“The pressure readings are all wrong.” He spread the papers across what looked like a makeshift desk inside the back of a van.

“If I’m right, this hurricane isn’t just going to hit the Bahamas.

It’s going to create a storm surge unlike anything we’ve ever seen. Entire communities could be wiped out.”

Fear gripped her—the desperate terror of someone who realized innocent lives were at stake.

“We have to warn people.” Her voice cracked as she said the words. “Issue an evacuation order, get people inland ? —”

“No one will listen. Not without proof. By the time we have proof, it’ll be too late.” His eyes appeared haunted, desperate. “That’s why I called you. Your storm surge models, your pressure differential research—you’re the only one who might be able to confirm what I’m seeing.”

At that moment, Quinn had somehow known he was going to die. Known with the terrible certainty that came from . . . what?

How could she have known that?

Quinn gasped and staggered backward, the memory fragmenting like broken glass.

Her heart raced, and a crushing headache built behind her eyes.

“Quinn!” Atlas gripped her arm. “What did you remember?”

She looked up at him, trying to process the flashback. “There was a man. An older scientist, I think. Dr. Hartwell. He was showing me weather data, storm readings that didn’t match the predictions.”

Atlas’s expression sharpened. “What kind of storm readings?”

“Hurricane data. Pressure differentials that suggested . . .” Quinn pressed her palms against her temples, trying to ease the pounding in her head. “He was afraid people were going to die because no one would believe his predictions.”

“And you were here to help him?” Atlas clarified.

“Yes, but . . .” Quinn’s voice trailed off as the darker part of the memory surfaced. “Atlas, I was afraid he was going to die. Not from the storm—from something else. Someone else.”

Atlas glanced back at his teammates, who’d stopped their search to watch this exchange.

“Do you remember anything else?” he asked Quinn. “What happened to Dr. Hartwell, or why you thought he was in danger?”

Quinn shook her head, frustration building inside her. “It’s all fragments, pieces that don’t fit together. Our conversation . . . it couldn’t have been about Hurricane Delilah. They just named that storm since my amnesia.”

“Another hurricane hit the Bahamas about two weeks ago,” Atlas said.

“Maybe that’s what he was talking about. Did the storm do a lot of damage?”

Atlas nodded. “Not as much as it could have done. The system fell apart before it hit land. Some people called it a miracle. You think Hartwell was researching that storm and asked you to help?”

She shrugged before shaking her head. “I wish I knew. But I have no idea.”

“At least it’s something . . .”

“But Atlas?” She met his gaze, letting him see the fear that was eating at her. “I have a really bad feeling about this island. Like something terrible is going to happen here. Maybe what was going to happen in the Bahamas. They got it wrong there, but maybe they want to test it again here.”

The wind picked up, whistling around them and sending sand swirling around their feet. In the distance, storm clouds continued to build, dark and ominous against the afternoon sky.

Quinn couldn’t shake the feeling that Hurricane Delilah wasn’t just bringing wind and rain to Lantern Beach.

It was bringing answers she wasn’t sure she wanted to find.

While Atlas spoke with his teammates, Quinn found herself drawn to the woods on the other side of the lighthouse. Flashes of being on a beach before continued to hit her.

Urgency pressed on her with each thought.

Almost as if in a trance, she walked toward the forest, pulled by something unseen.

She stepped between the trees, her eyes searching for something her mind wasn't certain about.

Then she saw it.

A dark van parked in the shadows.

Still moving almost robotically, she walked to the newer vehicle and opened the door to the back.

The equipment scattered across the floor made her breath catch.

Weather monitoring devices. Barometric pressure gauges. Digital anemometers.

And scattered among everything else were waterlogged notebooks with pages that fluttered in the draft from the open door.

She'd been in this van before. She didn't know how she knew it, but she did.

Quinn climbed inside and sat on the gritty floor. Her hands trembled as she picked up one of the notebooks.

The ink had run in places, but she could still make out handwritten observations in careful, precise script.

Pressure dropping faster than models predict. Wind shear patterns inconsistent with Category 4 classification. Storm exhibiting intensification characteristics despite water temperature readings. Never seen a hurricane behave like this before.

Based on the date at the top of the page, Dr. Hartwell's notes were about the hurricane that hit the Bahamas two weeks ago. Quinn was certain of it, though she couldn't explain how she knew his handwriting. She wasn't even sure who the man was. But his name had slammed into her mind with clarity.

As she turned the pages, more fragments of memory began surfacing like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle clicking into place.

Standing on a tropical beach, watching Hartwell's increasingly frantic calculations. His gray hair disheveled, his shirt wrinkled from hours of work without rest.

"Quinn, look at these readings." His voice sounded urgent and desperate. "The storm's exhibiting signs of artificial enhancement. Someone's been seeding the clouds, manipulating the pressure systems."

Her breath caught. "That's impossible. Weather modification on this scale would require ? —"

"Incredible resources and equipment. Exactly." Hartwell turned to face her, his eyes bright with fear and discovery. "I think someone's turning hurricanes into weapons."

"What's that mean for the Bahamas? There's a storm approaching there now."

His expression became even more grim. "It could be total devastation. I can only hope their plan doesn't work."

"When will we know?"

He frowned. "Soon. Someone would really need to know what they were doing to make this work. One incorrect variable would make this fall apart. Let's pray someone made a mistake."

Quinn gasped and dropped the notebook, the memory hitting her with such clarity it felt like a physical blow.

Then the next one came.

“Quinn . . . we’re lucky. The storm is falling apart. Something went wrong. This time. But if these people figure out their mistake . . .”

“It will be totally devastation next time,” she finished. “How did they even create this?”

“Someone had to be helping them. Another scientist.”

“Who? Who would do this?”

“That’s what we need to figure out.”

More, darker images crowded the edges of her consciousness.

Men in dark clothing appeared at the other end of the beach. Hartwell turned toward her, his voice urgent as the wind whipped around them. “Go. Run. Hide the data. Don’t let them ? —”

Gunfire sounded.

“I can’t leave you!” Panic raced through her as he thrust his notebooks into her arms.

“My knees are bad. I don’t stand a chance. I can’t make it back to the van. But you can. Now go! There’s no time to argue.”

Defeat pummeled her. She couldn’t leave him.

He'd die.

"Go!" His voice left no room for argument.

She glanced at the men.

They were getting closer.

But they were coming from the opposite side.

If she could make it to the van . . .

"Whatever you do, don't help them!" Hartwell yelled.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

Then she took off in a run.

And then . . . nothing. She wasn't sure what happened next.

In the space where her memories should be there was only white static.

Quinn sagged against the side of the van, breathing hard as the implications crashed over her.

Dr. Hartwell discovered something that had gotten him killed. She'd run. She must have made it back to the van. Left his notebooks here.

Maybe she'd even driven away.

Maybe she'd come to Lantern Beach and hidden the van, knowing that this island

was their next target.

Then she'd been grabbed—maybe before she could warn anyone—and . . .

She wasn't sure.

She looked down at her wrists, remembering the defensive wounds, the rope burns.

She'd fought those men.

Whatever they'd done to her, she'd fought them every step of the way.

But they'd won. At least temporarily.

Quinn picked up the notebook again, forcing herself to focus on Hartwell's final entries. The pressure readings, the wind patterns, the meticulous documentation of a hurricane that was behaving unlike any natural storm on record.

This information was on a different storm system.

But was Hurricane Delilah following the same pattern?

Her gut told her yes.

Understanding hit her like ice water. Whoever was behind this . . . they were conducting their experiment again.

And this time, what if their plan worked?

CHAPTER

THIRTY-ONE

Atlas watched Quinn disappear into the woods. Every instinct screamed at him to stop her. Instead, he decided to follow at a distance.

Through the foliage, he saw something out of place.

A van.

Quinn had climbed inside. How had she known the vehicle was there? The shadows had hidden the vehicle.

He remained concealed as he kept an eye on her.

Several moments passed before Quinn burst from the vehicle. She ran toward the beach, something small and flat in her hands.

Atlas followed her back toward the shoreline. He didn't want to stop some kind of memory from emerging. Right now, it was better to let it play out.

The other guys noticed the commotion and gathered to see what was wrong.

She stopped in front of them, breathless. "I . . . I think I remembered something."

She explained how she believed someone was responsible for manipulating storm

systems. How they'd tried to do it with a storm in the Bahamas. How they'd failed—though just barely.

She reiterated how men had come after Dr. Hartwell. How she wasn't sure what had happened to him.

"They're making the weather into a weapon," Jake muttered. "Into . . . a bomb of sorts."

"Exactly," she murmured.

"Are you sure about all this?" Jake squinted with a healthy dose of skepticism.

"I am." Quinn nodded emphatically. "I can't explain how or why. But the memories . . . they feel real."

"So you think these people are trying to alter Hurricane Delilah?" Hudson asked. "To make it a monster storm?"

"That's my best guess."

Their silence only lasted a moment before everyone sprang into action.

"Maverick, see what you can find out about this Dr. Hartwell," Jake called. "Quinn, why don't you keep looking at those notebooks and see if you can remember anything else? Atlas, stay with her."

"What about Kyle and me?" Hudson stood with his hands on his hips, and his eyes narrowed as the sun peeked from behind a cloud for a brief moment.

"Keep sweeping this area for explosives or anything else suspicious," Jake said. "We

don't have much time. Get moving. Now. Because if Quinn is right, then we are about to have a catastrophe on our hands."

Quinn went back to the van with Atlas to continue looking at all the notebooks.

Her mind raced. She was so close to finding answers. She could feel it in her bones.

She couldn't let these moments slip through her fingers like sand.

She had to seize the memories now.

With the van's back doors open, Quinn sat down and spread Dr. Hartwell's waterlogged notebooks across the floor. Her hands shook as she tried to piece together the fragmented data.

The numbers told a terrifying story.

These storms weren't just natural disasters.

They were weapons of mass destruction.

As she studied Dr. Hartwell's notes, something else began to surface. A memory that felt different from the others.

A memory that felt sharper and more immediate.

A sterile white room. Fluorescent lights that hurt her eyes. The smell of antiseptic and something else—something chemical and wrong.

"The target is protected," a voice said, cold and clinical. "I need more time."

But it wasn't her voice. It was someone else's.

"You're going to help us, Quinn," a man wearing a white lab coat instructed. "Just like you helped the Russians."

"I didn't help them. I stopped them. And I won't help you." Her voice sounded hoarse as if she'd been screaming.

"You will. Unless you want us to kill your friend Dr. Hartwell."

Her heart skipped a beat. "He's still alive?"

"He is—for now. But he's not being cooperative. We can't do this without one of you."

Quinn jerked back to the present, her heart pounding so hard she could hear it over the wind.

It all made sense now.

Those men had kept her alive because they needed her expertise.

Her knowledge of storm systems, her ability to predict and analyze hurricane behavior—they couldn't do this without help.

"Are you okay?" Atlas's voice pulled her out of her thoughts.

"It was another flashback." Her voice came out breathless. She glanced at Atlas, finding comfort in his presence. "Someone was trying to force me to do something. They were going to kill Dr. Hartwell if I didn't."

“What do you mean?”

Still sitting in the van, she grabbed Hartwell’s notebook with trembling hands, reading his final entry.

More memories flooded back.

Standing in a laboratory, analyzing satellite data that showed impossible storm behavior.

Phone calls with colleagues who’d noticed similar anomalies in other storm systems.

The growing realization that someone with military-grade resources was conducting illegal weather modification experiments.

Their plan had failed in the Bahamas. She had to make sure it failed here as well.

Quinn pressed her palms against her temples as the full scope of the conspiracy became clear.

Someone hadn’t just been experimenting with weather modification—they’d been perfecting it. Using actual hurricanes as test cases, regardless of the civilian casualties.

These people had tried to make her and Hartwell help with their deadly project. When they’d come after her here on Lantern Beach, it wasn’t to kill her.

They wanted her alive. They were only trying to eliminate Atlas or anyone else who stood between them and her.

If not for Atlas finding her when he did, she might have completed whatever mission

they'd manipulated her into working on.

If her theory was correct, Hurricane Delilah would soon be bearing down on this island with artificially enhanced fury, following the exact pattern Hartwell had died trying to expose.

Quinn glanced through the trees at the lighthouse as it towered in the distance. Beyond it, storm clouds gathered.

This time, she stared at the sky with the trained eye of a meteorologist who finally remembered what she was looking at.

And she knew with certainty they were running out of time. They had to either stop this storm or get people off the island. Whatever these criminals had done, they'd figured out how to strengthen storms. To speed them up. To direct their paths.

"You guys, I found something!" Hudson yelled.

Quinn and Atlas glanced at each other before dashing from the van.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-TWO

The urgency in Hudson's tone made Atlas's tactical instincts flare to life.

He jogged across the uneven beach toward where Hudson stood near the rocks at the lighthouse's foundation.

"What have you got?" Jake called as they approached.

Hudson pointed toward a depression between two large boulders, his expression grim. "I found him wedged down here. Looks like the tide brought him in."

Atlas reached the jetty first and immediately understood Hudson's tone.

A man's body lay among the rocks, freshly dead.

Was this what the commotion was last night? Had someone killed this man and left him here for police to find? Maybe someone was trying to send a message.

The corpse wore the remnants of what had once been khaki pants and a button-down shirt. Late sixties, gray hair, with the soft build of someone who spent more time behind a desk than in the field.

Quinn arrived at Atlas's shoulder and looked down at the body. Her sharp intake of breath was audible even over the wind.

“No . . .” Her hand went over her mouth.

Atlas studied Quinn’s face, noting the mixture of recognition and grief. “You know him?”

Quinn nodded, tears mixing with the salt spray on her cheeks. “That’s . . . that’s Dr. Hartwell, the one who first detected the weather anomalies, if my memories are right.”

The pieces clicked into place in Atlas’s mind as he looked back at the body.

Dr. Hartwell—the meteorologist Quinn had mentioned from her fragmentary memories.

The man who’d supposedly discovered evidence of weather manipulation and had warned Quinn.

Now they knew what had happened to him. He’d been captured and killed.

Jake turned to his team. “We need to call this in.”

“I’m on it.” Kyle reached for his radio.

As they all stared at the body another moment, Atlas couldn’t shake the feeling that they’d just found the first domino in a chain of murders designed to silence anyone who’d discovered Sigma’s weather modification program.

And Quinn . . . she might not be on the kill list.

But it was only because they wanted her alive for something far worse.

Quinn stared at Dr. Hartwell's body, tears still choking her.

She'd escaped that night, she'd realized.

But Hartwell had been held captive. Had possibly been used as a bargaining chip.

"I left him," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the wind. "He told me to run, and I left him to die."

Atlas stepped closer, his presence steady and grounding. "Quinn, you did what he asked you to do. You tried to expose the program."

"But did I? If I did, why doesn't anyone know about this storm?"

"Maybe they captured you before you could figure out who to trust."

"Maybe they killed Hartwell for nothing." An edge of bitterness filled Quinn's voice.

Maverick stepped closer, his tablet in hand. "So I've been looking into Dr. Hartwell. He was legitimate—thirty years with NOAA, specialist in storm prediction and coastal weather patterns. Highly respected in his field."

"Anything else?"

"He disappeared two weeks ago." Maverick offered a compassionate frown. "I'm sorry."

Quinn pressed her eyes closed.

Was that when this nightmare had started for her? Had she been under those men's control since then? Maybe she'd helped them work on the kinks in their program in

exchange for Hartwell's life.

Would she have done that?

"Anything about Quinn?" Atlas asked. "Any record of the two of them working together?"

Quinn opened her eyes again.

Maverick's expression softened with sympathy. "No, not yet. I'm sorry."

The words sucked the air out of her lungs—along with any hope she'd been holding onto.

Even with her memories returning, even with Dr. Hartwell's body as proof of what they'd discovered together, she was still officially a nonentity. How was that even possible? Especially if she'd worked with Hartwell. None of this made sense.

But there was no paper trail, no verification of her identity, no evidence she'd ever existed.

Kyle finished his call and approached the group, his expression grim. "Federal agents are en route. But with the storm coming in, they might not make it before we have to evacuate."

As if summoned by his words, a stronger gust of wind swept across the beach, carrying more rain from Hurricane Delilah's outer bands.

"The storm is approaching faster than predicted," Quinn muttered. "And we're running out of time to properly investigate the scene."

“I’ve always believed that storms are like grief—they come when they come, rage as long as they need to, and leave destruction that can either break you or teach you to build something stronger.

But weaponizing that power is like trying to bottle lightning—dangerous for everyone, especially the one holding the glass.”

Quinn couldn’t deny the truth in his beautiful words.

Quinn looked at Dr. Hartwell’s body one more time, making a silent promise.

He’d died trying to expose Sigma’s weather weapon program. The least she could do was make sure his sacrifice wasn’t forgotten.

“We need to document everything.” Her voice came out stronger now with renewed purpose. “Photos, measurements, anything that might help prove what really happened to Dr. Hartwell.”

Dr. Hartwell’s death wasn’t just a tragedy—it was evidence. Proof that Sigma had been killing anyone who discovered their weather modification program.

If she could prove that, she might finally be able to uncover who she really was.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-THREE

Atlas stood on the beach, waiting for the police and FBI to arrive and investigate Dr. Hartwell's death. His team had already documented things for themselves—just in case.

The approaching storm clouds created an ominous backdrop. They needed to protect Hartwell's body until the property authorities could get here. But the weather was making that complicated.

In the distance, a sleek vessel cut through the choppy waters. It wasn't a fishing vessel. It was more of a luxury watercraft.

Something about it made his tactical instincts flare to life.

The boat was maybe two hundred yards out, moving parallel to the coastline at a speed that suggested surveillance rather than casual boating. Something about it was too deliberate, too focused.

Atlas squinted against the wind. He noted the way the vessel seemed to be maintaining a perfect distance from shore. It was close enough for observation but far enough to avoid easy identification.

That wasn't a coincidence.

“Quinn.” His hand instinctively moved toward his weapon. “We need to?—”

The first muzzle flash from the boat’s deck cut off his words.

“Get down!” Atlas tackled Quinn to the sand as bullets whined overhead.

The beach erupted in geysers of sand around them as fire from automatic weapons dotted the ground.

Atlas rolled, pulling Quinn behind a piece of driftwood while rounds splintered the wood above their heads.

Hudson and Jake dove toward the rocks near the lighthouse base while Maverick and Kyle dropped behind an old, overturned boat.

His team returned fire, their disciplined three-round bursts a sharp contrast to the sustained spray coming from the offshore vessel.

“Stay down!” Atlas commanded Quinn.

She remained pressed flat against the sand beside him.

He rose just enough to return fire.

Were the gunman shooting to kill?

Or were they trying to send a message? To distract them even?

That was what they needed to figure out.

Quinn’s heart hammered against her ribs as the attack continued.

Sand kicked up around them, stinging her face and sending grit into her mouth. The crack of gunfire filled the air, along with the whine of ricochets. Shouts also sounded as Atlas's team yelled instructions.

She pressed herself deeper into the sand, trying to make herself as small a target as possible while her mind raced.

Why were they shooting? What did these people want?

The gunfire continued for what felt like hours but was probably only minutes. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the shooting stopped.

Quinn cautiously raised her head. The dark boat accelerated away from shore, its wake cutting a white line through the gray water.

Her ears rang in the sudden, relative quiet.

"Is everyone okay?" Atlas called out, scanning his teammates as they emerged from their scattered positions.

"All good here." Hudson wiped the sand from his pants, a scowl on his face.

"Fine here," the rest of the team muttered.

No one looked happy—and rightfully so.

What had that been about?

Had those guys just wanted to scare them? To make a statement? Maybe even just to distract them.

That explanation made the most sense. They'd wanted this body to be discovered. They'd waited for the crew to show up. Then they'd made a statement by firing at them.

She was glad no one had been hurt.

She sat up slowly, her hands shaking as adrenaline coursed through her system.

Before they could talk anymore, Jake's phone rang.

He listened before lowering his phone and turning toward them.

"That was an urgent weather alert. Hurricane Delilah has strengthened to Category 4 status and is moving faster than predicted. Landfall now expected in eighteen hours, and all coastal areas should begin immediate evacuation procedures . . ."

Something clicked in Quinn's mind as she listened to the update.

"It's just as I feared," Quinn murmured. "The timing, the rapid intensification, the accelerated forward speed—none of it is following natural hurricane behavior."

"What can we do about it?" Atlas asked.

Quinn remained quiet a moment before asking, "Atlas, can I use your phone?"

He hesitated only a minute before unlocking his device and handing it to her. She quickly searched the latest weather data.

Atlas's watchful gaze remained on her. "What are you thinking?"

"Hurricanes don't strengthen that quickly unless . . ." She trailed off, her

meteorological training connecting dots that made her stomach clench.

The numbers on her screen told an impossible story.

Delilah's central pressure had dropped twenty millibars in six hours—a rate of intensification that should have been physically impossible over the relatively cool waters off North Carolina.

“Unless what?” Atlas moved to look over her shoulder.

“Unless someone's artificially feeding energy into the storm system.”

“What do you mean?” Jake asked. “That sounds awfully science fiction to me.”

“It's been in development by governments for years,” Quinn said.

She pulled up satellite imagery, pointing to the storm's structure.

“See how the eye wall is perfectly symmetrical? Natural hurricanes are chaotic, asymmetrical. But if you were using aircraft to seed the storm with silver iodide, or heating the ocean water in its path to provide more energy . . .”

“You're saying someone's controlling the hurricane?” Disbelief rocked Maverick's voice.

“Not controlling—enhancing,” Quinn corrected. “Hurricane manipulation has been theoretically possible for decades. Project Stormfury in the 1960s tried to weaken storms by cloud seeding. But if you reversed the process, if you wanted to strengthen a hurricane instead of weakening it . . .”

“They can do that?” Jake asked.

She gestured to the data on the phone. “Small interventions at critical moments can create massive changes in storm behavior. Heat the water temperature in the storm’s path by just a few degrees.

Introduce nucleation particles to encourage more efficient energy transfer.

Alter the upper-level wind patterns to reduce wind shear. ”

Quinn looked up at the darkening sky, understanding flooding through her with terrible clarity. “They failed with the hurricane in the Bahamas. Now someone is trying again here with Delilah.”

“They needed you to perfect their plan,” Atlas said.

“When I escaped, they decided to proceed anyway. Which, in some ways, might be even more dangerous. They could lose all control of the storm and . . . I don’t even want to think about what that would look like.”

Nausea roiled in her stomach at the thought.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-FOUR

As Jake stepped back to call in this new development, Atlas stared at Quinn, trying to process what she'd just told them. "Are all your memories back?"

Quinn shook her head as the wind whipped her hair around. Her frustration was evident in her expression. "No. Just some knowledge has returned. Like muscle memory but for meteorology. I can look at these weather patterns and just . . . know what they mean."

Hudson stepped closer, his expression skeptical. "How is that possible? Yesterday you couldn't remember your own name."

Quinn remained quiet a moment as if searching for the right words.

"It's like the difference between remembering how to ride a bike and remembering when you learned to ride a bike.

The skills are still there, the understanding of how weather systems work, how storms behave.

But the personal memories—where I learned it, who taught me, what cases I've worked on—that's still mostly blank. "

Her explanation made sense, and Atlas didn't see how anyone could argue with it.

The brain was a funny thing, but she'd described her situation perfectly.

She pulled up more data on Atlas's phone, showing them wind velocity charts and pressure readings. "This weather system isn't natural. Someone's been feeding energy into this storm for hours, maybe days. Now they're trying to refine their methods. And given the trajectory, the timing . . ."

"They're aiming it directly at Lantern Beach," Atlas finished.

The implications hit him like a physical blow. This was bad. Really bad.

"More than that." Quinn frowned and rubbed the side of her face. "They're timing it perfectly. A Category 4 hurricane hitting during high tide on a full moon, with storm surge enhanced by artificial intensification? This entire barrier island could be wiped out."

Ice formed in Atlas's stomach. "We have to warn people. Get everyone evacuated."

"Evacuated to where?" Kyle placed his hands on his hips. "If they can control the hurricane's path, then there's nowhere on the coast that will be safe."

Quinn studied the storm-tracking data, her expression growing more alarmed by the second. "The storm surge predictions are all wrong. The official forecasts are based on natural hurricane behavior, but if this storm has been artificially enhanced . . ."

"Then what?" Atlas asked.

She looked up at them with haunted eyes. "Then we're not talking about flooding. We're talking about complete devastation. Everything within five miles of the coast could be underwater."

Atlas reached for his phone. "I've got to let people know."

Colton picked up a moment later, and Atlas explained the situation to him.

Static crackled through the speaker before Colton's voice came through, tense and urgent. "Thanks for the update. I'll let people know. But I need to tell you something else also. We looked up that symposium the weather man mentioned."

"And?"

"And we think we found a connection. There was a woman who spoke there named Calista Quinton."

He glanced at her, his eyes wide. Her expression looked equally as tense.

"And?" Atlas pushed.

"She's a leading weather scientist for the government."

"But if she worked for the government, why aren't her prints on file?" Atlas asked.

"Good question," Colton said. "But there's more. She went missing, and there's buzz that she's working for the enemy and helping teach them how to use weather as a weapon."

"I'd never do that!" Quinn said.

"The FBI got word of our search and put out an arrest warrant for Quinn," Colton continued. "They're saying she's a possible terrorist and that's why she shot down that helicopter."

“Do they have new evidence?” Atlas asked.

“If they do, they’re not sharing.”

Atlas looked at Quinn and saw the fear flicker across her face as she realized what that meant.

“Quinn isn’t the threat here,” Atlas told Colton. “She’s the key to understanding how to stop these people.”

Atlas explained what they’d discovered.

“But she needs more time to figure out how to stop this,” Atlas finished. “If the feds put her away . . .”

Colton sighed before finally saying, “Fine. I’ll try to hold them off. But we’ve got less than eighteen hours before that hurricane makes landfall, and probably even less time than that before the FBI returns.”

Atlas looked at Quinn and saw the trust and terror warring in her eyes.

He knew at that moment that he’d protect her at all costs.

He needed to get her out of here before the FBI arrived.

He needed to get her back to headquarters and see if they could figure out how to stop this impending disaster.

Quinn gripped the door handle as Atlas navigated the SUV through increasingly difficult conditions.

The wind was intensifying, bending the island's trees at unnatural angles. Heavy bands of rain were beginning to lash the windshield.

"We have to get people off this island." She studied the latest weather data on Atlas's phone. "The storm surge alone will be catastrophic, but if they're artificially enhancing the hurricane . . . things could really get haywire."

"Blackout can help coordinate the evacuation." Atlas's knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

"We've got boats, helicopters, and personnel trained in emergency operations.

But eighteen hours isn't much time. As conditions deteriorate, there will be less we can do—flying our copters, for instance. "

Quinn did quick calculations in her head. "The island has what, probably less than a couple thousand permanent residents? Plus however many tourists decided to ride out the storm?"

"It's closer to ten thousand total."

She sucked in a breath, the number higher than she'd anticipated. "The sustained wind speeds are already at twenty-five miles per hour with gusts reaching higher. It won't be much longer until the ferries shut down."

The enormity of the task ahead settled over Quinn like a weight. Ten thousand people. Eighteen hours.

And somewhere out there, whoever was controlling Hurricane Delilah was counting on those people not making it to safety.

“Atlas, why Lantern Beach?” she murmured. “I keep trying to understand why Sigma would target this specific place. It’s not a major population center, not a military installation . . .”

“Maybe it’s not about the island itself,” Atlas said after a moment of thought. “Maybe these people know if they target a small town like Lantern Beach, then there’s nowhere in the US that should feel safe.”

“You could be right.”

“Or maybe it’s about Blackout. We’ve been investigating Sigma for months, disrupting their operations. What better way to eliminate a threat than to make it look like a natural disaster?”

A chill swept over Quinn. “I can see that. Maybe it’s also about testing their capabilities. Lantern Beach is isolated, manageable. If you wanted to test a weather weapon, you’d choose a target where you can control the variables.”

“Then why the Bahamas?”

“I think they had an enemy there also.” She shook her head. “But I don’t know who.”

“You think Lantern Beach is another field test?”

“I think this is a demonstration.” The pieces clicked together in her mind. “Proof of concept. Imagine being able to threaten any coastal city in the world with a weaponized hurricane. The geopolitical implications . . .”

Atlas glanced at her, and something in his expression made her stomach clench.

“What aren’t you telling me? Quinn, I think you were involved in this project.

Not willingly, but . . .” He paused, choosing his words carefully.

“The timing of your memory loss, your expertise in weather systems, the way Sigma operatives keep showing up wherever you are. You weren’t just a witness to something. You were part of it.”

Quinn pressed her palms against her temples as fragments of memory threatened to surface. “I can feel it, you know. Like there’s information locked in my head that I can’t quite access. Knowledge about how the system works, about who’s behind it.”

“That’s not your fault,” Atlas said. “Whatever they made you do, whatever they used your expertise for, you’re not responsible for their actions.”

Gratitude filled her at Atlas’s kindness. But, despite his words, Quinn couldn’t shake the growing certainty that she was somehow complicit in what was about to happen to Lantern Beach.

The guilt felt like a living thing in her chest, an organism that fed on every weather update that showed the storm growing stronger.

“Maybe I can make this right.” She drew in a deep breath of determination. “Maybe there’s still time to figure out how to stop it.”

Atlas reached over and squeezed her hand. “We’ll figure it out together.”

Quinn looked out at the darkening sky and hoped he was correct.

If they couldn’t stop Hurricane Delilah, the blood of everyone on this island would be on her hands.

Whether she remembered helping Sigma or not.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-FIVE

The emergency command center at Lantern Beach’s middle school’s auditorium buzzed with controlled chaos.

The police chief, fire chief, mayor, city manager, and council members had all gathered, along with key members of Blackout. The organization had always partnered with town leaders to do whatever they could to help in the face of danger or disaster, and the town had welcomed them.

Atlas stood at the front of the room near a wall-mounted map of Lantern Beach. Red pins marked evacuation points and safe zones. While he studied that, the island’s key decision-makers absorbed Quinn’s briefing about the weaponized hurricane.

Chief Chambers leaned toward the map, her expression grim.

If she knew about the warrant for Quinn’s arrest, she was ignoring it—a fact for which he was grateful.

“So you’re telling us this storm isn’t natural?” Cassidy asked Quinn, who stood near the map.

“It’s been artificially enhanced.” Quinn pointed to the latest satellite imagery. “The intensification rate, the forward speed, the precision of the track—none of it follows natural hurricane behavior.”

Mayor Mac MacArthur, a man in his sixties who'd weathered dozens of storms on this island, shook his head in disbelief. "In forty years of living on Lantern Beach, I've never seen anything like this. The storm just keeps getting stronger."

Colton studied the evacuation timeline they'd sketched out on a portable marker board beside the map.

"We've got anywhere from twelve to eighteen hours to move ten thousand people.

The ferries can only take twenty cars at a time.

Even if you guys put emergency ferries in place, it's going to be tight. "

"More than tight," Ty added. "We've got limited ferry capacity, and the weather's deteriorating faster than predicted. Every minute we delay could cost lives."

Mac stood. "I'll issue an immediate mandatory evacuation order. But people are going to panic. We need to control the message."

"Tell them the truth." Quinn's voice turned all professional. "A hurricane is coming that's stronger than anything they've experienced. Their lives depend on getting off the island."

Mac hurried from the room.

When he was gone, Atlas looked at Quinn, an idea floating in his mind. "Is there any way to downgrade the storm? To counter whatever enhancements have been made?"

Quinn was quiet as she worked through possibilities.

"Theoretically, yes. If we could identify the mechanism they're using—cloud seeding

aircraft, ocean heating devices, atmospheric manipulation equipment—we might be able to disrupt it.

But we'd need to know exactly what we're looking for and where to find it. ”

“And we'd need to do it while being hunted by Sigma operatives in the middle of what will probably be a Category 5 hurricane,” Colton added with an irritated roll of his eyes.

“The alternative is letting thousands of people die,” Quinn said.

The room fell silent as the weight of that statement settled over them.

Finally, Ty spoke up. “What do you need from us?”

Quinn looked around the room, meeting each person's eyes. “Time. Access to weather monitoring equipment. And a way to get close enough to their operation to shut it down.”

“That means we have to figure out where it is,” Atlas muttered.

“They must have set up some kind of command center, and it has to be close,” Quinn said.

“As in, in the middle of the ocean?” Colton asked.

She thought about it a moment and shook her head. “I can't believe they'd have those kind of capabilities. I mean, to withstand this, the boat would need to be the size of an aircraft carrier. I doubt they have those resources and, even if they did, a boat that size would be noticed.”

“So what are you thinking?” Ty asked.

“Is there anywhere on the island they could have set up equipment?”

Cassidy shook her head. “It’s doubtful. We monitor things on Lantern Beach closely. I would think someone would have spotted something like that by now. I’m assuming it would have to be a large amount of equipment.”

“Essentially, it would be a portable lab,” Quinn said.

“Then no,” Cassidy said. “We haven’t seen anything like that.”

“Then where else?” Quinn’s gaze roamed from town leader to town leader. “Is there anywhere nearby where could they set up this equipment without being detected?”

“We need to figure that out,” Colton said. “But in the meantime, we need to evacuate as many people as possible. It’s the safest bet.”

“Agreed,” Cassidy murmured.

As the meeting broke up, everyone scattering to their assigned tasks, Atlas caught Quinn’s arm. “We’re going to stop this.”

“I hope so,” Quinn replied.

But Atlas saw the doubt in her eyes.

Because they all knew that hoping wasn’t going to be enough.

Atlas and Quinn remained in the command center after everyone else spread out to do various tasks. Ty and Maverick stayed with them.

Ty spoke on the phone with someone before lowering it and turning to address them. "A convoy of black SUVs just arrived on the island via the ferry with their emergency lights on."

Atlas's lungs tightened. "Feds?"

"Most likely." Ty offered a grim nod.

"They're coming for me." Quinn rubbed her neck, strain stretching through her gaze. "I don't want you all to get in trouble because you're protecting me."

"I'll worry about that later." The last thing they needed was for her to flee, Atlas mused. "I just can't believe federal agents are coming for you while a weaponized hurricane will be bearing down here."

"How long do we have until agents get here?" Quinn asked.

"Twenty minutes, maybe less. Traffic is thick right now, though it's mostly going in the other direction." Atlas's jaw was set with determination.

"Then we need to get busy."

Atlas studied a topographical map of the area. "Where could they be keeping this equipment?"

They all gathered around.

"What's this?" Quinn pointed to a small spot of land farther down the coast.

"It's a private, uninhabited island," Ty explained. "It's not very big. Two hundred fifty acres maybe. Sometimes people have parties there as if it's their own private

sand bar.”

“Is it big enough for a mobile lab?” she asked.

“Maybe,” Ty finally said with a frown. “But the ocean is getting rough. Getting there isn’t safe. A small craft warning has already issued.”

“But is it possible?” Quinn asked.

“Most of us are former Navy SEALs. Of course, it’s possible—just not advisable.”

“Good,” Quinn muttered. “Because we might need some of that dogged determination.”

“Could you check the satellite images?” Atlas asked. “See if there’s anything unusual happening on the island?”

“Yes, let’s do that.” Ty turned to Maverick. “You got this?”

“I’m on it.” He was already typing away on his laptop. A few minutes later, he stopped. “Something is definitely going on there.”

He showed them the screen.

Sure enough, a container had been left in the middle of the island. The top was open, and equipment had been set up inside. Probably a control center with generators, computers, satellite dishes.

Sigma. Sigma was the only group that made sense.

They’d been the ones who abducted Quinn. Who were behind all this.

The fact that the helicopter pilot had been Air Force fit the narrative.

That meant they needed to get to that island and stop the devastation.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-SIX

Quinn stood in the temporary command center staring at the satellite images Colton had just spread across the table.

The uninhabited island was barely a speck of land in the Pamlico Sound, but the equipment visible in the enhanced photos was unmistakably sophisticated. There were antenna arrays, mobile command units, and what looked like weather monitoring stations far too advanced for a research outpost.

“That’s it.” Her breath caught. “That’s their base of operations. The ionospheric heating equipment, the coordination systems for cloud seeding—it’s all there. Maybe that’s even where I was held. Maybe I escaped and swam across the channel to Lantern Beach.”

“Makes sense,” Atlas murmured. “It would be possible. It would be a long swim but doable if you were in good shape—and you are.”

Ty leaned over the images, his expression grim. “How certain are you that’s what we’re looking at?”

“Completely. The positioning is perfect for manipulating storm systems approaching from the southeast. And look at these antenna configurations—” Quinn pointed to specific structures. “Those aren’t communication devices. It’s atmospheric manipulation equipment.”

Outside the briefing room, Quinn heard urgent radio chatter about FBI agents getting closer. Agent Hughes was probably at the helm.

“We’re almost out of time.” Ty glanced at his phone, where updates were coming across his screen. “Hurricane Delilah is getting closer to landfall, and if that equipment isn’t shut down . . .”

“People will die,” Quinn finished. “We’re already on borrowed time. I don’t know if we can get everyone off the island in time. And anyone left . . . they can’t survive this.”

Ty stood, his presence filling the room. “Atlas, you, Maverick, Jake, Hudson, and Kyle need to get to that island, shut down the equipment, and get back before the storm makes travel impossible.”

Quinn stepped forward. “I’m going too.”

Ty grimaced. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“I’m the only one who can shut it down,” Quinn reminded him. “It won’t be enough to destroy the equipment. I need to destroy the program that created this monster.”

“ If you remember how.”

She swallowed hard. “I will.”

He still hesitated.

She stepped closer. “Listen, internet is already bad. Communications will be shut down. I won’t be able to talk them through anything. I need to be there.”

Ty nodded slowly. “I can see that.”

“What about the FBI?” Atlas asked.

“I’ll hold them off as long as I can. I’ll tell them you’re conducting evacuation operations and buy you some time.” Ty’s expression was resolute. “But once you’re gone, you’re on your own.”

Quinn’s stomach clenched as the reality of the situation hit her. They were about to head into a hurricane to assault a fortified position, with federal agents trying to arrest her and Sigma operatives defending their weather weapon.

The odds of survival weren’t good.

“Let’s move.” Atlas gathered a couple of satellite photos. “Every minute we delay makes the crossing more dangerous.”

They filed out of the briefing room and rushed back to Blackout headquarters to gather their equipment.

Ten minutes later, they headed to the back of the property.

Quinn immediately staggered as the wind hit her.

The gusts would reach tropical storm strength soon—which started at thirty-nine miles per hour.

The air carried with it the smell of rain and the electric tension that preceded major weather events.

The Pamlico Sound stretched before them, its normally calm waters churned into

whitecaps that reflected the darkening sky. Their boat—a reinforced patrol craft designed for rough weather—looked impossibly small against the growing fury of the approaching hurricane.

“Weather’s deteriorating fast,” Hudson called out over the wind. “We need to move now if we’re going at all.”

Quinn looked up at the roiling clouds, her instincts screaming warnings about wind shear, pressure drops, and the violent air currents that preceded major storms.

Everything in her training said this was suicide.

Then she thought about Dr. Hartwell’s body on the rocks, about the families evacuating the island, about the thousands of people who would die if Hurricane Delilah made landfall at artificial strength.

Please, she prayed silently as they approached the boat. Let us get there in time. Let us stop this storm. And, please, bring us all home safely.

Before heading to the boat, Atlas grabbed Quinn’s arm.

She turned toward him, her heart racing as adrenaline pumped through her system. “Yes?”

“Are you sure you want to do this?” He stared at her, practically pleading with her to change her mind. “It’s going to be dangerous.”

She noted how he gripped her arm. His concern for her touched a place deep inside her, a void that had been there since she’d found herself with amnesia.

If Atlas hadn’t been the one who rescued her, she’d be in a totally different position

right now. She thanked God for putting him in her path—or, should she say, that He'd put her in Atlas's path.

Atlas waited for her response.

"I need to do this." The wind whipped around her as she stared up at him. "This may all be my fault."

"I have a hard time believing that."

"I'm glad you believe me. I really am. But you may want to put distance between us. If I go down, I don't want to take you with me."

He stared at her, something unspoken in his gaze.

He cared about her, didn't he?

She cared about him also. She couldn't deny it. They hadn't known each other long—but they'd known each other long enough.

"You guys!" Jake called. "We need to go. Now!"

They stared at each other another moment, unspoken conversations drifting between them. Then Quinn reached up and planted a soft kiss on his cheek.

Hopefully, they could talk later.

Right now, they had a hurricane to disarm.

As they climbed aboard the boat, Quinn couldn't shake the feeling that she was about to face the most dangerous mission of her life—even if she couldn't remember what

her life had been before.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-SEVEN

Atlas gripped the safety rail with white knuckles as the patrol boat pitched and rolled through the increasingly violent waters of the Pamlico Sound.

Every wave felt like it might be the one to swamp them entirely, and the wind had reached the point where spray from the whitecaps stung like needles against exposed skin.

He glanced at Quinn, relieved to see her securely fastened into her life jacket. Her face was pale. But despite her obvious terror, determination hardened her gaze.

He remembered the feel of her lips as they'd brushed his cheek, and his heart raced.

He'd seen something in her gaze back there, something more than gratitude for everything he'd done.

She felt the same thing he did, didn't she? Despite the fact they hadn't known each other long, something strong and deep had developed between them.

Something he hadn't felt in a long time. Not since Noreen.

Yet this felt even stronger.

Would they ever have the chance to talk about it?

That was debatable. First, they had a storm to stop.

Rain began falling in earnest now. It wasn't the gentle precipitation of a normal storm.

Instead, it was driving sheets of water that reduced visibility to mere yards and made every surface slippery and treacherous.

Atlas had to blink constantly to clear his vision, and he saw his teammates struggling against the same conditions.

"How much longer?" he called out to Hudson, who fought the wheel to keep them on course toward their target.

"Maybe fifteen minutes!" Hudson shouted back, his voice barely audible over the wind and engine noise. "But these conditions are deteriorating by the minute!"

Atlas squinted through the rain and spray, catching sight of the ferry in the distance making its way toward the mainland.

The vessel was packed with cars and people—families fleeing Lantern Beach as Hurricane Delilah approached.

Even from this distance, Atlas could see how the ferry struggled against the rough waters.

Get them to safety, he prayed silently. Don't let this storm claim any innocent lives.

The irony wasn't lost on him that they were racing toward the very equipment that was making the evacuation necessary. Somewhere on that island ahead, Sigma operatives were using Quinn's own research to turn Hurricane Delilah into a weapon

of mass destruction.

A particularly large wave lifted their boat nearly vertical. Atlas's stomach dropped as they momentarily went airborne, then crashed back into the trough with bone-jarring force.

The impact sent spray cascading over the bow, soaking everyone, despite their protective gear. Atlas's teeth rattled as the hull slammed against the water, the boat groaning under stresses it was built to handle but never designed to enjoy.

"Hold on!" Hudson shouted from the helm, his knuckles white as he gripped the wheel. "Another big one coming!"

Atlas looked ahead and saw what Hudson meant. A wall of water rose like a liquid mountain, its crest already foaming white with fury. The approaching wave had to be fifteen feet high, maybe more, and their small craft would have to climb its face like a roller coaster built by a madman.

Quinn gripped the rail beside him, her face pale but determined. Water streamed from her hair, and Atlas could see her fighting seasickness with the same stubborn will she'd shown in everything else.

She kept checking her instruments even as the boat pitched and rolled, her meteorologist's training apparently stronger than her body's revolt against the violent motion.

The wave hit them with the force of a moving wall.

The boat's nose climbed impossibly steep, the deck tilting until he was looking almost straight up at the storm-dark sky.

For a heart-stopping moment, they balanced on the wave's crest, suspended between sea and air.

Then they plunged down the back side, the hull slamming into the trough with enough force to make Atlas's vision blur.

Equipment rattled and shifted despite being secured, and he heard Maverick curse creatively as his tablet nearly flew from his hands.

"How much more of this?" Jake called out, his voice tight with strain.

Hudson checked their position on the GPS, squinting through the rain-lashed windscreen. "Ten more minutes or so! But it's getting worse!"

Atlas looked around at his team—all experienced operators, all veterans of dangerous situations, but none of them looked comfortable with the violent motion of the boat.

Kyle was gripping his safety harness so tightly his knuckles had gone bloodless.

Maverick had wedged himself into a corner, trying to protect his equipment from the constant battering.

Another wave hit them from the side. For a terrifying moment, he thought they might not right themselves. But the patrol craft had been designed for exactly these conditions, and slowly, agonizingly, they rolled back to horizontal.

"There!" Maverick pointed through the storm toward a dark smudge on the horizon. "Island ahead!"

Atlas strained to make out the silhouette of land through the driving rain. The island looked even smaller and more desolate than it had in the satellite photos—a barren

piece of land that shouldn't have been able to support the sophisticated operation they were about to assault.

Which meant everything they needed to stop Hurricane Delilah was concentrated in a very small, very defensible area.

"Quinn!" Atlas called out over the storm. "You still certain about the equipment location?"

Quinn checked her instruments one more time, then nodded grimly. "The atmospheric manipulation arrays will be on the highest ground. The ocean thermal devices will be positioned on the windward shore."

"Got it."

"But Atlas—" She grabbed his arm, her grip tight with urgency. "If they're actively controlling the storm when we shut down their equipment, there could be feedback effects. Sudden pressure changes, wind shears that could?—"

Her words were cut off as another massive wave crashed over the bow, flooding the deck with seawater.

He held onto her, determined not to lose his grip.

Determined not to lose Quinn.

When the water settled, he saw her expression had grown even more determined.

"We have to shut it down," she continued. "Whatever the risks. Because if we don't, Hurricane Delilah is going to kill thousands of people."

Atlas looked at this remarkable woman—brilliant, brave, willing to risk everything to save strangers—and felt his chest tighten with an emotion he wasn't ready to examine too closely.

He wished Quinn didn't have to be here. Wished she was safe on the mainland instead of about to assault a fortified position in hurricane conditions.

But they needed her expertise. Without Quinn's knowledge of the weather modification systems, they'd be trying to shut down equipment they didn't understand, in conditions that would kill them if they made a mistake.

"Five minutes out!" Hudson called.

Atlas checked his weapon and looked at his teammates—wet and cold but ready to do their jobs. They were about to attempt something that would either save thousands of lives or get them all killed.

Maybe both.

As the island grew larger through the storm, Atlas made a silent promise to Quinn and to himself: Whatever happened in the next hour, he was going to make sure she made it home safely.

Because losing her now would be worse than any cataclysmic storm.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-EIGHT

The impact of the boat's hull scraping against the shore jarred Quinn from her white-knuckled grip on the side of the boat.

Somehow they'd made it through Hurricane Delilah's outer bands and increasingly violent waters. They'd reached the island.

But as Quinn stumbled onto the beach on unsteady legs, her relief was immediately tempered by what she saw on the sand about fifty yards away.

Another boat, sleek and military-grade.

"We're not alone." She nodded toward the vessel.

Atlas's expression immediately shifted into tactical mode. "Sigma operatives. They're protecting their equipment."

Quinn's stomach clenched as the reality of their situation became clear. They weren't just racing against Hurricane Delilah's approach. They were walking into a place where armed personnel would kill to protect their weather weapon.

Maverick consulted his tablet, comparing satellite imagery to the terrain around them. "Equipment should be about three hundred meters inland, on the highest ground."

Quinn looked toward the island's interior, seeing nothing but windswept scrub vegetation through the driving rain. But somewhere in that seemingly barren landscape was the technology turning Hurricane Delilah into a weapon of mass destruction.

Technology that she may have helped design, even if she couldn't remember doing so.

Atlas stepped close enough that only she could hear, "You okay?"

She nodded, though her hands were shaking—whether from cold, fear, or the weight of responsibility, she wasn't sure. "I just hope I can remember what I need to do. The equipment configurations, the shutdown sequences . . ."

"You can do it."

She looked up at him and saw the concern in his green eyes. "What if my memories aren't complete? What if I can't figure out how to stop it?"

"Then we'll figure it out together. But Quinn, we're running out of time."

He was right. Quinn felt Hurricane Delilah's approach in the dropping air pressure, the increasing wind speed, the electric tension that made her hair stand on end despite the rain.

The storm was probably less than ten hours from landfall now, and every minute they delayed meant more artificial energy being pumped into the system.

"Let's move." She forced steel into her voice. "People are counting on us."

As they made their way inland, Quinn couldn't shake the feeling that she was

walking toward either salvation or destruction.

She wouldn't know which until she was face-to-face with the equipment.

Atlas moved with practiced stealth through the scrub vegetation, his team spread out in tactical formation as they approached the center of the island.

The storm provided excellent cover. The wind and rain masked the sound of their movement, and visibility was so poor that they could get much closer to their targets before being detected.

But it also meant the enemy had the same advantages.

Jake held up a closed fist, bringing everyone to an immediate halt.

Atlas followed his gaze. Through the driving rain, he'd spotted movement in the distance.

Two figures in tactical gear, assault rifles at the ready, conducted what looked like perimeter patrol.

Sigma guards, positioned to protect their weather station.

Jake gestured to Kyle and Hudson, pointing toward the guards' positions and indicating a flanking maneuver. His team had worked together long enough that minimal communication was needed—they understood the plan immediately.

Kyle would circle left and Hudson right, while Atlas guarded Quinn. Maverick and Jake would maintain positions to cover their retreat if things went bad.

Atlas watched through his scope as his teammates moved into position. Then they

simultaneously neutralized both guards with two quick pops. The guards weren't dead, but they were definitely out of commission.

As they advanced toward the equipment area, the fire of automatic weapons erupted from a concealed position Atlas hadn't spotted.

He jerked Quinn down behind a cluster of trees as bullets whined overhead.

Atlas's team returned fire, the familiar, sharp crack of systematic three-round bursts mixing with the sustained spray of enemy weapons.

Through the chaos, he heard Jake's voice over the radio: "Two more guards down! Area secure!"

Atlas helped Quinn to her feet, noting how she'd instinctively taken cover without freezing under fire. Whatever her background, he had no doubt she'd been trained for dangerous situations.

They advanced to what Maverick had identified as the equipment site—a small weatherproof shelter.

They stepped inside, and Atlas sucked in a breath.

Someone sat behind a bank of computers monitoring everything.

It was . . .

"Agent Hughes?" Quinn muttered.

The woman turned, a gun in her hand.

Atlas moved in front of Quinn, desperate to protect her.

“You weren’t supposed to come here,” Hughes muttered.

“You’re supposed to be FBI,” Atlas countered.

“I am FBI.” She scowled. “This is my side hustle.”

“Working for Sigma and trying to destroy our country?”

Her scowl deepened. “It’s more complicated than that.”

“Not really,” Atlas said.

“You have to stop this,” Quinn told her.

“This is what I’ve worked so hard to do. There’s no way I’m stopping this.”

“Wait . . . you’re a scientist?” Quinn pushed herself in front of Atlas. “You weren’t sent to Lantern Beach to question me. Not by the FBI. You went there to find out what I knew.”

Hughes smirked. “Someone had to design this. That’s where I came in. But I needed help—help that only you and Hartwell could offer. But neither of you were willing to be turned. Things got complicated. But we’ve come too far for me to let you stop me now.”

As she raised her gun, Atlas yelled, “no!”

Then he threw himself in front of Quinn before the rogue agent could kill her.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-NINE

Quinn saw everything happen in slow motion.

Hughes draw her gun.

Atlas push himself in front of her.

Then she heard the gunfire.

Her heart seemed to stop.

Had Atlas been shot?

She dared to pull her head up.

When she did, she saw Hughes slouched in her seat.

Blood covered her chest.

Atlas had managed to grab the woman's gun and turn it before she'd fired on them.

Instead, she'd fired on herself.

Atlas put a finger to her neck, then looked at Quinn and shook his head. "She's

gone.”

Part of Quinn wanted to feel sorry for the woman. But she couldn’t.

Not considering the fact the woman had done this to herself.

But the woman had also held answers about Quinn’s past. Quinn hoped she could recover those answers from someone else.

But right now, she had other things to worry about.

She had to stop this storm. Now.

Atlas stared at the equipment in front of him.

The shelter was full of sophisticated electronics, all centered around a massive antenna array that hummed with power despite the storm conditions.

The setup was completely out of his depth.

He could handle weapons, tactics, and human psychology. But the banks of monitors and control systems might as well have been alien technology.

Gently, he pulled Hughes’s body from the chair. He dragged her until she was outside, and he left her on the ground.

They’d deal with her death later. Stopping the storm was their priority now.

He still couldn’t believe the woman had betrayed her country like this. But maybe she’d also thought she was working on the right side. Maybe Sigma had convinced her they were the good guys.

Right now, they needed her out of the way so Quinn could work on stopping the destruction Hughes and her colleagues had unleashed.

“Quinn.” Atlas turned to her as she approached the equipment with growing recognition in her eyes. “What do you need us to do?”

As Hurricane Delilah continued to strengthen with artificial enhancement, Atlas knew that everything—the mission, the island, thousands of innocent lives—now depended on Quinn’s ability to remember skills she didn’t even know she possessed.

CHAPTER

FORTY

Quinn approached the weather modification equipment with a mixture of recognition and dread. Her hands were already reaching for controls she didn't consciously remember learning to operate.

The setup was more sophisticated than anything she'd imagined—banks of atmospheric monitoring equipment, ionospheric heating controls, and ocean thermal manipulation systems all coordinated through a central command interface.

But as she studied the displays, fragments of memory began crystallizing into technical knowledge.

"This is it." She sucked in a deep breath before her fingers began moving across the control panels with growing confidence. "The ionospheric heaters are running at maximum output, superheating sections of the upper atmosphere to create pressure differentials that feed energy into the storm."

On the central monitor, she saw Hurricane Delilah's real-time data—wind speeds, pressure readings, the storm track. All of it artificially enhanced beyond what nature could produce.

"The ocean thermal system is heating water temperature by eight degrees along the hurricane's path," Quinn continued. "And they're coordinating cloud seeding flights every forty minutes to maintain optimal moisture content in the storm's eye wall."

Atlas moved closer, watching her work with intense focus. “How do we shut it down?”

She pulled up on the monitoring computer what looked like a cascading shutdown protocol, her fingers hesitating over the controls.

“I need to reverse the enhancement gradually. Step down the ionospheric heating first. Then I need to reduce the ocean thermal output so I can disrupt the cloud seeding coordination.”

“How long will that take?”

“Twenty minutes for a safe shutdown.” Quinn’s voice sounded tight with concentration. “But, Atlas, I’m not sure we have twenty minutes. The storm’s already past the point where gradual reduction might work.”

She looked at another option on the screen—an emergency shutdown that would cut all enhancement systems simultaneously. The warnings displayed in red text made her stomach clench: CAUTION: RAPID SYSTEM TERMINATION MAY CAUSE SEVERE ATMOSPHERIC INSTABILITY.

“There’s a faster way,” she said quietly.

“Emergency termination of all systems. It would stop the artificial enhancement immediately. But the atmospheric feedback could create dangerous conditions—microbursts, massive wind shears, pressure waves that could be just as destructive as the enhanced hurricane.”

Quinn looked up at Atlas, then Jake and saw the weight of the decision in their expressions.

“If I do the emergency shutdown, Hurricane Delilah will weaken rapidly,” she continued to explain. “But the process could create dangerous localized storms. If I try the gradual shutdown, we might run out of time before it takes effect.”

Her hands hovered over the controls, the fate of thousands of people hanging on their decision. Around them, Hurricane Delilah continued to strengthen with man-made fury.

Quinn closed her eyes, trying to calculate wind patterns, pressure differentials, and the complex atmospheric dynamics that would result from either choice.

When she opened her eyes, her decision was made.

“Emergency shutdown,” she said, her voice steady despite the fear in her chest. “We can’t risk letting the storm reach full artificial enhancement. Do you agree?”

Jake and Atlas exchanged a glance. Then they both nodded.

“Do what you need to do,” Jake said.

Quinn’s fingers flew across the controls, initiating shutdown sequences for all three enhancement systems simultaneously.

Warning alarms began blaring as the equipment protested.

On the central monitor, Hurricane Delilah’s data began changing. But not fast enough.

Pressure readings began fluctuating. Wind speeds dropped.

“It’s starting to work.” Quinn watched the monitor and frowned. “But Atlas, the

atmospheric instability?—”

Thunder crashed overhead.

She prayed she hadn't created a weather system that was even worse than Delilah.
Please, Lord . . .

They were playing with fire right now.

She had to completely shut this program down before it could do more damage.

And she prayed she wasn't making a terrible choice in doing so.

CHAPTER

FORTY-ONE

Atlas watched Quinn work at the weather modification controls, her fingers moving with increasing confidence across keyboards and equipment that meant nothing to him.

Around them, machines hummed and beeped with electronic urgency while generators thrummed. Warning lights flashed as Quinn initiated shutdown sequences that would either save thousands of lives or create new forms of destruction.

“Kyle, Hudson—maintain perimeter watch,” Jake ordered, positioning his men to guard against any remaining Sigma operatives while Quinn fought to reverse their weather weapon. “Maverick—monitor our extraction route. We may need to leave this sandbar fast.”

Through the shelter’s open door, Atlas saw the storm’s outer bands lashing the island with increasing fury.

But the storm’s behavior now seemed erratic, uncertain. Pressure changes made his ears pop. The wind patterns shifted unpredictably. The ominous rumble of thunder didn’t sound quite natural.

“Quinn.” He moved to stand beside her as she monitored multiple data streams. “Is it still working?”

Quinn pointed to the central display showing Hurricane Delilah's vital statistics.

"Look at the pressure readings. They're destabilizing as the artificial enhancement shuts down.

Wind speeds are dropping, but unevenly. The storm's trying to revert to natural behavior, but the transition is chaotic. "

Atlas studied the scrolling numbers and graphs, seeing patterns that meant nothing to his tactical training. "Is that good or bad?"

"Both," Quinn said, her voice tight. "The artificial enhancement is definitely failing—Hurricane Delilah is weakening rapidly. But I'm still not sure what the effects of that will be . . ."

As if summoned by her words, a violent gust of wind struck the shelter with enough force to rattle the walls. Atlas felt the pressure change in his sinuses, and outside debris flew in patterns that defied the storm's previous direction.

"How long before we know if it worked?" Atlas asked.

Quinn's hands moved constantly across the controls, making adjustments and monitoring feedback. "The storm should continue weakening over the next hour. But the instability effects could last for several more hours."

Hudson's voice came through Atlas's earpiece. "We've got company. Three boats approaching from the northeast, moving fast despite the conditions."

Atlas's tactical instincts kicked into high gear. "Sigma reinforcements?"

"Most likely. ETA ten minutes."

Atlas saw the intense concentration on Quinn's face as she fought to stabilize the atmospheric chaos her shutdown had created.

They needed more time—time they might not have if Sigma operatives reached the island before the systems were completely disabled.

He stepped closer, his heart racing. "Quinn, whatever you're going to do, do it fast. We're about to have company, and I don't think they're coming to help."

Quinn nodded, not taking her eyes off the monitors. "I'm trying to smooth the transition and reduce the instability effects. But Atlas, even if I succeed, we still need to destroy the equipment. If Sigma rebuilds this program somewhere else . . ."

Atlas understood immediately.

It wasn't enough to stop Hurricane Delilah. They had to eliminate Sigma's ability to create weaponized storms in the future. They needed to irradicate the formulas they had created—formulas stored on these computers. But they also needed to obliterate the expensive equipment itself.

"Do you need my team to set charges?" Atlas asked.

"I . . . I don't know. But you could start setting them up, just in case."

"We're on it." Hudson hurried away.

Thunder crashed overhead again, and the island shook beneath their feet from the unstable atmospheric conditions.

"Seven minutes!" Hudson reported. "Multiple armed personnel visible on the boats!"

Atlas checked his weapon and looked at his teammates. They were all wet, cold, and outnumbered but ready to hold their position as long as necessary.

“How much more time do you need, Quinn?” he asked.

Quinn’s hands paused over a final sequence of controls, her face pale but determined. “Thirty seconds to complete the shutdown.”

Atlas nodded. Everything they’d fought for—stopping the weaponized hurricane, protecting innocent lives, exposing Sigma’s weather modification program—came down to the next few minutes.

“Hold the line,” he told his team. “Whatever it takes, we hold the line.”

Because Atlas knew that if Quinn couldn’t complete her work, Hurricane Delilah would continue toward Lantern Beach with artificial fury, and thousands of people would die.

That wasn’t going to happen. Not on his watch.

CHAPTER

FORTY-TWO

Quinn held her breath as the final shutdown sequence processed through the weather modification systems.

Her eyes remained fixed on the central monitor displaying Hurricane Delilah's vital signs.

The storm's artificial enhancement was failing. The pressure readings were stabilizing, wind speeds were dropping toward natural hurricane levels, and the deadly precision of its track began to wobble as the weaponized elements dissolved.

Around them, water already pooled on the shelter floor as storm surge began flooding the low island.

They had minutes, at most, before the rising water made evacuation impossible. But the equipment readings showed they were so close to total shutdown. She couldn't risk not seeing this through to completion. For all she knew, there could be a backup protocol that would reboot.

On the monitor, Hurricane Delilah's data showed a storm that was still dangerous as it was weakening.

"Come on," Quinn whispered, watching the last artificial enhancement protocols terminate. "Come on, work . . ."

Alarms continued to blare.

Finally, an electronic chime sounded, barely audible over the storm.

The final system went offline.

“It worked!” Quinn felt a surge of relief so powerful it made her knees weak. “Atlas, it worked! The storm’s slowing down and reverting to natural behavior!”

Maverick stepped into the shelter. “Charges are set. You just have to hit this button.” He handed her his tablet.

Quinn nodded, grateful that they could destroy this equipment.

“Are we still in danger of changing things too quickly?” Atlas asked.

“It doesn’t look like it. Everything appears to be stabilizing.”

“That’s great news!”

She turned toward Atlas with a triumphant smile, ready to celebrate their success in stopping Sigma’s weather weapon.

They’d done it—they’d saved thousands of lives and eliminated a terrorist threat.

Then gunfire erupted from the shelter’s entrance.

Atlas pushed Quinn behind a bank of monitors as bullets shattered equipment around them.

Through the chaos, a voice called out, “Step away from the equipment! Hands where

I can see them!”

His blood turned to ice.

As he turned, he instinctively knew who the voice belonged to.

Noreen.

The woman stepped into the shelter.

Her weapon was drawn and her expression coldly professional. And she looked as gorgeous as ever with her flowing black hair and trim build. But the beauty stopped at surface level. Inside, she was rotten.

“Atlas,” she purred. “Long time, no see.”

“Noreen . . .” His teeth clenched. “You’re the last person I expected to see here. But I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. You’ve always been a bit of a snake.”

“Ouch. Still haven’t gotten over me?”

“Oh, I got over you a long time ago.”

“No hard feelings, right?”

“I’d love nothing more than to see you behind bars. Does that count as hard feelings?”

She shrugged. “It’s a toss-up, I suppose.”

“I don’t know how you live with yourself.”

She pretended as if she didn't hear him. "I guess you didn't know your new little girlfriend was recruited by the CIA? I guess she couldn't tell you about Russia."

Russia? So Quinn did have Russian ties? What did Noreen know about Quinn's past?

Then she turned to Quinn and said with mock sympathy, "I'm afraid you've just made a very serious mistake."

Quinn stared at the woman, understanding stretching through her intelligent eyes.

"You were behind all of this." Quinn's voice sounded steady despite the fear in her gaze as the storm pounded them

Noreen smiled coldly. "Someone had to ensure the program's security. And now you've just destroyed months of Hughes's careful work. That wasn't very smart."

The water around their feet was rising steadily, and Atlas heard Hurricane Delilah's weakened but still dangerous winds howling outside.

They were trapped on a flooding island with his evil ex and armed Sigma operatives.

But at least the weaponized hurricane had been stopped.

Even if they might not live to see the lives they'd saved.

CHAPTER

FORTY-THREE

Atlas tried to understand the scope of Noreen's betrayal. "How could you?"

"I've been working for the greater good," Noreen replied smoothly. "The weather modification program represents the future of international relations. Imagine—the ability to end conflicts without firing a shot, to encourage cooperation through the threat of natural disaster."

Atlas noticed that one of Noreen's operatives had moved to flank Hudson, pressing a gun to his teammate's neck. Hudson's expression was grim but steady. He'd been in worse situations and survived.

Atlas prayed that was the case now also.

"Don't worry about me!" Hudson called out over the increasing wind. "Take the shot if you have it!"

But Atlas knew the tactical situation was impossible.

Noreen's people had superior positioning, and any firefight in the cramped shelter would likely result in casualties.

"Step away from the equipment." Noreen gestured with her weapon toward the central control systems where Quinn had just completed the shutdown sequence.

“Your interference has already caused enough damage.”

“The storm’s been neutralized.” Atlas noted how water was now ankle-deep around their feet. “Hurricane Delilah is reverting to natural strength. Your weapon is finished.”

Noreen’s expression darkened. “We’ll recreate it, don’t you worry.”

The casual way she discussed mass murder made Atlas’s jaw clench with rage.

“But you didn’t perfect it,” Quinn said. “You can try to recreate it all you want, but you still won’t be successful.”

Noreen’s expression darkened even more.

“How many people have you killed testing your weather weapons?” Atlas asked.

“They’re acceptable losses considering a greater strategic goal,” Noreen replied. “Though I admit, Quinn’s escape complicated our timeline significantly. She was supposed to help us work out some kinks.”

Atlas glanced at Quinn and saw the horror in her eyes as she realized the full scope of Sigma’s program. They had big plans for their technology.

“The water’s rising.” Noreen nodded at the ground. “We might have five minutes before this island becomes part of the ocean. I suggest we conclude our business quickly.”

“What business?” Atlas suspected he already knew.

Noreen’s smile returned, colder than before. “Quinn’s final contribution to the

program. Her complete knowledge of weather modification techniques will be extracted before we eliminate the security risk she represents.”

Ice formed in Atlas’s stomach. Extracted?

Noreen wasn’t just here to stop them. She was here to capture Quinn, take her back into captivity, and force her to perfect the weather weapon technology.

“That’s not happening.” Atlas’s muscles bristled.

“I’m afraid you don’t have a choice.” Noreen’s weapon trailed his chest as he stood with his arms raised. “You always were so handsome and romantic—so chivalrous too. I had moments of regret, you know.”

“I don’t care about your regret.”

She shrugged off his words. “Anyway, your team is outnumbered, outgunned, and trapped on a flooding island. Surrender Quinn, and your new friends might survive to see the mainland.”

Atlas looked at his teammates—Hudson with a gun to his head, Jake and Kyle covered by Sigma operatives, and Maverick calculating angles for a move that probably wouldn’t succeed.

Then he looked at Quinn and saw the determination in her expression despite the impossible odds.

“The demolition charges,” Quinn said just loud enough for Atlas to hear. “They’re armed and ready. If we can’t get out . . .”

Atlas understood immediately.

Quinn was offering to trigger the explosives that would destroy the weather modification equipment—even if it meant killing everyone in the shelter.

It was the ultimate sacrifice to pay. Destroy Sigma's technology and prevent them from rebuilding their weather weapon program, even at the cost of their own lives.

Atlas met Quinn's eyes, and he saw the resolve there.

His teammates gave him an affirming nod.

The choice was made.

“Do it,” he said quietly.

Because some things were worth dying for.

CHAPTER

FORTY-FOUR

Quinn's hand hovered over the demolition control panel as Noreen's weapon tracked toward Atlas.

Everything slowed to crystalline clarity—the rising water around their ankles, the sound of Hurricane Delilah's weakened but still dangerous winds, the cold calculation in Noreen's eyes as she prepared to eliminate the only people who could expose Sigma's weather weapon program.

"Quinn, step away from those controls," Noreen said with calculated calmness. "You don't want to be responsible for killing your friends."

Quinn remembered Dr. Hartwell's body on the rocks. She thought about the thousands of people evacuating Lantern Beach.

How many more communities would Sigma destroy if they had their way?

"You're right," Quinn said. "I don't want to be responsible for killing my friends."

A smirk stretched across Noreen's face. "Smart girl."

The next instant, Quinn slammed her palm down on the demolition activation switch. "But I can live with killing you."

Noreen gasped, and the shelter erupted in chaos.

Sigma operatives lunged toward her. Atlas's team responded, fending the men off.

As they did, Quinn dove away from the control panel. Gunfire exploded around her, and the confined space turned into a deadly maze of ricochets and falling equipment.

Noreen's weapon tracked toward Quinn.

She braced herself for what was coming.

Before Noreen could fire, Atlas tackled the woman.

The bullet went wide, missing Quinn.

"Run!" Atlas told her.

Running was the last thing she wanted.

But she needed to get out of the way so the guys could do their job without worrying about her.

Quinn scrambled toward the door. Before she reached it, a wide-screen monitor tumbled in the wind.

She saw it coming a split second before it hit her, catching her temple with brutal force.

Pain exploded through her skull, and Quinn felt consciousness slipping away as she collapsed to the flooded ground.

Just then, the barriers in her mind—the psychological walls that had kept her memories fragmented and incomplete—shattered like glass.

Calista Quinton. A meteorologist who was recruited for a top-secret project by the CIA.

After extensive training, she'd been sent on assignment to Russia.

The country wanted to develop the weaponization of weather. Her job was to infiltrate the program, find out what they were doing, and stop it.

She'd been successful.

Then she'd been whisked back to the states, given a new name, and she'd begun working for NOAA. She was done with her undercover days.

Her name had been scratched from all records so those she'd betrayed couldn't find her.

That was where she'd met Dr. Hartwell. He'd begun acting strangely in recent weeks.

Together, they'd been sent on assignment down to Florida. It was where Hartwell developed his theory that someone else was experimenting with weaponizing weather.

As they'd investigated, he'd been taken. The terrorist group wanted him for his expertise.

Quinn had escaped, but she didn't know who she could trust—only herself. She had to figure out a way to stop these people. So that was what she'd set to work to do.

Until these terrorists had found her and grabbed her too. They brought Dr. Hartwell and Quinn somewhere on the Outer Banks and tried to force her to help them.

She'd refused.

They'd told her they'd kill Hartwell if she didn't.

She'd still refused. Hartwell wouldn't want her helping them. She knew that.

When she saw the first chance, she'd run. But she must have hit her head somewhere in the process of escaping.

Her memories had disappeared.

Until now.

Quinn's eyes snapped open as her complete identity crashed back into place. She wasn't a fragmented amnesia victim anymore.

She was Calista Quinton, and she remembered everything.

Including exactly how to stop Sigma's weather modification program permanently.

CHAPTER

FORTY-FIVE

Atlas pinned Noreen to the wall of the equipment shelter.

Her gun skittered across the water-slicked desk beside her.

Around them, the sounds of combat echoed as his team subdued the remaining Sigma operatives.

Atlas kept his focus on the woman who'd once broken his heart, the one who'd orchestrated so much death and destruction.

"It's over, Noreen." Atlas scowled at the woman below him. He no longer felt anything toward her—not even regret. "Your weather weapon is about to be destroyed, your operation is blown."

Noreen laughed, blood trickling from her split lip. "You have no idea what you've interfered with. This program has backing at the highest levels of government. I'll be extracted, the charges will be dropped, and Quinn will disappear into a black site where her knowledge can be properly utilized."

Rage built in Atlas's chest at Noreen's casual arrogance. But movement in his peripheral vision made him turn toward where Quinn had fallen.

Jake grabbed Noreen and jerked her arms behind her back as he secured her.

Atlas rushed to Quinn.

She sat up slowly, one hand pressed to her temple where the projectile monitor had struck her. But something in her posture had changed.

The uncertain vulnerability that had characterized her since they'd met was gone, replaced by a confident authority that seemed to radiate from her entire being.

"Quinn?" Atlas called out, noting the transformation immediately. "Are you okay?"

Quinn looked up at him, and Atlas saw the sharp intelligence of someone who knew exactly who they were and what they were capable of.

"I remember," she said. "Everything."

Before Atlas could ask exactly what that meant, Maverick's voice cut through the aftermath of combat. "We've got a problem! The demolition charges aren't responding!"

Atlas glanced where Maverick monitored the explosive devices Quinn had armed to destroy the weather modification equipment. Water was now mid-calf deep around them, and the island was rapidly becoming uninhabitable.

"What's wrong?" Atlas demanded.

"The charges are armed, but the detonation sequence isn't initiating." Maverick's fingers flew across the tablet's interface.

Atlas's stomach dropped.

They'd risked everything to reach the island. They'd fought Sigma operatives and

captured Noreen. But if they couldn't destroy the weather modification equipment, all of it would be meaningless.

"Can you override it?" Jake rushed.

Maverick grimaced. "I'm trying but?—"

His words were cut off as another surge of floodwater swept through the shelter, carrying debris and making their footing even more treacherous.

They were trapped on a flooding island with a traitor who seemed confident she'd still win despite being captured.

Atlas looked at Quinn and saw her studying Maverick's tablet with intense concentration.

"Quinn." He hoped her recovered memories might hold the key to their survival. "Do you know something we don't?"

But even as he asked the question, Atlas wasn't sure they had enough time left to find out.

Quinn rushed to the computer, her newly recovered memories providing context for what she needed to do.

"Sigma set up their own safety protocols on the equipment—including a detonation system. It must be under the shelter where we can't see it."

"You know how to activate it?" Atlas asked.

"I think so."

The demolition charges were armed but locked in a security protocol.

“It’s a cascade failsafe.” Her voice sounded tight with frustration. “Designed to prevent accidental destruction of expensive equipment. The charges won’t detonate unless specific meteorological conditions are met.”

“What conditions?” Atlas asked, water now approaching knee-deep around them.

Quinn’s mind raced through the technical specifications she now remembered with perfect clarity.

“Clear atmospheric pressure, wind speeds below tropical storm strength, no active enhancement protocols running.” She looked up at him with growing despair.

“Conditions that don’t exist in the middle of a hurricane. ”

Maverick gestured toward his tablet, showing the real-time weather data. “Even with the artificial enhancement shut down, Hurricane Delilah is still a Category 2 storm. The atmospheric conditions won’t be stable enough to allow detonation for hours.”

The weight of failure crushed down on Quinn. They’d stopped this particular weapon test, but the equipment would survive.

Sigma could rebuild their program, target other communities, and perfect their weather modification technology until it became an unstoppable tool of mass destruction.

“Our boat,” Jake called from the shelter’s entrance, his voice grim. “It’s gone. Washed away in the storm surge. So are the rest of the boats.”

Quinn closed her eyes. The tactical situation was becoming impossible.

They were trapped on a flooding island with no way to destroy Sigma's equipment and no means of extraction.

Then something on Maverick's tablet caught her attention.

"Wait." She leaned closer to study the atmospheric data. "Look at the pressure readings."

Atlas moved to her shoulder, following her gaze to the scrolling numbers that meant nothing to his tactical training. "What am I looking at?"

Hope began to build in Quinn's chest as she recognized patterns in the data.

"The rapid shutdown of the weather modification systems created an atmospheric vacuum effect. The storm's trying to equalize pressure differentials, but the process is creating .

. ." She paused, hardly daring to believe what she was seeing.

"Creating what?" Jake pressed.

Quinn's fingers flew across the tablet, pulling up wind speed measurements and barometric pressure readings. The numbers were changing rapidly, stabilizing in ways that shouldn't have been possible in the middle of a hurricane.

"A pressure equilibrium zone," Quinn breathed, understanding flooding through her. "The shutdown created a temporary area of atmospheric stability right around the island. We're in the eye of an artificial calm."

Atlas stared at her. "What does that mean?"

Quinn looked up at him, seeing hope reflected in his green eyes as he began to understand the implications.

“It means the failsafe conditions are being met.” Excitement grew in her voice. “The demolition charges should activate automatically as soon as the atmospheric readings stabilize within acceptable parameters.”

As if summoned by her words, Maverick’s tablet began flashing with new alerts. Warning messages appeared across the screen as the demolition system registered changing atmospheric conditions.

“Pressure’s stabilizing,” Maverick reported, his voice tight with anticipation. “Wind speeds dropping below threshold. Electromagnetic interference clearing.”

Quinn held her breath as the final conditions aligned.

Then the tablet screen flashed green.

“Charges armed and ready for detonation,” Maverick announced. “We have sixty seconds to reach minimum safe distance.”

Quinn looked at the flooded shelter. Remembered that their boat was gone.

They’d found a way to destroy Sigma’s weather weapon.

But they might not survive to see their victory.

Still, as she thought about the thousands of lives they’d saved and the future weather attacks they’d prevented, Quinn realized she could live with that trade.

Or die with it, if necessary.

CHAPTER

FORTY-SIX

Atlas watched as the countdown timer on the computer ticked toward zero.

They had thirty seconds until the demolition charges would destroy Sigma's weather modification equipment.

Hudson and Kyle corralled the Sigma operatives, including Noreen, and forced them to run through the woods.

Meanwhile, Atlas took Quinn's hand, and they ran as fast as they could away from the shelter.

Around them, floodwater had risen to their waists. The equipment groaned ominously behind them as Hurricane Delilah's weakened but still dangerous winds battered the structure.

Fifteen seconds.

Atlas looked at his team, then at Quinn.

Earlier, he'd seen the quiet acceptance in her eyes.

They'd accomplished their mission. They'd stopped the weaponized hurricane, eliminated Sigma's weather weapon, and saved thousands of lives.

She'd done what she needed to do, and she was at peace.

But they were about to pay the ultimate price for their success.

Ten seconds.

They continued to run.

“Quinn.” Atlas held on tight to her hand as the water continued to rise. “I need you to know?—”

Five seconds.

Before he could finish, an explosion ripped through the air.

A concussion wave raced through the water. A brilliant flash of light filled the sky behind them as millions of dollars of sophisticated technology was reduced to smoking debris.

His pulse surged.

They'd done it.

The weather weapon was destroyed permanently.

“Atlas.” Quinn struggled to keep her footing in the surging water, but they kept moving. “Whatever happens next, I want you to know that meeting you, falling for you—it was the most real thing that ever happened to me.”

Atlas's chest tightened with emotion he couldn't afford to examine in their current situation. “Quinn, don't talk like this is goodbye. We're getting out of here.”

But even as he said the words, Atlas knew they were hollow.

They reached the beach, their place of escape.

But their boat was gone. He'd known it was. But he'd wanted to believe there would be some sign of hope for them.

The island was flooding, and there would soon be no dry land.

And Hurricane Delilah's winds had made any kind of rescue impossible.

This place was going to be their grave, he realized.

A sound cut through the storm's fury, and Atlas's heart leapt.

It was a horn—deep, powerful, unmistakably maritime.

“Coast Guard!” Hudson pointed across the water where they could just make out lights cutting through the rain and darkness.

Through the chaos, Atlas saw a Coast Guard cutter fighting its way through the rough waters toward their position. The vessel was built for heavy weather operations, its reinforced hull designed to handle conditions that would swamp smaller boats.

“Colton and Ty must have sent them!” Jake yelled out over the wind.

Atlas helped Quinn navigate the knee-deep water. “Emergency beacon! Must have activated automatically when our boat was destroyed!”

The Coast Guard vessel maneuvered as close to the island as possible, its crew deploying rescue boats designed for exactly this kind of operation. Atlas saw Coast

Guard personnel preparing to extract civilians from a disaster zone.

“This is Coast Guard Rescue Team Alpha!” a voice called through a bullhorn.
“Prepare for immediate extraction! Water taxi incoming!”

Overwhelming relief hit him as he helped Quinn toward the rescue boat that was fighting its way to their position.

Around them, his team secured Noreen and the other operatives. They prepared for emergency evacuation, their movements efficient despite the dangerous conditions.

As they climbed aboard the Coast Guard rescue craft, Quinn collapsed against Atlas’s chest, exhaustion and relief overwhelming her recovered strength.

“We did it,” she whispered against his ear. “We actually did it.”

Atlas held her close as the rescue boat fought its way back to the Coast Guard cutter.

Finally, they felt the solid deck of the larger vessel beneath their feet as they were pulled to safety.

Behind them, the island continued to flood. But the weather modification equipment was destroyed beyond repair. That was an answer to prayer.

Hurricane Delilah continued its approach toward the mainland, but now it was just a natural storm—dangerous but no longer artificially enhanced, manageable rather than catastrophic.

They’d saved thousands of lives and eliminated a terrorist threat that could have changed the balance of global power.

And somehow, against all odds, they'd survived to see their victory.

As Coast Guard medics checked Quinn's injuries, Atlas allowed himself a moment of quiet satisfaction.

They'd won. The mission was complete, the island was safe, and the woman he'd fallen for was alive and whole beside him.

Everything else was just details.

CHAPTER

FORTY-SEVEN

Three days later, Quinn made her way downstairs at the Blackout Headquarters.

It had survived the storm.

In fact, the whole island had survived the storm. There were no casualties—unless you included Agent Hughes. Some homes, buildings, and piers had been damaged. But Quinn could live with that.

Six Sigma operatives had been taken into custody, though last she'd heard none of them were talking.

She wasn't surprised. But at least they'd been stopped.

And she felt fairly certain that the equipment they'd been working to develop had also been destroyed. She prayed no one was ever able to recreate it.

Because that kind of knowledge in the wrong hands could be deadly.

What she thought she'd remembered had been correct.

She'd started out as a budding but brilliant meteorologist. The CIA had seen something in her and recruited her for a special assignment.

They needed someone with her specialty to go find out what kind of program Russia was working to develop concerning weather control.

It was faster to train her as an agent than it would be to train an agent in weather science.

She'd accepted the assignment—she'd been the perfect candidate. Her mom had died when she was a toddler, and her father passed from a heart attack when she was in high school. She had no siblings, no attachments.

She'd spent two years in Russia infiltrating the government program they'd started there. Though her flashbacks had made her believe she'd killed someone, she actually hadn't taken any lives. She'd only obtained information about what they were doing and passed that on to her handler.

Because of the nature of her work, she'd had to change her identity. Her fingerprints had even been hidden from all databases.

If the Russians had found out, they'd want revenge.

So she'd become a new person and had begun working for NOAA, which was where she'd met Dr. Hartwell.

She could remember Dr. Hartwell studying storm models and becoming concerned. That was when they'd gone down to Florida to study the hurricane about to hit the Bahamas. That was also when Dr. Hartman had been abducted.

She'd taken his van and escaped. He'd warned her that someone was on the inside, so she hadn't known who she could trust.

When she heard about the new storm forming in the Atlantic, she'd done the projections. She'd known where it might hit.

That was why she'd gone to Lantern Beach. She'd hidden that van in the woods near the lighthouse so she could monitor things.

But before she could accomplish too much, those people had found her.

They'd abducted her, taken her to the island near Lantern Beach, and tried to force her to perfect their program. She'd refused.

When she'd found the right opportunity, she'd run. She hadn't swum all the way across the water, but she'd stolen a boat.

Sigma's men had chased her down. When she'd reached Lantern Beach, she'd tried to run. But she'd fallen and hit her head.

That was when she'd run into Atlas—a real godsend.

She reached the bottom of the stairs, and her face lit with a smile when she spotted Atlas waiting for her there.

He still looked as handsome as ever.

The past few days had been a whirlwind. They'd been questioned by every possible investigative agency. Just last night they'd been able to return here.

She and Atlas hadn't had a good chance to talk—not just the two of them.

But today, they would.

He reached for her hand, and she slipped hers inside his. “Want to go for a walk?”

“No breakfast?”

“I already have that covered. Trust me.”

She did trust him. He’d proven himself time and time again.

He led her outside to the gazebo.

A table had been set up there with two covered plates.

“Fancy,” she murmured.

“Not fancy. Not really. But at least it’s private.”

She sat across from him and took the cover off her plate. Eggs, bacon, and toast waited for her there.

He’d remembered this was the breakfast she’d liked.

“It looks delicious,” she murmured.

He took her hand, and they prayed before starting to eat.

“So, how have you been?” he started.

“I’m so glad this is all over with and that I have my memories back.”

He smiled. “Me too.”

Her own smile slipped before she asked her next question. “How’s everything been since . . . since you saw Noreen again? I’m sure that wasn’t easy.”

He shrugged. “It wasn’t. But I actually feel like I have some closure now. It always bothered me that she’d gotten away without any repercussions. Now I know she’ll be

in prison for a long, long time.”

“That’s good then.” Her gaze traveled across the water, and she remembered that day when she’d taken down the copter. “Did you ever figure out what the explosives were for in the helicopter?”

“No one is talking, of course,” Atlas told her. “But I suspect Sigma wanted to have the explosives on hand just in case things went south with this storm.”

“Not to bomb Blackout?”

“Maybe. But I think they wanted the hurricane to take us out first.”

“I guess that makes sense.” She paused, piece of bacon in midair. “Do we know why they targeted the Bahamas yet? I haven’t been able to figure that out.”

“We’re still working out those details. But if they targeted Lantern Beach in order to get to us, then they probably targeted the Bahamas for the same reason.

There’s still so much we’re trying to uncover about the organization.

They’re still active and still a threat. There are still more agents out there.”

“Including maybe one in your midst?” She frowned at the thought.

His expression sobered. “Unfortunately, yes. We’re still keeping our eyes open. But nothing has happened lately. Maybe that’s a good sign.”

They both knew, however, that could be just because whoever was the mole didn’t want to be found.

She didn’t say that aloud, however.

“So, Quinn, I know we haven’t known each other very long, but in so many ways it feels like a lifetime.”

“Yes, it does.”

“I wrote something for you.”

Her eyebrows flung upward. “Did you?”

“I did. Would you like to hear it?”

“I’d love to.”

He pulled out a piece of paper and cleared his throat as he looked at the words there.

“I used to think storms were meant to destroy,

That hurricanes only brought chaos and fear.

But you taught me that even the wildest winds

Can clean the air, make the path ahead clear.

You came to me lost in a tempest of lies,

Your memories scattered like leaves in the gale.

But beneath all the thunder, I found something true?—

A heart that no storm could diminish or pale.

They tried to remake you, to twist who you are,

To turn your bright mind into weaponry dark.

But love is the anchor that holds through the storm,

And you are the lighthouse that guides my heart home.”

Her hand went over her mouth. “Oh, Atlas . . . that’s beautiful.”

He grinned. “Its beauty doesn’t compare to you.”

She tilted her head. From some men, that would sound like a line.

But not from Atlas. Sincerity captured his every word.

Quinn had always thought of pressure points in meteorological terms—the precise atmospheric conditions where small changes could trigger massive storms. But sitting here with Atlas, she realized there were emotional pressure points too.

Moments where the slightest shift in trust, in understanding, in love, could change everything. They'd found each other at exactly the right moment, when both their hearts were ready for the storm of falling in love.

Of course, Lantern Beach had been the ultimate pressure point. It had been the precise location where Sigma’s weather weapon, her recovered memories, and her love for Atlas had all converged.

One small island where the slightest change in any variable could have meant disaster or salvation.

But like any good meteorologist, she’d learned to read the signs. And all the atmospheric conditions had been perfect for something beautiful to grow from the storm.

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Thank you so much for reading Pressure Point . If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review.

Coming next: Ground Zero.