

# **“Great Sacrifice”**

*By Kenya Gaede*

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## **Dedication**

To those of you, young, old, and in all walks of life, created with the unquenchable passion to write. It isn't something you can ignore, so you might as well as embrace it. However, one key question to ask yourself before embarking on such an adventure is: how are you going to use your gift?

The human experience is inescapably interconnected, and we constantly affect one another. As such, the individual bears an innate responsibility to use his or her gifts and abilities properly. So, how will you use yours? To build up or to tear down?

## Author's Note

*September 2024*

The two brief points I wish to address are as follows:

1) As of December 2024, the original "*The Great Sacrifice*" would have been fifteen years old. It was my first published book. Although I had been writing for years, I was still developing as an author and a person. Now, as the years have passed and I have continued writing, I have matured. Writing is comparable to an artist taking up a new medium. The first few pieces are rough, but as one continues to practice, the technique sharpens.

When I began rereading this book in 2013, it quickly became apparent that a rewrite was necessary. I gave it a new title and added chapter titles. Most of the content changed dramatically. Certain key points and events remained the same, but you came to them by a different route. Relationship dynamics were different and key characters were given more depth.

At the beginning of 2022, I restarted reading my older works and began refreshing them. By this, I mean I adjusted sentence structure to improve flow and make the books easier to read. I also corrected any noticeable plot holes.

"Great Sacrifice" was one of those updated works. When I started reading it earlier this year, I easily recognized the previous updates and immediately knew that they hadn't been nearly enough. This time, I smoothed out the writing, fixed a few "almost" plot holes, and adjusted the relationship dynamic between our main character and support character.

This marks the final writing and resting place of *Great Sacrifice*. There comes a time as a creative type when you must stop touching up a work and leave it be.

2) On how I write Cassidy's dreams / PTSD in dreams:

I've read author tips and insights about writing dreams or how a character ought to remember traumatic events in said dreams. A common theme within this advice is that people don't dream vividly for an extended time or don't recall exact details about their trauma during unconscious bliss.

I certainly agree that some people don't dream in this way. However, I have also read about people who lucid dream. I've read accounts about how people experience their PTSD. I rarely experience mine in detail. For me, it's more about reliving the emotions during those times, which is no less horrible. There's nothing like waking up at night and finding yourself in the middle of a full-blown panic attack.

That said, I haven't interviewed everyone who had, has, or will have PTSD. Therefore, I can't argue with absolute certainty that no one ever experiences extended, detailed PTSD dreams.

At the end of the day, however, the detailed dreams in this book are for the sake of the plot and storytelling.

And now, I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I have enjoyed the long journey of creating the final production.



# Chapter 1

## Eventful Day

“TJ! Let’s get moving!” he called as he stormed down the narrow hall, old floorboards squeaking beneath his shoes. He shoved open the partially closed door to see the witness rolling off the bed and to his feet.

Special Agent Jason Stayton, six-foot-four with broad shoulders that made him look like a football player, grabbed the witness by the coat collar and pulled him towards the door.

“Come on,” he growled, expression furrowed with concentration.

The witness, a middle-aged man, thin, and going bald, stumbled into the hallway. Using the wall, he managed to keep himself from tripping.

“What’s wrong?” he whispered hoarsely, his eyes shifty.

TJ had a right to be nervous. He worked for a multi-billion-dollar corporation that had become one of the largest financing companies in the United States. All was going well. That is, until he stumbled upon some information directly linking his boss and several CEOs to weapons dealings with the mob.

Being the upstanding citizen he was, TJ snooped around to gather more information and then gave it to the FBI. He didn’t go to the local cops because they wouldn’t offer much protection, if any at all. At least, that’s what he had learned from watching crime dramas on television.

The case turned TJ into the prosecution’s key witness—especially after his coworkers began turning up dead.

Now, the FBI was keeping him under their watchful care and refused to entrust his wellbeing to anyone else. Thus, enter Jason Stayton, TJ, and the safe house they were presently leaving.

Jason pushed the man down the hall, through the pantry, and to the back door that opened into the woods.

“Our location has been compromised,” he said, finally answering TJ’s question.

Jason poked his head out the door, and his keen blue eyes quickly scanned the birch and spruce trees. A cool breeze from the north brushed through the branches, shifting shadows and jostling the tall grass. The sharp air nipped rudely at his nose and brought with it the heavy smells of wet moss and leaves.

Jason surmised that he didn't like the situation at all. As he pulled TJ through the door, he felt his stomach tightening with each passing second. When the hair on the back of his neck rose, he was positive they were being hunted.

They lifted into a jog, running lightly over the last patches of snow. They found a game trail and picked up the pace, cutting through the trees. The only noise apart from their shoes and TJ's gasping was the wind. No birds sang, and eerie quiet enveloped the forest.

"Where...are we going?" panted TJ, who obviously didn't frequent the gym.

Jason, gaze continuously sweeping their surroundings, flinched as TJ blurted the question during a gasp for air.

"To meet reinforcements," huffed Jason quietly.

"When did you—"

"I called it in before we left. Now hush."

Protocol dictated that two agents minimum protected a witness. However, unique circumstances, their geographic location, and a heavy caseload had stretched thin the regional unit in which Jason worked.

*Snap!* A branch behind them broke.

Jason instinctively grabbed TJ by the back of the neck and bent him forward. The first gunshot cracked through the trees even as Jason drew his firearm.

"Faster," whispered Jason, throwing a look over his shoulder but seeing no one.

The two men sprinted along the trail as it drifted left and near a thick stand of trees. At the next gunshot, Jason shoved TJ off the trail and crashing into the brush.

Two more gunshots, closer this time. A chunk of bark hit Jason in the shoulder as a bullet made its mark. Glancing back, he caught a glimpse of someone in a gray coat duck behind a large spruce.

“Keep running,” he said to TJ, “and stay low.”

“Wait, no! Don’t leav—”

“Go!”

“But.”

“GO.”

TJ scuttled through the trees, trying to keep as many as possible between himself and his assailants. He sure hoped his bodyguard agent was as good as the Bureau claimed.

When he spotted a shadow beside a thick stand of birch, he slid to a stop and frantically searched for a hiding place. Spotting a large fallen tree, he dove behind it as another gunshot punched through the quiet air.

TJ panted in his panic, and his darting eyes searched for Jason. He saw nothing but the trees and felt mildly impressed that his large protector moved so silently.

Without warning, it sounded like he was in the middle of a battlefield. Multiple gunshots came from what seemed like everywhere and from three or four different firearms.

Bark went flying from the tree TJ hid behind. Covering his head, he sought a different hideout.

“Run!” he heard Jason call. “Run now!”

TJ hesitated. His head throbbed with his pulse, and his stomach writhed with fear. He really didn’t want to do this. Could he trust the agent to protect him?

After taking a breath, he forced himself up and bolted for a trail that disappeared behind another thick stand of trees twenty meters ahead.

He heard bullets whiz by him.

Halfway to his refuge, TJ checked behind him. As he did, his shoulder smacked into a tree which sent him careening wildly. He hadn’t begun steadying himself before a low-lying willow bush caught his right ankle. Had the situation not been dire, the scene of him flailing dramatically and then toppling to the ground would have been comical.

A snarl of pain came from somewhere behind TJ as he scrambled to his feet. He hoped that hadn’t been Jason.

A barrage of gunfire rained down upon him. TJ was no weapons expert, but the bursts told him that at least one person had a semi-automatic rifle.

TJ threw himself behind a stand of spruce and crawled along behind them.

The gunshots abruptly stopped. Dead silence settled over the forest. TJ did his best to quiet his breathing as he peered through the branches.

That was when someone grabbed the back of his coat and dragged him from under the tree. He twisted about and looked at the man before him.

*That's not Jason,* informed his brain.

Adrenaline slammed into TJ's veins. He drew a deep breath, and his eyes widened. This was it. He was going to die.

The man in a gray jacket had already leveled his gun at TJ's head and now put his finger on the trigger.

One more gunshot rang out. A body lay still on the moss, blood soaking into the ground from the fatal head wound.

Jason Stayton crept around a bushy spruce with his gun aimed at the assailant. He found a wide-eyed TJ half-sitting and looking at the man on the ground.

Jason holstered his firearm and hauled a very pale TJ to his feet. "Come on. We need to keep moving."

With a little encouragement, mainly Jason's firm hand on his shoulder, a shocked TJ started down the trail.

They would rendezvous with reinforcements several miles later and take TJ to safety. Jason could only imagine the paperwork he would have to fill out after this little adventure.

Rubbing his face with his hands, he sighed.

This had turned out to be quite an eventful day, indeed.

## Chapter 2

### Whirlwind

“Don’t touch me.”

“Would you just—”

Cassidy Jackson, five-foot-five and all of one hundred and twenty pounds of lean muscle, was known throughout the four divisions as being a real live-wire. Her intense, dark blue eyes snapped at everyone, and she wielded a “let’s just get to it and catch some bad guys” mentality.

And no one intimidated her. It didn’t matter if she was dealing with a terrorist or a gangbanger with two hundred pounds and a foot of height on her. Cassidy didn’t let anyone walk over her, and she told anyone what was on her mind at the time.

“Listen, Cass, could you—”

“Quit!”

She tore her arm away from the agent trying to calm her and nearly elbowed him in the face. Her jaw was set tight, and her eyes blazed. She had a right to be upset. She had just returned from a disastrous overseas assignment.

The main doors of the large room opened and in strode a rather large man. He was at least three days unshaven and had a marked tiredness about him. Yet, his intelligent gaze was steady and clear.

Cassidy watched the other agents respond to his entrance, performing a quick study of how their expressions and body language changed. This man was admired and respected, perhaps, though, in the same way someone might respect a wolf.

*Of course, when you’re that tall,* thought Cassidy, folding her arms as he stopped beside her and the other agent.

“There a problem?” he asked with a voice that commanded attention. He stood towering over her. The poor lighting of the room cast various shadows, and Cassidy stepped sideways and out from his.

The other agent was about to answer, but Cassidy beat him to it.

“I came to see Chief Braxton, but he isn’t here. And then Tony,” she jerked her thumb at the agent, “kept patronizing me.”

“That’s because you came in like a madwoman!”

Cassidy’s volume had already been elevated. Now, it kicked up another notch.

“I did not!” she snapped. “Why don’t you just back off!”

The tall man looked down and studied this young woman before him. Her long, dark brown hair was haphazardly pulled back in a ponytail and away from those fiery eyes. Her fair complexion was marked with cuts and scrapes like she had been involved in some kind of recent altercation.

Her plain white, long-sleeved shirt was too big and flopped past her wrists even with the cuffs rolled back. The brown leather coat was faded and worn, like her jeans, and her shoes were covered with dust.

He noted a touch of redness in her eyes and the way her mouth was drawn into a tight line. She appeared ready to throttle someone.

“I’m Special Agent Jason Stayton,” he said finally, extending his hand.

Cassidy slapped her hand into his. She had quite the grip. “Cassidy Jackson.”

His eyebrows rose. “So, you’re the infamous Jackson...”

Nearly everyone had at least heard of her. CIA-trained, spoke a bunch of languages, knew the layout of Middle-Eastern countries better than she did the U.S. Her dad had been military or something-rather, and she had unofficially tagged along with him. She hadn’t even finished college before various government intelligence agencies tried to recruit her.

No one was sure exactly what happened next because she disappeared for a while. The rumor was she had joined up with an experimental branch of intelligence. Wherever it was, when she did show back up, Cassidy Jackson had been involved in numerous classified assignments.

Somehow, she ended up here. Local gossip said it was some kind of disciplinary action for going rogue one too many times and not playing well with others.

“She’s here about her latest assignment,” jumped in Tony, holding a printed summary of the mission.

Cassidy snatched them from him.

“Sheesh, Jackson, you’re so...”

“I just lost half my team!” she bellowed.

Silence filled the office. The few people in the room decided to slink away to less hostile territory.

Jason’s expression furrowed. “The East Africa op?”

Cassidy let out an exasperated breath. “Yes.”

Her shoulders slouched, and sullenness replaced some of her fight. She rubbed the side of her face, trying to decide whether she should divulge any information at the moment.

The FBI had been increasing its global presence for years. Normally, the average person thought of mob bosses or fraudulent, million-dollar firms when they heard the acronym “FBI.” In this present day and age, however, things had changed, and the Bureau’s reach was expanding.

Finally, Cassidy said, “We were supposed to meet with a special forces team, but they never showed. We’d come so far already and...”

Cassidy gave a shake of her head and pressed a fist against her forehead.

“It was up to my discretion whether or not to continue,” she went on, looking at Jason as anger flashed in her eyes. “So, we did...and I got half my unit killed. We were ambushed shortly after arriving at the target location.”

Her expression changed to a cool glare. “But that means they knew we were coming and that someone obviously gave them that information.”

Cassidy let her sentence trail off. In the whirlwind of minutes Jason had known her, he guessed she was thinking about various things she would do to the traitor once she found him.

“Well,” said Tony, looking at his watch. “I need to get going. Uh...I am sorry about your team, Cassidy.”

Jason rolled the chair from behind his desk and offered it to Cassidy. She rested her hand on top of it but didn't make a move to sit, her mind someplace else.

"You're in the west division just outside the city, right?" asked Jason, borrowing a chair from an unoccupied desk and sitting down.

His question brought Cassidy back to the present. Taking his lead, she sat and skimmed the papers she had taken from Tony. "Yeah, west division."

"Yours was the best unit of the four branches in the state."

"*Was* being the keyword," huffed Cassidy bitterly.

"Does your boss agree with your theory of a mole?" asked Jason. "Someone who leaked your movements to the enemy?"

She tossed the papers onto his desk and leaned back in the chair. "Not if they got the same summary I just read. Nothing conclusive right now. But if someone on the inside was involved and is in on the investigation—"

"They may have access to reports and be able to alter them before they reach anyone high up the chain," finished Jason.

He raised an eyebrow before asking, "And Hensley sent you all the way over here to talk to the chief...he didn't want to lose any face over the possibility of getting into an argument?"

A harsh, sardonic laugh edged with bitterness burst from Cassidy. "The *likelihood* of an argument, you mean. The rumor that Hensley and Braxton despise each other isn't just a rumor. Hensley loathes the higher-ups who placed Braxton as chief over the four divisions instead of him."

She leveled her gaze on him with eyes twinkling. "Hensley is usually an alright boss, but sometimes he acts like a real—"

Jason's cell phone rang. Digging it out of his pocket, he glanced at the caller ID, and then answered. "Stayton."

There was a brief pause before Jason's expression became puzzled. "That's what they're calling it?"



He shifted uncomfortably, feeling Cassidy's eyes reading him like an open book.  
"Yes, sir."

He ended the call and sat in silence for a second to process the information he had received. "Bob Dexton was just found dead."

It was Cassidy's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Bob Dexton? As in, the Dexton who was my unit's direct contact in DC and oversaw overseas logistics?"

"That's the one. The chief said it looked like Dexton slipped on the stairs in his house, fell, and cracked his skull on an end table."

"Right," quipped Cassidy sarcastically, "days after an overseas operation ended up killing three agents."

"You don't think it's a coincidence?"

Cassidy huffed through her nose. "No such thing."

She felt stiff and sore from nearly being blown up in another part of the world. Yet, with great effort, she pushed herself out of the chair.

"Well, it was nice meeting you," she said, rummaging in her pockets for her keys. "I'm sure we'll run into each other again."

"Headed home for the night?" asked Jason, who was thinking about grabbing a bite and a late movie.

He usually had a few days off between assignments, which allowed him to disengage and recover. He had only come in today to look over and submit reports from his previous case. During that time, he had bumped into Tony and Cassidy.

*This is what I get for coming in on my days off,* he thought to himself.

Meanwhile, Cassidy looked at Jason like he had just suggested she go dress shopping. "No. I'm going to the crime scene."

"Wait, why?" he asked. "We have people for that. What do you think you'll find, anyway?"

Cassidy faced him. "I'm not looking for evidence. I just want to see the scene itself. With everything that has happened in the past few days, I wouldn't trust what I read in the final medical examiner's report."

“You think someone would intentionally botch it?” asked Jason. He tried to inquire with a straight face but couldn’t entirely keep the “you might be a little paranoid” look from his expression.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you,” she answered coolly before turning and starting for the door.

“Hold on a sec,” said Jason, springing to his feet.

He had no idea what he was doing as he stepped beside her. The “protect” switch of his brain had been flipped, and he hadn’t realized it. This wasn’t uncommon with his assignments, but it emphasized the importance of having a few days rest between cases so he could recollect himself. In the instances when he didn’t or couldn’t reset, his brain automatically searched for another problem to direct its attention to.

“You don’t think you’re a bit close to all this?” he asked.

The second the words left his mouth, Jason knew he had said the wrong thing. Cassidy’s face hardened, and a warning flickered in her eyes. He may have been a head taller than her and had a hundred pounds of muscle on her, but in that instant, he felt rather afraid of her.

“If you think I’m going to sit idly by and twiddle my thumbs while those responsible for killing my people and my unit’s logistics officer are still out there somewhere,” she said evenly, “then you are sorely mistaken, Special Agent Stayton.”

She stepped closer. “And one day, when you have the deaths of your agents on your head, I’d love to see how you react.”

Jason cleared his throat and shifted his weight back. He didn’t need to be a special agent to decipher Cassidy’s body language. She was engaged, wound tight, and telling him if he said one more wrong thing, physical violence would follow.

*Why do I care what she does, anyway,* he thought to himself. He had no idea. But he did know he suddenly didn’t feel like going home right now. Besides, there was something irritatingly interesting about this woman.

“Okay, we’ll stop in for a quick look,” he said.

“We?” asked Cassidy, eyebrows lifting before she continued her thought, *and I could have been halfway to the crime scene already if you hadn’t initiated this whole pointless conversation.*

“Look, Dexton was a liaison for my division, too,” began Jason, scrambling to formulate a believable explanation, “not just yours. I’d also place money on a bet we’re going to land your team’s case, especially since Hensley sent you over here. If Dexton’s death really does look like murder, I don’t want that to be overlooked, because that would give confirmation to your theory it’s related to the Africa op.”

Cassidy gave him a look that said she didn’t believe him. Jason didn’t blame her. He’d totally b.s.’d his way through that whole speech as he had on English essays in college. Then again, he didn’t have to explain himself to her, either.

“You are not a member of my team,” she replied, “and you are not my partner, so don’t feel like you have to tag along...I’m sure you can read all about Dexton’s death in the final report when it comes out.”

Cassidy ended the conversation for them by turning and heading out the door.

Jason pinched the bridge of his nose, thoroughly exasperated. His options were: go home and sit in an empty house or make a trip to a crime scene with a woman who couldn’t stand him.

Honestly, it was a tougher call than one would think.

With a sigh, he pulled out his keys and followed her.



It was dark by the time they reached the residence of Bob Dexton. There was no way Cassidy and Jason were riding in the same vehicle, so they had come separately.

Only two sets of lights flashed outside the house. For the death of a government official, the activity outside seemed docile. They probably wanted to keep it out of the press for as long as possible.

Jason brought his dark green sedan to a stop behind Cassidy’s car.

She joined Jason's side, and they casually walked up the driveway. It inclined gently for a short distance to where the house sat atop a small rise. It was a modest two-story with a three-car garage and looked quite homey.

The two agents approached an imposing, muscular man with short, reddish-brown hair and his hands on his hips.

"Chief Braxton."

"Hey, Jason, good to see you back in one piece," replied the chief with a gruff voice.

Jason nodded to Cassidy. "And this is Special Agent—"

"Cassidy Jackson," said Braxton. "Yes, I was briefed on you and your unit in light of recent events. Oh! I have some documents for you, from one of your Agency friends. Something about an unfinished case."

Jason glanced at Cassidy, who scowled. She didn't like people knowing her business.

"Hey, what are you doing here, anyway?" Braxton asked Cassidy.

"Since Dexton was important to the west division, we just wanted to take a look at the scene," answered Jason.

Cassidy's lips pulled into a tight line, and her eyes glinted with anger, clearly unhappy he had spoken for her.

"Alright, well, everything's been mostly processed already. Sign in, take a quick walk-through, then I want you to get out of here," replied Braxton. "That goes especially for you, Jackson. You need to go home and crash."

Cassidy's own leadership style may have had all the tact of a bulldozer, but she respected authority. She never argued with a superior in front of coworkers.

Therefore, she managed a "yes, sir" through a clenched jaw then brushed past Jason.

Inside, the scene of Grant's death appeared straightforward. It looked like he had slipped from the top step of the wooden stairs and then smacked his head on the end table at the bottom.

“Looks like an accident to me,” shrugged Jason as the ME and his assistant prepared to move the body.

Forensic scientists and crime scene investigators walked around the house, double-checking to make sure they hadn't overlooked anything. Of course, there hadn't been much evidence to gather in the first place.

Cassidy said nothing as she inquisitively studied the living room, to the right of the stairs, and the kitchen, on the left. Her expression was one of intense concentration, and as she mulled about, Jason wondered what was going on in that spy brain of hers.

At last, she stopped at the base of the stairs, glanced at the body, then knelt to inspect his shoes. Afterward, she stalked silently to the top of the steps where she observed the floor.

“Long scruff marks,” mused Cassidy, mostly to herself. “So...he just felt like dragging himself to the top of the staircase, standing up, and then throwing himself down the steps?”

They moseyed through the upstairs and found everything in its place. It was unclear where he had been leading up to his death, and Cassidy wondered what exactly he had been doing before his untimely meeting with an end table.

“Do you get assigned a lot of bodyguard jobs?” asked Cassidy, poking her head into the master bedroom.

*Well, this is a bit off-topic,* thought Jason. “Uh, yeah. It's more like bodyguard and transport.”

“From what I've heard and read, you excel at it,” she remarked, turning down the hallway.

Jason eyed her as she stopped abruptly and checked out the bathroom. “What you've read? You read up on all the agents?”

Cassidy paused to look over her shoulder. After choosing her answer carefully, she responded with, “One thing I learned quickly while overseas was to know the people you work with. Some traitors are the ones you would least expect.”

*Okay, someone has trust issues,* thought Jason as she continued down the hall, *but then again, who doesn't?*

After another five minutes, Cassidy had completed her expedition and satisfied her need to study the scene. Stopping in the open entryway, she skimmed over the notes she had taken on a small pad she kept in her pocket. With a sigh, she flipped the pad closed and rubbed her forehead, aching terribly.

“I may not be your partner,” said Jason, a bit smartly, “but I hope you’ll take care of yourself and go home and get some rest now.”

*Rest,* thought Cassidy, almost laughing. *Right. If you only knew.*

She opened her mouth, ready with a comeback when Chief Braxton marched through the front door.

“Jackson!” he exclaimed. “You’re still here?”

“We were just leaving, boss,” answered Jason again, earning him another icy look from Cassidy.

“Good.”

Braxton looked at Cassidy. “Hensley would tell you to take the week off, talk to someone and all that. However, we know you won’t listen. But I don’t want to hear that you’ve gone into work tomorrow, or I’ll make sure Hensley puts you behind a desk for the rest of your secret-agent, terrorist-fighting days.”

Cassidy knew it was an empty threat but understood the gist of it. Not that it would prevent her from going back to work in the morning.

She and Jason left the house and walked down the driveway. Cassidy ran a hand over her face and let out a long breath.

“You need me to drive you home?” asked Jason, all snarkiness gone from his tone.

“No.”

The response came out a bit harsher than Cassidy intended, but she was feeling quite tired and exceptionally crabby.

They stopped between their vehicles.

“Look, I know it doesn’t mean much, but I really am sorry about your team, Ca...uh, Agent Jackson,” offered Jason gently, which was difficult to do with that strong voice.

Cassidy merely nodded as she gazed into the darkness of the trees across the road.

“I trust we’ll be seeing each other again,” he continued, studying her intently.

Her mind was someplace far away again as she managed a, “Yeah.”

In the lights along the driveway, he saw how worn she truly was. Stress lined her face as she glared into the night. Jason couldn’t help but feel a little empathetic for her, as well as a spark of admiration. She appeared small and fragile, yet she somehow stubbornly stood beneath an incredible weight.

“You take care of yourself,” said Jason with a cautious tone.

The expression with which she fixed upon him would stay with him for a long time. It was a haunting gaze. Rage flared to life and finally pain. Yet, as quickly as it came, it went, hidden behind exhaustion. If Cassidy truly was as he perceived her, and if she was like him, she would never talk about her feelings.

Cassidy said nothing more to Jason and made for her car. He thought about helping her. She kept an arm pressed against her side, and stiffness hitched her gait.

Ultimately, he decided against it. He had already earned enough bad points with her.

After Cassidy drove off, Jason sat in his car a moment, clutching the steering wheel. He cleared his throat and reached for the key in the ignition, but stopped and closed his eyes.

It would be one more night of going home to an empty house. He had been debating whether to sell it, yet he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Not yet. Even if he bought another house, he knew he would still be going home to an empty place.

The memories, the wounds, were still felt fresh even after two years. A semi-truck driver had fallen asleep at the wheel and smashed into his wife Jenny’s car, sending it through the guardrail and into a dry riverbed. Miraculously, his wife survived with minor

injuries. Their four-year-old daughter, Abby, didn't. Dead on impact, that's what he had been told. As if that would bring any genuine comfort.

Jason cleared his throat again and turned the key, bringing the car to life.

He had once believed in God, starting in college when he'd been "born again." Jenny had been a believer since middle school, and their daughter loved it when they read the family Bible every night.

But Abby's death had tested him. Jenny somehow pressed through it and seemed stronger. She had been a saint to help Jason continue living. Their relationship, though rough at times, had ultimately strengthened.

However, when a fast-moving cancer took Jenny on the anniversary of the car accident that killed Abby, it also took Jason's faith.

Death had taken his family, and for the past two years, he had thrown himself in its path. It didn't seem interested in him, though. Not yet.

Working obsessively seemed to be the only way to numb the pain, and he wasn't stupid enough to get into alcoholism or drugs. Instead, he vehemently ignored his Lord's persistent and gentle asking to return to their relationship. As a result, he slowly became calloused.

Jason's tactic had been working well until he met Cassidy Jackson. Sure, he had heard the stories about her as an agent, but he'd never met her.

Something about her had stirred or unsettled him. He was like a man who had been falling without realizing it, but now he had hit the bottom of the cliff. He had been jarred rudely to wakefulness. Put another way, the spell of indifference that he had cast over himself had been shattered. Something about Cassidy's harsh and no-nonsense personality had blindsided and dazed him from the sleepy haze he had been living in for two years.

Now that the blinders had been removed and the figurative slumber interrupted, Jason again felt the fullness of his life's pain and dissatisfaction. Reality had dragged him from under the rock he had been sheltering and then brained him with the rock.



Naturally, Jason didn't think of his situation quite so philosophically, and indeed, he remained unaware of the deeper reasons for the change. All he knew in that moment was his deep-seated dissatisfaction and discomfort.

His shoulders hunched, and every feature on his face drew down into a deep frown. A slight ache awoke in his chest, and his stomach became unsettled. Grief's unique and uncomfortable discontentment began escaping from the deep chamber into which he had tried locking it.

He didn't want to go to the house. It was no longer home. What was once a place of joy and contentment was now ugly and detestable. The thought of going there repulsed him stronger than ever.

*I don't want to go there, he thought again. I could just get a hotel room for the night.*

He gave his head a slight shake. *No, that's going too far. Don't be a pansy.*

Jason set his jaw against the ache filling his chest. Normally, a good dose of anger dulled the pain, but he was just too tired.

*This is cruel and unusual, he thought to the heavens.*

With a sigh, he put the car in gear, and headed down the road, resigning himself to the fact it would be a long night.

## Chapter 3

### Rogue Partners

Wet, gray clouds draped from the weary sky as if the weather was aware of the mood.

When Jason walked into work, he went straight to the conference room at the back of the main room. Chief Braxton and Tony already sat at a long oak table. It really was a nice piece of craftsmanship. Too bad it was out of place with the rest of the cheap furniture in the building.

Jason took a chair opposite Tony as the two other agents came in and sat. They looked as tired as Jason. Everyone except Tony, of course. He was the “new kid” and hadn’t experienced burnout yet, so he was pumped and ready to go.

Braxton, at the head of the table, leaned back in his chair and toyed with a pen. “Okay, here’s the rundown. Since the other two divisions are swamped with current cases, my bosses have decided the killing of Jackson’s team in Africa is our top priority.”

“I take it our friends in intelligence were kind enough to provide us with some preliminary findings?” guessed Tony.

“At first glance, there isn’t much to go on,” replied Braxton. “Just looks like a rebel group got the jump on them. Plenty of shell casings, damage done by RPGs...”

As the chief continued, Jason glanced around the table. Beside Tony was Logan, mid-forties with hazel-brown eyes and gray hair beginning to show through his natural brown. He was a good agent, and his years of experience had developed his sharp mind. However, he was becoming a bit stiff-necked as he edged toward fifty.

Next to Logan sat Lee. Word was he was from Asia, but he looked more Native American, at least to Jason. His facial features were distinctive with high cheekbones and a long, narrow nose. His short hair was jet black and his eyes dark brown. Lee was more reserved and didn’t speak until he was good and ready.

Finally, there was Kara, a strawberry blonde with hazel eyes. But don’t be fooled. She was as battle-hardened as any commander. With a pitiful family life growing up to

tragedy that marked her young adult years, she was anything but a pushover. She had a quiet fierceness about her, a determination that Jason wished he had.

“So, like I said, we caught this case,” Braxton was saying. “We may be able to get a little help from the other divisions, but don’t hold your breath.”

“Any leads?” asked Logan.

Braxton shook his head. “It’s a very turbulent part of Africa. None of the local terrorist or insurgent groups stand out. They certainly would have taken responsibility for killing Americans.”

“But what about the fact the attackers knew Jackson’s team was coming?” asked Jason. “Or that they knew exactly where and when to hit them? Doesn’t that clearly point to a traitor, someone who leaked the information? Whoever did could easily have paid a rebel group to execute the attack.”

Braxton grimaced as he reluctantly admitted, “That is a very distinct possibility. We’ll check for breaches in OPSEC, too. Either way...we’ll need to exercise the utmost caution while we investigate everything.”

“A mole hunt while we try to find someone off the radar,” muttered Logan.

“Great,” mumbled Kara before picking up her coffee cup. “There goes the next ten months of my life.”

“Why don’t we just round our top wanted guys?” asked Logan sarcastically. “I mean, they’re upstanding citizens. I’m sure they would know something.”

Jason’s eyes flicked from Logan to Braxton.

The chief raised a hand. “We might be a mobile unit, but we’re still FBI. Our cases have to hold up in court, so we have to be careful about violating Constitutional rights.”

He sent a sly look at Jason, “Unless, of course, our perpetrators aren’t American citizens and are hiding somewhere overseas.”

“I know there would probably be a whole ‘conflict of interest’,” said Logan jokingly and apparently feeling his oats this morning, “but why not just put Jackson on the trail? She has plenty of skills and connections. I’m sure she would have this case wrapped up in forty-eight hours.”

“Yeah, then she would disappear after leaving a trail of bodies for us to clean up,” added Tony.

That earned him a curt look from Jason.

“Alright, alright,” said the chief, cutting in and leveling a correcting look at Tony. “She’s one of us, people.”

The door to the conference room opened and in walked a new analyst Jason hadn't seen before. He must have been hired after his last visit a month ago.

He walked quickly to Braxton, whispered a flurry of words, and then departed.

Braxton picked up the phone at the end of the table, the only thing decorating it, and punched a button. “Chief Braxton.”

After listening for a few seconds, his jaw twitched. “When?” he asked, checking his watch.

Another pause.

“Thanks.”

Braxton dropped the phone back into its holder. “One of Jackson’s remaining team members was found dead less than an hour ago. Looks like he was out for a jog and had a heart attack.”

“Who was it?” asked Kara.

“Marty Sharp, thirty-two and in picture-perfect health.”

Logan shrugged. “Sometimes that happens to young, healthy people.”

Jason’s right eyebrow arched. *Yeah, and you would have to drop at least thirty pounds just to be near the range of “healthy.”*

“Yeah, a young healthy guy who was also part of Cassidy’s team in Africa,” jabbed Kara.

She and Logan shared a hard look.

Jason smiled inwardly at the exchange.

“Here’s what we’re going to do first,” said Braxton, with a clap of his hands. “We’re going to pick up the rest of Jackson’s team and keep an eye on them until we figure this out.”

He leaned forward. "Remember: this isn't just any group of agents. The west division was elite trained, like, uh, special forces. They are very good but can't be on alert twenty-four seven."

He looked at Jason. "You already know Jackson. Go pick her up."

The chief stood. "While you're all doing that, I'll get some leads rolling."

Everyone stood and went on their way. As Jason made for the stairs, he searched through his cell to find Cassidy's number.

On one hand, he was glad he hadn't seen her today. Right now, though, he wished she had ignored the boss's orders and come to work. It would have saved him a trip through town.



*Rapid weapons fire came from everywhere in the darkness, drowned out intermittently by an RPG. She smelled the dust, heard the distinct rap of the AK-47, and the shouts from her team as they ran for cover.*

*She couldn't clearly see what was happening because she was surrounded by semi-darkness. Then came a flash and a deafening bang that rocked the night. She felt the shockwave from the blast punch through her.*

*Shielding her eyes from the brightness of the burning debris, which had once been a villa, she saw three silhouettes standing in front of the flames. She didn't need to step closer. Her eyes adjusted, and she saw who they were.*

*Morgan, Bryant, and Stevens, the three agents who had died in the ambush stood looking grimly at her. A deep ache grabbed her heart. Their fatal wounds were displayed in gruesome detail and would always remain engraved in her memory.*

*The last thing she saw was their expressions before everything faded. No anger appeared on their faces, only disappointment.*

*"Excellent job," said a snide voice. "Walked right into an ambush and got three team members massacred. Nicely done."*

*“Your father should have trained you a little better,” added another voice, this one closer.*

*In the semi-darkness, she spotted one of the shadows, winged and looking at her with black eyes that reflected a glint of light.*

*“Ah, come on,” joined in a third, off her right shoulder. “It’s just history repeating itself. You complete your mission no matter the cost. Even in a group, you still operate by yourself, leaving the others to struggle to keep up with you.”*

*She couldn’t help but wince at that jab.*

*“You can take care of yourself,” added a fourth shadow, circling from the left. “But it’s the others who pay the price.”*

*Others might have been terrified about seeing demons in their dreams. But being a believer, she believed wholeheartedly in the daily activities of angels and demons. One could not be in this line of work, see some of the things she had, and not believe in Evil.*

*Besides, these four had been hounding her for years. Sometimes, they were too cowardly to show themselves and only felt obliged to visit her with nightmares. Other times, when they were feeling particularly mischievous, they popped up to do some harassing face-to-face, like now.*

*Anger rising, Cassidy hit the ugly imp to her right with a fierce look. He yelped and fluttered back to a safe distance.*

*If it had worked, she would have smacked the brute on the left with the rifle still in her hands. But physical weapons weren’t what one used against this enemy.*

*A sharp pain stabbed through her head. Slapping a hand on her temple, she leveled a glare at the demon in front of her. With heart beginning to pound, she marched towards him. “Get out of my head,” she snarled, pointing at him.*

*Her vision blurred with darkness. Seconds later, she felt something strike her in the chest once, then again, and again.*

*When her vision cleared, she found herself standing by a crumbled wall on the side of an abandoned structure. She was with the remainder of her team and on the edge of the small town. And she was taking rounds to the vest.*

*She half-collapsed behind the wall with the oxygen pushed from her lungs. Panting, she glanced twenty feet away, to the far side of the building where Stevens was laying down cover fire.*

*The rest of the unit made it across the open, and she forced herself to her knees. Rifle in hand, she peeked over the wall. She spotted a pair of muzzle flashes atop the steep rise and squeezed off a few rounds.*

*Stevens signaled to her, letting her know everyone was clear and he was ready to move.*

*That was when, in the light of a nearby fire, she saw it.*

*“Stevens!”*

*Rapid-fire pinned her down. She pulled out a grenade and threw it at the foot of the hill to create a brief distraction.*

*She rose into a crouch when the rocket hit Stevens’ location. She didn’t know if it was multiple rockets or what, but there came a jarring bang followed simultaneously by a blinding flash. She slammed into a pile of debris, landing on her side on a piece of rebar...*

Cassidy awoke with a fierce snarl. It took her a full thirty seconds to realize she was in her apartment and sitting on the floor beside her bed. Her breathing calmed slightly, and she became aware of how badly her side ached. Hands shaking, she lifted the side of her shirt to check the injury.

It had been a miracle, and the armor, which kept her from puncturing a lung or organ. Her side was black and various shades of purple and presently throbbing. She must have elbowed herself in her sleep.

She rubbed her face and discovered tears on her cheeks. *Easy*, she told herself as she took a few more steady breaths, *you’ve seen worse*.

She pushed herself up onto the bed and noticed the lamp and alarm clock. Sometime during the night, both were sent crashing off the nightstand. Batteries for the clock were nowhere to be seen and probably hiding under the bed.

When her phone, the only item still on the nightstand, buzzed at her, Cassidy lurched to her feet.

“Pull yourself together, woman,” she muttered to herself. She snatched up the phone and punched a button.

“What?”

There was a brief moment of silence before, *“This is Jason. Everything...okay?”*

“Just peachy,” answered Cassidy, tossing the blankets and sheets onto the bed.

*“I was a bit surprised you didn’t come in this morning.”*

“Alarm clock malfunction,” she explained, turning for the kitchen on the other side of the hallway. “What can I do for you?”

In passing, her foot slammed against the edge of the doorframe, making her toes crack. “Ow,” she growled, “son of—”

Muttering, she hobbled over to the counter.

*“Sorry, I didn’t catch that,”* said Jason.

“Nothing. You were saying?”

*“There have been some new developments. My division landed your case, and the chief is working more leads. Were any of your Agency contacts able to provide any useful information?”*

Cassidy grabbed one of the two mugs from the cupboard. It slipped from her fingers, and, after some fumbling, she managed to drop it onto the counter.

“I haven’t exactly had time to ask around,” she replied, turning to the little island where the coffeemaker resided.

She punched the “on” button.

Nothing happened. She scowled.

“Plus, you know how government agencies are big into interoperability,” she continued sarcastically as she punched the button a second time. “Sharing critical information would just be too helpful and courteous.”

Drawing a frustrated breath, she slammed her fist down on top of the machine. This never fixed anything, but it made her feel better.

*“Ain’t that the truth...well, I’m on my way to pick you up.”*

“I can drive myself just fine.”



*“The chief asked me to pick you up,”* stated Jason, *“and the rest of the team is picking up the remaining people in your unit.”*

She finally accepted the fact that she would have to walk across the road to the dump of a gas station for coffee. As she exited the kitchen, she cut around the island a little too close and slammed her hip into the corner. She had done this a number of times before, but her bruised side didn't appreciate it.

Grunting, she bent over. “Gosh...dang it!”

*“Are you sure everything is okay?”*

“Yes!” she exclaimed, voice dripping with derision. “Everything's just fine!”

Cassidy stomped down the hall to the door. “Something happened that made the chief particularly concerned for our safety. What is it?”

In the background of the conversation, she heard screeching tires followed by a blaring horn.

*“Uh...I'll explain on the way back to headquarters.”*

Cassidy slipped into her running shoes, aware she was still in her flannel pants and oversized shirt. Presently, she didn't care.

“Be that way,” she said. “You need directions to get here...”

After relaying them to Jason, she hung up and grabbed her coat from the hook. She still had ten minutes before he arrived, plenty of time to go ingest toxic amounts of caffeine, which she was going to need to function today.

Cassidy undid the chain, then the deadbolt, and finally the lock on the doorknob. She gave the door a yank. It didn't budge. She tried again with the same result. The third time she threw her shoulder into it, but that didn't work, either.

Head back and fists clenched, she growled with frustration. After taking a breath, she kicked the stupid door, which occasionally didn't let her out of her apartment without a fight.

Cassidy pulled out her phone to call the landlord and sighed. “Man, I hate Wednesdays.”



After Cassidy gave him directions, Jason closed the phone and cut across three lanes of traffic when he saw a sign for the exit he needed. Ten minutes later, he pulled onto a gravel parking lot in front of an ancient-looking apartment building.

Seconds after he stopped, Cassidy appeared out of the shadows and climbed into the passenger's seat. She looked a little better than yesterday evening like she may have gotten a few hours of sleep.

"The building looks a little, well...it looks like you need a higher salary," Jason commented as they pulled onto the street.

Cassidy snorted a laugh. "Agents such as myself need to be inconspicuous, and it has all the basic necessities, so I don't mind."

She glanced at Jason as he sped through a yellow light and took the on-ramp that launched them onto the freeway. "So, what's all this about?"

Jason was silent for a couple of seconds and felt Cassidy's gaze trying to read his thoughts. He cleared his throat and kept his gaze on the traffic ahead. "Another one of your teammates was found dead this morning."

Silence.

Jason shot a few glances at Cassidy. She simply sat there, expression stoic as she gazed out the windshield. He knew she was processing things, fitting this new development into her musings.

He didn't know exactly who she had worked for, or what the CIA, FBI, and whoever else had asked her to do. He did know that she understood loss of lives, including those on her team, came with the territory.

"Who?" she finally asked.

"Marty Sharp."

Out the corner of Jason's eye, he saw her wince a little like she had received a physical blow.

"You, uh, knew him well?" he asked after a beat.

“Not really. I’d only been this unit’s commander a few months. You know how it goes in the field. It’s all business. No personal stuff.”

Silence.

Jason shifted a little after a few minutes. “May I ask you something?”

Cassidy shrugged. “Shoot.”

“Do you prefer to work alone?”

Cassidy gave a nod. “I was only transferred to Hensley’s unit for a specific case they were working overseas.”

Jason looped under the overpass, then came up and across the freeway before back down, heading the other direction. “I figured as much,” he said. “You seem to be quite the nomad.”

A small smile tugged at Cassidy’s mouth. “I take you to be quite the rogue yourself, what with the types of tasks you’re assigned.”

It was Jason’s turn to manage a weak smile, the first of any sort since she had met him. “I prefer solitary over group work,” he replied.

When he noticed Cassidy still looking at him, or more appropriately, studying him, he fidgeted a little. The expression she wore told him she knew more about him than he realized.

“Yeah, solitary’s for the best,” she sighed quietly, returning her attention forward as she muttered, “especially when history repeatedly shows that if you work in a group, the people around you usually wind up dead.”

Jason shot a look at her, but before he could inquire, his phone rang. He wiggled oddly as he tried to grab it from his back pocket while staying on the road at the same time. Finally, he had it.

“Stayton.” When he heard the news from the person at the other end of the line, he couldn’t keep the mild surprise from his expression.

“When was this?”

Pause.

“Thanks, bye.”

“Who’s dead now?” asked Cassidy blandly.

“Greg Bennett.”

Cassidy considered this. “They’re working up the chain of command...with whoever’s left, that is.”

A breath of silence passed.

Without warning, Cassidy slammed the side of her fist against the door. Anger hardened her gaze as she glared out the windshield, and her jaw muscles flexed.

She wracked her brain, trying to think who would know her real identity and the identities of her team. Who would have that kind of reach and have access to those resources? Was it someone she had personally crossed?

She was reluctant to admit this was about her because one, she was raised to believe the world didn’t revolve around her. Second, there wasn’t a trace of evidence that suggested this was someone with a personal vendetta.

After a few minutes, Cassidy drew a breath to calm herself. She glanced at the side mirror and mentioned offhandedly, “You know, that silver sedan has been following us since we left the apartment complex.”

Jason’s eyes flicked to the rearview mirror. Sure enough, a silver car was two cars back and one lane to the right.

He casually changed lanes to pass a slower vehicle.

The other car mimicked their maneuver and settled two vehicles behind again.

“They sure suck at tailing,” muttered Jason.

He glanced at Cassidy and saw her fiddling with her cell phone.

The traffic ahead was thinning, meaning they would soon be more vulnerable.

Cassidy finished doing whatever it was with the phone and shot a look in the side mirror.

“Down!” she yelled.

She and Jason hunkered forward as a bullet passed through the back window and out the windshield.

Jason swerved into another lane amid blaring car horns. They flew along the left shoulder as he pressed the accelerator to the floor.

Cassidy, still stooped, pulled her gun from under her jacket and checked the magazine.

Jason sent the car swerving in front of a huge semi, cutting to the right and out of the pursuers' line of sight. Moments later, the silver car reappeared in the rearview mirror and two more bullets finished off the back window, shattering it.

"Take the next exit!" shouted Cassidy, peeking out the back window.

Jason did as told and sent the sedan screeching down the off-ramp, just clipping a car that was moving too slow and unable to get out of the way quickly enough.

The silver car didn't do much better. It fishtailed and slammed into an SUV before correcting and rocketing forward.

"Take a left at the second light!" called Cassidy over the noise of the air rushing through the back window.

"Why?" asked Jason.

"We're going to get my car!"

The only vehicle between them and their pursuers turned right down another street. As soon as the civilian car was out of the way, Cassidy opened fire. Three rounds punched through the pursuer's windshield and forced the driver to swerve.

They ran a red at the second light and performed a power slide under the freeway. Sort of. The sedan whined loudly in protest to the abuse.

"Why are we getting your car?"

"You honestly think we can outrun whoever it is in this thing?" answered Cassidy with a question.

Bullets plinked into the trunk.

"Besides," she added, "I don't think yours will *last* all the way back to headquarters."

More gunshots.

"Take a right up here."

Jason floored the gas and shot around the corner. “Why are we out here instead of going back to the apartment?” he asked, passing a red car as they flew down the road.

“You think I’d leave my car out in the open? I don’t want to start my car one day and find a surprise waiting for me.”

There came another series of shots. A loud *pop!* sounded before the back end of Jason’s car broke loose.

*Lucky tire shot*, thought Jason.

“We’re almost there,” said Cassidy, crawling into the backseat. “Take the next left, but don’t do it until I say.”

The silver car rapidly closed the distance.

“Uh, Cassidy?”

“Not yet.”

The silver car came closer.

“Cassidy...”

“Wait.”

The vehicle was within a few feet.

“Cassidy!”

“Now!”

Just as Jason began turning the wheel, Cassidy sat up and opened up rapid-fire on the silver car. Bullets made the windshield spider web and crack.

Their followers remained undeterred and tried to cut them off.

As Jason’s car swung around, Cassidy braced against the side and shot out a rear passenger window. She turned her focus on the front of the car, aiming for the radiator. Steam and smoke erupted from it seconds later, and with one last round, Cassidy nailed the driver. The silver car veered suddenly and into the ditch.

“Whoo!” exclaimed Cassidy, climbing back into the passenger’s seat. “Reminds me of my last trip to Algeria!”

Jason stared at her. This was the first time he had seen her excited. Then again, it was the first time he’d seen her in action. She was in her element, and he quickly

surmised she was one of those people who felt truly alive while in the midst of dangerous conflict.

Another quarter mile later, Jason's now rather beat-up car finally clunked to a stop in front of an abandoned house.

Jason killed the engine and joined Cassidy outside. He followed her as she jogged behind the house where, hiding under a large tarp, was what she called her "black beast."

"A Pontiac," nodded Jason appreciatively.

"Yeah," said Cassidy, unlocking it and dropping behind the wheel as Jason got in on the passenger's side. "Pity they don't make 'em anymore."

When the engine rumbled to life, he cocked an eyebrow. "I thought the GTP only had a V6?"

Cassidy smiled. "I may have had a little work done on it."

She put the car in gear and sent it leaping forward. They swung wide on the gravel road and returned to the silver car in the ditch.

The three occupants were just coming around when Cassidy rolled down her window, drew her gun, and shot out the left front and rear tires. Satisfied, she punched the gas, and they continued on their way.

Feeling Jason's stare, she said, "It's been a bad week."

On the freeway, they hadn't gotten half a mile before a blue car merged out of the light traffic and moved in behind them.

"Oh, come on!" exclaimed Cassidy. "Really?"

She watched the passenger pull out a gun. Veering hard to the left, they dodged around an SUV and met the blue car on the other side. They drove beside each other briefly, and Cassidy sent the driver an "I'm not amused" look.

She swerved towards them with a jerk. The driver of the other vehicle had just enough time to move out of the way. After correcting, he glared at Cassidy and Jason and swerved towards them.

Cassidy was already accelerating, and they shot ahead. The blue car missed them by inches and smashed into an Escalade. Tires screeched and smoke filled the air as cars rear-ended one another.

With that gesture, Cassidy hit the gas and sent her car flying down the freeway, the wreck behind them shrinking quickly.

Jason finally relinquished the death grip he had on the seat and armrest of the door. Letting out a breath, he glanced at the speedometer. It read 110mph. He never would have guessed by the way the engine purred along happily.

He looked at Cassidy. Her stoic expression was again in place as if this was merely another day in the life. In a span of twenty minutes, she had gone from quiet and pensive, to Marine on the battlefield, and then back to calm.

*Women, he thought, are so complicated.*



It turned out that Cassidy was the only one of her team to reach division headquarters. Everyone else was missing.

There was minor discussion about the pileup on the freeway, but Jason and Cassidy assured Chief Braxton it could not have been avoided.

When Cassidy learned she was to be placed under protective custody, she nearly hit the roof.

“Protective custody!” she exclaimed. “You cannot be serious.”

*What a little firecracker,* thought Jason, standing at a safe distance to the side. Although, honestly, he was quickly becoming used to it.

“Not in the traditional sense,” replied Braxton calmly. “We just want to keep an eye on you and the rest of your team.”

Cassidy took a sharp breath and restarted by reasoning, “My team and I are highly trained.”



“And yet they’re still being picked off,” countered Braxton. “Whoever it is, is good. They know you and your team. They knew where you would be in Africa and probably know where you are now.”

Cassidy’s mood darkened, but she managed to keep her tone civil. “Sir, I can find out who’s behind this. Just let me do my thing, work my connections, go on the hunt. I’ll take care of it. Quick and clean.”

“Might be a good idea, boss,” said Tony, who was one of those people who had no common sense to keep his nose out of other people’s conversations.

Jason sensed a bad moon arising as he watched Cassidy’s cool gaze slide over to the agent. The same warning that flickered in her eyes yesterday returned, only this time it was directed at the rookie.

He cleared his throat, “Uh, Tony, I don’t think now—”

“I’m just saying,” continued Tony, stacking some papers together on his desk. “Look at what happens whenever she’s assigned to a team...”

The shadow over Cassidy’s face deepened, and she locked her gaze on Tony like she would a terrorist or someone trying to take food from her plate.

Jason took a step forward, raising his hands a little. “Why don’t we continue this in—”

“Sure, she can look after herself...”

*Oh, Tony, just shut up,* thought Jason.

“...but can she protect the others? That’s all I’m...”

Tony’s sentence was abruptly cut off when Cassidy delivered a stunning right hook. The agent dropped to his butt, dazed and completely taken aback.

No one needed to restrain Cassidy, though. She didn’t continue throttling him. She remained where she was, drilling him with a lethal glare. “*I could give you a thrashing if I really wanted to, punk,*” said her expression, “*but you’re not worth the effort.*”

“Never question my loyalty to my people,” she said, clipping her words and pointing at him.

Braxton hooked a hand under Tony’s arm and pulled him to his feet. “Get up.”

Tony swayed a little unsteadily as he gingerly rubbed his jaw. “I was just saying—”  
“Well, maybe if you did a little less saying and a little more thinking,” chided Braxton, directing him towards the door, “you wouldn’t be going to see the doc right now.”

Jason snuck a sidelong glance at Cassidy. She was glowering and looking apologetic over her actions. But only a little. She did, however, bite her lip as she wondered whether this incident would be put into her file, too.

After Tony was gone, Braxton leveled a sharp look at Cassidy that read something like, “*I’ll pretend I didn’t see that this time but get yourself together.*”

“Anyway,” he continued. “Cassidy, you and Jason are now, what you call, partners.”  
“What?” they exclaimed in unison.

The chief, feeling a little tired of his agents for the moment, shrugged and headed for his office. “Deal with it.”

Jason turned to Cassidy, now frowning. He could almost see the little black storm cloud over her head unleashing thunder and lightning.

“So, what do you want to do to kill time?” he asked.

Cassidy’s bottom jaw stuck out.

“Are you hungry?”

“No.”

When Jason gave her a look, she insisted, “I’m not! I’d rather go to the first crime scene.”

“And what makes you think you’ll be any help there?”

Cassidy turned and fully faced him, and her hands went to her hips.

*Oh, boy, here it comes! Change the subject to avoid any possible bodily damage,* screamed a thought through his mind.

“Fine,” began Jason, trying to think of a different approach that would make things easier for both of them. “If food isn’t appealing, then maybe you’d like to go unload a few hundred rounds into targets at the gun range?”

The suggestion definitely drew response and a positive one, at that. Mild surprise formed on her face, and he watched her expression soften a few seconds later. Now, he realized, he was speaking her language.

Jason crossed his arms and dipped his head a moment before leaning closer.

“And may I suggest you try *not* looking at your fellow colleagues as adversaries,” he said quietly. “Not everyone is against you. Believe it or not, some of us can be trusted.”

She studied him, gauging the sincerity of his words. But his proximity and the way he was looking at her with those blue eyes made Cassidy uneasy. This time she looked away first.

“Fine,” she said. “Quick bite to eat and then the range.”

*Might be therapeutic to shoot a few terrorists,* she thought.

Jason nodded, and they headed for the door.

“Besides,” he continued, “when was the last time you ate? You disappear when you turn sideways.”

In actuality, Cassidy couldn’t remember the last time she had eaten, which wasn’t uncommon. It came with uncertain schedules. Plus, she had more important things on her mind than the frivolous necessity of eating—not that she was going to admit that little fact.

“I didn’t realize you were paying close attention, pal,” she countered. “And I’ve always been lean. So, sue me.”

Jason rolled his eyes, knowing the progress they had just made ten seconds ago had been erased. *And we’re right back to where we started.*

“Hold up a sec!”

They stopped and half turned as Braxton marched up to them with a freshly printed but folded document in hand. “This just came in,” he said, handing it to Cassidy, “from your CIA friends. It’s an assignment.”

“How exactly is that going to work if we’re partners?” asked Jason.

“You aren’t going on the mission,” replied Braxton.

That brought visible relief to Cassidy. She then turned her attention to the document, eyeing it almost hungrily.

“I was assured this is the only item on her plate,” he continued. “Apparently, it’s important enough to deal with now. After this, she’s back stateside where you two get to spend time together. I reminded them it looked like someone was targeting her and her team, but, like I’m really going to tangle with the CIA?”

Braxton settled a look on Cassidy. “Jason is the best at what he does. He’s protected hundreds of witnesses.”

“You haven’t gotten anyone killed, though, have you?” Cassidy asked Jason under her breath.

“Why would you be worried?” he fired back. “You’re plenty able with a gun.”

“Alright, alright,” interjected Braxton. “Just get through today without hurting or killing each other.”

He turned his attention back to Jason. “Take her to a secondary location until it’s time for her to leave.”

Cassidy’s mood soured again. *So much for the range.*

“I’ll have to go grab a few things from my apartment,” she mumbled, expression the epitome of distaste.

“Of course. Just let me know when you reach the safehouse.” Braxton turned back to his office.

“Yes, sir,” answered Jason.

He looked back to Cassidy who frowned at him. It was then Jason decided that this was going to be a very long assignment.

## Chapter 4

### Not Easy Friends

They returned to the apartment complex just after noon, and the atmosphere felt heavy as the gray clouds pressed against the earth.

“What floor do you live on?” asked Jason, glancing at the four-story building.

“Three.”

They started up the grate stairs when something on the second level caught Cassidy’s attention. She glanced at the next flight, then down the tunnel-like breezeway on her left.

“Keep going up the next flight of stairs,” she whispered.

“But...”

“What? You’re a big, strong agent. You can take ‘em,” said Cassidy, giving him an encouraging slap on the arm before turning and walking briskly down the breezeway.

“That’s not...” Jason pinched the bridge of his nose.

Two rogues working together had to be as brilliant of an idea as tossing a grenade up a steep hill.

He took the stairs to the third level. What little light there was faded when something slammed into him. Back hitting the wall, Jason managed to wrestle the attacker off him and restore a little space with a powerful kick. That was when he saw the glint of something metallic.

Jason reacted swiftly. Latching onto the hand holding the gun, he brought his knee up hard and fast, slamming it into the assailant’s stomach. He was a stubborn bugger, though, and didn’t let go of the weapon.

Before Jason could repeat his maneuver, the man socked him smartly in the side and grunted when he landed a second blow. Jason kicked him in the knee, making something crack.

That did the trick. The assailant dropped to one knee where Jason introduced his fist to the man’s face. With that swing, the threat was neutralized and unconscious.

He took the man's firearm, released the magazine, and ejected the round from the chamber. He was contemplating where he was going to secure this weapon when Cassidy crested the stairs.

Someone grabbed her from behind, but quick as a flash, Cassidy threw her elbow into his chest. The moment he began to step back, she proceeded to elbow him in the face. Going with the momentum, she turned and punched the daylights out of him. It was over, just like that.

Jason was impressed. He had to keep reminding himself that Cassidy was trained.

They met in front of her apartment, and he noted the splintered doorframe.

"Landlord had to take a sledgehammer to it," she explained.

With a little shoving, the door opened.

The apartment was clean and organized, unlike Jason's. He wasn't a complete slob, but neither was he this neat. Within two minutes, Cassidy had her things packed in a small duffel and a backpack.

At the car, Jason said, "I should probably drive since I know where we're going."

Cassidy gave him a "yeah, right" look as she tossed her duffel into the trunk.

Jason didn't budge on the matter.

"Come on," he pressed with arm extended and palm up. "Let's have the keys."

*This isn't going to become a habit*, thought Cassidy as she tossed them to him.

Minutes later, they sped down the freeway. "Didn't your parents ever tell you to play nice with others or at least respect your elders?"

Cassidy snorted. "Elders?"

She raised her eyebrows. "You consider yourself my elder?"

"Technically, I'm older than you."

"Yeah," she laughed, "by, like, four years. Big whoop. And besides, you don't exactly play nice, either."

"You didn't answer my question."

"I thought it was rhetorical."

Jason sent her another correcting glance.

“You give everyone that look?” asked Cassidy.

“No, I think it’s one I’ll reserve just for you,” he replied.

She sighed and slouched in the seat. “Do we *have* to talk about this stuff? Because I don’t think you genuinely care.”

“If I didn’t care, I wouldn’t have asked,” countered Jason. “Besides, wasn’t it you who said it’s wise to know the people you work with?”

This was one of those times where a previously smart remark had come back to bite Cassidy in the butt. She absolutely *hated* when that happened.

She crossed her arms. “What do you think you’re going to learn about me by asking about my parents? You a psychologist or something?”

“Good grief,” sighed Jason. “It’s just a simple question, Cassidy. Why are you making things so difficult, anyway?”

“Fine,” she said, snapping her head around to look at him. “My mom died young, would have been the cancer but the terrorists got her first. And my dad...just...he’s dead.”

Jason cringed for pressing the issue. “Sorry,” he apologized quietly.

Cassidy merely gave a light shrug, and no anger marked her expression or tone. “I make a big deal about things like that because...I just don’t like people knowing my personal business. And it’s safer for everyone.”

“Fair enough.”

She visibly relaxed upon hearing him agree to drop the matter.

Silence settled over the car for the next half hour of driving. As they approached the countryside, Jason asked, “Want to stop for some snacks or something?”

“Sounds good.”

They walked out of the next gas station with a small bag of junk food.

“Great, this is just what I need,” said Cassidy, opening a bag of Doritos, “especially when sitting in a car for who knows how many more hours.”

“I think you can afford it,” replied Jason, sneaking a chip from the bag and popping it into his mouth.

Cassidy went for her Dr. Pepper and tried to open it but the cap was unreasonably stubborn.

“Want me to, uh...”

“Please.”

She handed it to Jason who twisted it open with ease and handed it back to her. Cassidy took the bottle and cap and looked from one to the other. “I just loosened it for you.”

Jason coughed out a chuckle as he put the car in gear and pulled back onto the road. He had gone through a couple more chips when an impressive belch came from the other side of the car. At least Cassidy had attempted to be polite by keeping her mouth clamped shut, but she paid a price.

Jason had a good laugh as Cassidy pinched her nose, and her eyes watered. “Ow,” she said, chuckling despite herself, “that’s what you get for being polite. Man, that burns.”

Wiping the tears from her eyes, she shot a look at Jason. “I’m glad you found that entertaining.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t just let ‘er rip,” he said. “You know, to establish your dominance.”

Cassidy blew through her lips. “I did that back when I took out that silver car.”

“What?” asked Jason. “If I recall, I was the one who was doing the precision driving.”

“Have you ever accurately fired out of a vehicle moving at a high rate of speed and swerving all over the place? And that wasn’t precision driving. That was more like...convulsive jerking.”

“Smart Alec.”

Cassidy let a breath pass between them before saying, “I still don’t like this arrangement. I’m telling you that on my own I can find whoever’s responsible a lot faster than an entire division. Besides, there’s almost always someone trying to kill me.”

“Speaking of killing,” said Jason, “what’s your Agency assignment? I know, I know, you can’t tell me details, but is there anything I need to do?”



“Killing?” Cassidy made a *tsk* sound with her tongue. “Is that all you think the CIA does? And your task is very simple: you wait here, I go, come back, and then we solve a case.”

“You’re headed overseas, then?” inquired Jason.

“Since the Agency doesn’t have jurisdiction to execute operations within the United States, the answer would be ‘yes.’”

“How long will this take?”

“A few days. Just wrapping up my role.”

Jason took another road that directed them deeper into the hills.

Cassidy crammed several chips into her mouth. “You’ve been doing government work for what? Ten years or so?”

“Twelve,” nodded Jason. “Did an internship senior year of college and was offered a position. You?”

“I think I’ve been at it about a decade, tack on a few more years if you want to count the unofficial work I did with my dad.”

“Didn’t you start with the NSA or something?”

That made Cassidy smile. “Contrary to the rumors, it wasn’t the NSA. I saddled up with an experimental sister group of the Defense Intelligence Agency.”

She huffed through her nose. “Me and my big ideas.”

“Didn’t go well?”

“Oh no,” she said, looking out her window. “It went very well, actually.”

Apparently, Cassidy didn’t want to discuss that subject in depth, so Jason dropped the topic. Since she was feeling so talkative, though, he figured he should take advantage of the opportunity.

“Can I ask you another question?”

“If you must,” she said flatly, obviously wishing he would stop talking altogether.

“Does it bother you,” he asked, “you know, the violence involved in your work and...the other stuff?”

“Like killing, you mean?” she clarified.

"I saw the, uh, Bible in your apartment and I assumed..."

Cassidy gave a nod and jumped to his point for him. "You're wondering about the whole 'turning the other cheek' thing? If, as a Christian, I'm supposed to love my enemies, does it bother me that I've ended up killing some very bad men?"

"Well...yes."

"I will answer that question with another question: do you think evil men should be allowed to roam around, doing whatever they want without facing the consequences?"

She glanced at him. "That was rhetorical, by the way. First, there is killing and then there is murder, though people throw around the two words like they're interchangeable when they aren't necessarily."

"Right," said Jason with a nod. "Like when people misquote the sixth Commandment: do not kill."

"Exactly. The original text writes, 'do no murder.' Anyway, no, it doesn't bother me. Now if the situation is someone insulting you, that's entirely different. Then the whole 'turn the other cheek' thing is applicable. Now, what changes things is when my rival is coming at me with the intention of killing me. My conscience is clear because I do not kill with malicious intent. I don't like to do it, but sometimes it's the only way to protect innocent people from being massacred. Often, when you're dealing with evil men, especially those in the occult, they give you no other choice. It's either you or them."

Cassidy blew through her lips. "I mean, sure it would be nice if we could all get along and hold hands and sing. But in this world, there is always going to be at least one person or one group vying for power and total control, people who will destroy anyone who gets in their way. And other people create chaos just for the fun of it."

Jason started a little when she suddenly twisted in her seat to look at him.

"And are we just supposed to let evil men walk all over us? How about getting away with slaughtering thousands of people? Scripture itself has very harsh words about injustice, about letting evil men walk away free and oppressing the innocent."

Cassidy spoke with her hands now, flailing them around for emphasis. "Yes! Please! Kick down my door and come on in! Massacre my family and do whatever vile things you want because we're just going to take it all lying down!"

Then she pointed at him. "There are situations that call for 'turning the other cheek', but may God judge me ever so severely if I do whatever I have to, to keep my people safe or to stop an attack that will wipe out masses of innocent people. While God is love and merciful and compassionate, He's also a lover of justice. Sometimes He executes it Himself. Other times He uses other people."

Cassidy took a breath and was about to add something but stopped herself and clamped her mouth shut.

"What?" he asked. "I agree with everything you've said, so you're in good company."

Instead, Cassidy shook her head and took another sip of Dr. Pepper.

They kept up light, sporadic conversation as dusk fell over the hills before silence completely settled in again. The next time Jason glanced over at Cassidy, he saw she was asleep, slumped awkwardly against the door.

Returning his gaze to the road, pavement illuminated by the headlights, his thoughts kept him company as the hours stretched on. He wondered where all this was leading: the assassinations of Cassidy's team, the murder of their liaison, and the attempted murder of Cassidy herself.

Jason scowled. How serious was this whole situation going to get? Of course, he realized, he probably could have avoided all of this if he hadn't gone into work on a day off in the first place.



The car bounced as it went over the pothole-covered gravel road. Evidently, no one had bothered to grade or smooth it in the past decade.

At the next hole, the car bottomed out, scraping against the ground.

Cassidy shot awake and ready for action.

“Sorry,” said Jason. “The road looks like it was caught in the middle of a mortar attack.”

Cassidy brushed the loose strands of hair from her eyes as a small house appeared around the next bend. The lights were on inside, but no other vehicles were parked out front.

Something about it gave Jason pause.

Cassidy eyed the place suspiciously then glanced into the woods surrounding their vehicle.

Jason caught a glimpse of a dark figure outside Cassidy’s door a second before she threw it open and knocked someone to the ground. She was on him instantly with gun drawn.

“Easy!” said the man, hands raised.

“Who are you?” she growled.

“Special Agent Greene.”

Cassidy kept the gun trained on him a second longer before holstering it. “Get up.”

Jason had his door open and his arm resting on the roof of the car. If Cassidy wasn’t mistaken, he was grinning.

“What are *you* smiling at?” she scowled, closing the passenger door.

“Sorry if I startled you,” said Greene.

Cassidy mumbled a response before he and Jason exchanged quick hellos. She surveyed the dark forest. A gust of wind rolled through the trees. It pulled at her clothes and brought a chill that had nothing to do with the cool evening.

Jason got back in the car and parked in front of the house. Cassidy reached him just as he was opening the trunk. He pulled out her duffel, and she snatched it from him as she continued mumbling.

Jason tried not to smile.

As Cassidy tromped into the house, Greene looked at Jason. “Got a lively one, huh?”

“Well, you know that saying,” chuckled Jason. “Dynamite comes in small packages.”

Once everyone was inside, Greene introduced them to the second agent, Thomas Byrd. Neither Green nor Byrd had received the memo that Cassidy would, in fact, be leaving.

*Figures, thought Byrd. I could have spent the night watching the game with a few beers.*

Jason contacted Braxton and asked if they had received any new information on the murders. No, nothing useful yet. The agent on Cassidy’s team, who had suffered an apparent heart attack while running, was found to have small traces of poison in his system. The second agent was said to have accidentally fallen from the balcony of the five-story building he lived in.

During the conversation with Braxton, Jason frequently glanced at Cassidy.

She had planted herself on the old couch in the rustic living room and placed her feet on the old coffee table. The sofa practically swallowed her. The entire time he spoke with the chief, she messed with her cell phone.

He shrugged. Who knew what she was doing?

Agents Greene and Byrd sat in chairs at one end of the coffee table and played poker.

When Jason finished talking with Braxton, he sat down on the couch with Cassidy. He quickly relayed the information from the chief to Cassidy, who continued playing with her phone.

Finally, Cassidy stuck it in her coat pocket. “They’re going up the chain of command, like I said earlier.”

Jason looked at her.

“The ambush in Africa was to take out as many agents as possible, if not the entire team. Now, whoever is behind it is going after those of us who survived. Gregg Bennett would be considered the ‘rookie’ of the remaining unit. He’s the one with the least experience. Marty Sharp was a level above him...”

Jason nodded. "How many agents are left besides you?"

"Two."

He frowned.

Cassidy glanced at her watch and, after a brief struggle, managed to escape from the couch's grasp. She then grabbed the small black backpack that she had retrieved sometime when Jason hadn't noticed.

"I need to head out," she said.

"Already?" asked Jason. "We literally just got here."

Cassidy shrugged as he tossed her the keys.

He frowned. "I'm glad we wasted an entire afternoon driving out here. We probably could have just driven in circles around the city all day instead."

"We're government employees," put in Greene. "Wasting time is what we do."

Cassidy huffed a laugh. "Okay. I'll be back soon."

"Right," replied Jason, expression clouding.

"I will."

"How do you know for sure?"

Cassidy stopped with her hand on the doorknob and half-turned. She easily read the doubt on his face.

She sent him a "you worry too much" look and replied aloud with, "See you later."

And then she was out the door and into the darkness.

## Chapter 5

### Revenge

Gazing down disappointedly at the subject, he stripped off his bloodied latex gloves before turning and tossing them into a large open trashcan.

“The incubation period still isn’t long enough,” he said, tearing off the gore-covered scrubs and throwing them away, also. His face shield followed.

“Not long enough?” came a voice through a speaker. “We’re at eight days.”

He stepped through the automatic door into the decontamination chamber, which hissed and sealed shut. He closed his eyes as an impressive blast of air roared over him. Thirty seconds later, the air stopped, and the second door unlocked.

He pushed through it and joined his assistant at a long counter lined with monitors. “Yes, not long enough,” he continued, looking through the large window into the autopsy room where the subject, another human corpse, lay on a metal table.

“Fourteen days is the goal,” he explained, typing some notes into the computer in front of him. “The longer we have until the initial outbreak, the more people we can infect before someone catches on...I’ve told you this already.”

“It’s already disguised, quite well I might add, as a flu virus,” reminded the assistant.

“And, yet,” said the boss, saving his notes and sending the document to his phone. “I’m the one signing your checks.”

“Understood.”

“Get the cleanup crew in there and have them toss the body into the furnace after nightfall. I should have the necessary modifications by tomorrow, then we can arrange for more trials.”

“See you tomorrow, then.”

The boss turned and walked briskly out of the room. A narrow concrete tunnel led him straight fifty meters before running into a steep staircase. He climbed to the top of

the dozen stairs, swiped his access card, punched in the code, and then pushed the heavy metal door open.

Muggy evening air greeted him, and a blustery wind danced about him during his short trek across the scrubby landscape to a small house. He went through a side door and charged up the stairs.

The entire second level presented as a large, single room bordered by dry erase boards on the wall nearest the stairs and to the left. Computers and several large monitors took up the opposite wall. This allowed for light to stream through the large windows on the far wall.

He tossed his phone onto the desk in the center of the room and shrugged off his coat. After pulling up viral simulations and animated DNA projections on the monitors, he crossed to the boards covered with formulas and equations.

He stood there for some time, letting his restless mind work over everything. Occasionally, he spun and marched to the computers, altered a code or equation, and ran a simulation.

The sun sank below the western horizon and twilight had fallen over the land before he realized it. He had been up for twenty straight hours and had yet to feel tired.

In the past week, he had attacked his work with new urgency. He only managed a few hours of sleep a night, but even then, he didn't feel drained. In fact, with every passing day, he was becoming more energized. This allowed for great amounts of progress.

He walked back to the table, where a crinkled photograph lie taped in the middle. And it had all been made possible because of the person in the picture. This large plan didn't revolve exclusively around her. She had merely inspired him to develop this plan and so-happened to fit into it perfectly.

He glared at the photo, feeling warm anger churn through him. With a growl, he ripped it off the table and stormed to the windows. His fingers dug into the paper, adding new creases.



Oh, did they have a history. She was the only one who had crossed him, thwarted his plans, and was still breathing. He had hunted down and destroyed everyone else. Any person who ever stood in his way met a slow, agonizing end because, well, he had always had a fascination with pain and suffering.

But this woman...

He crumpled the picture in one hand. Three times they had met, and three times she frustrated his schemes. And every encounter was the equivalent of having an arrow in his side turned slowly deeper.

When he recalled every word she spoke during their encounters, his stomach burned with malice. When he remembered every subtle facial expression that tripped across her face, his chest tightened and filled with heat. And when he thought about her fearlessness and almost mockery as she frustrated his long-laid plans, the inextinguishable flame of hate consumed his soul.

She hadn't just stopped him. There was something different about this opponent; she was truly unafraid of him despite his reputation. She wasn't scared off or deterred, no matter how bad things became. She just strove harder, relentlessly like a wolf that tasted human blood and wouldn't stop killing until it was killed. She was driven by something deeper, something...spiritual. And he recognized her as a legitimate threat.

Their last encounter left him plotting her slow but epic demise. Shortly after, he had been given a new idea for slaughtering millions of people, and it distracted him.

Until last week. He couldn't tell if it was some kind of irritating divine intervention or the darkness aligning itself because she suddenly popped up on his radar. She and her team had nearly walked into one of his former testing facilities in Somalia. He found out a couple of days before they were supposed to move on the facility and made plans accordingly. As a result, he was all but consumed with malice for this scum of a human being.

He allowed himself a twisted little smile. It was funny what money could buy: a rebel militia group or informants inside the FBI who had information on his target and could keep an eye on her.

He had already figured out how he was going to kill her. Like the climactic ending of a thriller novel, he could picture it and visualize how every detail would play out. Now it was just a matter of writing each step that would lead to her death.

He often let his mind wander through all the different ways he could kill her. The possibilities were endless. Capture and torture? How about a slow death via some horrific disease?

As much as he loved that idea, he would have to keep to the original plan.

A thrill of anticipation ran down his spine as he looked out the windows. It was dark, so the employees would be firing up the furnace to begin burning the corpse. No one passing by would be able to see the plumes of smoke under the cover of night.

Every last person on the staff would end up in the incinerator within the next week. Everything would be cleaned up and burned out, and he would be long gone before anyone came upon this place.

With cool gray eyes, he glanced down at the photo in his hand...a picture of Cassidy Jackson.

## Chapter 6

### A Reminder & a Connection

*“India and Bravo have secured the first package! Who has eyes on the second?”*

*“He’s running north. Swahili Street! Heading for the market!”*

Cassidy caught a glimpse of him as she skidded out of the alley, streets wet from the intermittent thunderstorms sightseeing over the city. Running down the road, she dodged between the other pedestrians and kept her eyes on the target.

The city swelled with crowds this time of day. However, it was also the best opportunity to grab the people the team had been hunting for months.

The man ducked left into the market.

Cassidy slowed as she reached the corner of the building to make sure he wasn’t lying in wait. Breathing steadily, even after her run, she peered around the corner.

The target slowed to a stop at the first vendor and looked around for his pursuers. When none immediately jumped out at him, he turned and began walking more calmly down the road.

“He’s walking through the market now,” reported Cassidy quietly. “Still heading north.”

She walked down another row of vendors parallel to the target, staying twenty feet behind and to his right.

The target stopped abruptly, his attention drawn to something off his left shoulder.

Cassidy heard the agent codenamed Yankee swear through her earpiece. *“It’s local military. They’re headed right for the plaza.”*

The target took off again.

Cassidy followed.

*“I see you, Sierra. I’ll try to flank him from the left.”*

Shouts came from behind her, and she glanced over her shoulder. The local military had stopped their truck at the edge of the market and were piling out. She looked at the target, who had also checked on their position.

He turned back around and collided head-on with a police officer.

Reacting without thinking, the target punched him, wrestled his firearm from him, and shot him. That was more than enough to draw the attention of the military personnel, and they spotted him before he disappeared down another alley.

“The target is now armed,” said Cassidy, giving way to the chase again. “Heading east down Pemba.”

She passed the road he had turned down and made for the next alley on the right. She didn’t want to be directly behind him and in a line of sight or fire. The target was still in flight mode and reacting instead of thinking.

Cassidy kicked it into high gear down the side street, mindful of the random stacks of crates. She could have done without the hot, muggy air that made her clothes cling to her. But then again, what did one expect in a city built on the edge of the Indian Ocean?

*“Where’s our ride located?”* asked Yankee.

*“Lumumba Street,”* came the response.

*“Guys, can we grab him by then?”*

“No problem,” breathed Cassidy.

She rocketed out of the alley and across the road. The target was half a dozen strides ahead of her now. That was when he spotted Charlie, coming from his right. He skittered to a stop and wheeled around, searching for a hideout.

The instant he turned, Cassidy stopped and crouched behind a car in the long string of vehicles in the crowded street. It was difficult to stop on a dime because of her forward momentum. But the car was able to remedy that as she rammed into it.

This odd behavior earned some looks from bystanders, but she didn’t care about them. She peeked over the vehicle in time to see the target run into a store. Charlie was right behind him with Yankee on his heels.

Cassidy jogged across the road and into the alley beside the building. The next street was Lumumba, so they had to make sure they took custody of their target.

*“Sierra, I’m on the south side of the building the package ran into,”* said Echo.

*“What’s your twenty?”*

*“Alley, north side near the pickup location,”* replied Cassidy, stepping out onto the sidewalk and studying the front of the building.

*“Watch him!”* shouted Charlie.

*“Down!”*

She heard the gunshots outside the building, as could the pedestrians.

*“He’s headed upstairs!”*

*“I’ll take the other set and we’ll cut him off!”*

The people exchanged looks and slowly began moving away from the structure, especially after Cassidy grabbed one of the exterior support beams and began scaling it.

*Ow, ow, ow, hot!*

Once atop the awning, she climbed onto the ledge that ran along the second-story windows. When she looked inside, she saw straight down the main hall which led to the stairs. The window was an old, single pane of glass, and Cassidy had no trouble kicking it out.

Not seconds later, their target stumbled up the stairs, and she ducked out of view.

Charlie came down the hall on the left, but when their man rounded the corner, he doubled back, completely oblivious to the fact he had a gun in his hand. Yankee came up the same stairs the target had, and the man backpedaled.

There was no time for a standoff, though. Someone grabbed the target from behind, pulled him out a broken window, and tossed him to the sidewalk where Echo waited.

Cassidy climbed down as their ride arrived.

Echo shoved their target, now complete with a cloth bag over his head, into the backseat. He and Cassidy climbed in and positioned themselves on either side of him.

Yankee and Charlie hopped into a second car, and they disappeared into afternoon traffic.

“Nice trick back there,” said Echo, still panting lightly from the run and excitement. He was a British native and had an Essex accent to match.

Cassidy chuckled as she pulled the solid tan tactical scarf from her face. She rubbed her eyes and would be glad when she could finally remove the colored contacts.

“Thanks. Took a long time to perfect.”

The sun found a break in the clouds and burned brightly as they turned onto the main road that hugged the coastline. The light made the thunderheads over the city of Dar es Salaam brood in even darker, more ominous contrast.

“Who are you people?” asked their target.

“Shut it,” chided Echo. “I don’t want to talk to you, yet.”

He and Cassidy glanced at the man between them then exchanged a look. He was visibly shaking already, and they surmised their conversation would be short and fruitful.

They stopped on the outskirts of the city as thunder rolled around in the sky. A humid breeze sprang up, bringing mixed scents of desert, rain, and saltwater.

They transferred their target to a small, abandoned tin-roofed house. It didn’t have air conditioning, but the ocean view was a good consolation prize.

Echo shoved their man into a chair in the open area between the kitchen and living room. He then yanked the sack from his head.

“Hello, Omar,” said Cassidy, scarf back in place over her nose. The man didn’t need to see her face to know she was smiling. He heard it in her voice and saw it in her brown eyes.

He was the new number-two guy in an al Shabab splinter cell. He had first popped up on their radar in Syria. Shortly after moving to Lebanon, he became close to Hezbollah leadership.

He knew people, had access to future plans, and they wanted what was in his head. But he vanished shortly after a string of small strikes on Israel and before they could nab him. They had spent eight months tracking Omar, gathering intelligence, and

working informants. And wouldn't you know it? He popped up on the grid in Tanzania last week.

"I swear I don't know anything!" he exclaimed, holding his hands up with palms out.

Echo laughed as he walked into the kitchen behind Omar. "My friend, if you knew nothing, you wouldn't be here."

He pulled open a drawer, retrieved a file, and then returned.

"So, how's working for al Shabab going for you?" asked Cassidy, stepping over to the ancient wooden table. She started to lean on it but stopped when she saw the surface.

"Man," she whined, wiping her hand over the top. "They forgot to clean up from the last interrogation."

Omar's eyes couldn't have grown any wider when he saw the table stained with semi-dried blood.

Echo sighed. "How many times do we have to remind them?"

Of course, it wasn't real blood, and they didn't truly use such gruesome interrogation tactics. Usually or officially. It was all for the psychological effect and the impact it had on their target. It worked quite well.

Omar looked from Cassidy to Echo.

"I tell you, Ali is the boss here," he pleaded. "He's the one who plans the attacks. It was his idea to blow the pipeline. I just moved here—"

"Yes, from Lebanon," nodded Echo, gesturing with the file. "Hezbollah probably kept you pretty busy, eh? Then I see you made a few stops in Iraq to attack NATO and US forces. Then you hopped down to Egypt where you began your little trip south and ended up right here. Seems you gave yourself plenty to do along the way."

"I did not plan anything," implored Omar. "I had nothing to do with the two attacks in Iraq. I was already in Cairo!"

"Come on," said Cassidy, turning to Echo. "Let's just get to what and who he knows. I'm hungry and want to wrap this up so I can eat lunch. Jumper cables are in the closet..."

“No, no please!” Omar looked like he was about to wet himself. He slid to the edge of the chair and almost to his knees. “Look, yes, I can tell you some things. Yes? I know who planned the attack on NATO forces and built the bombs.”

He scooted forward a little more. “And, and who attacked the American outpost in Somalia!”

Now that grabbed Cassidy’s attention. She and Echo shared a look before he asked, “What do you *think* you know about Somalia?”

“I have a friend close to one of the rebel groups there,” replied Omar, only so happy to answer. “They were hired to ambush the Americans. They don’t know the man, but he worked nearby or...how you say? Something like that?”

“That’s it?” asked Echo, feigning disappointment.

“He said there was supposed to be a special forces, black ops team, or something to help the spies,” blurted Omar. “But said he’d take care of it.”

Echo gave a slight nod before turning and stepping outside the house to make a call.

Omar shifted uncomfortably under the relentless gaze of this other agent standing there, arms crossed. He only knew she was a she because of her voice. Her clothes gave no hints, and the tactical scarf covered her entire torso.

The sound of the backdoor opening drew Cassidy’s attention and Omar had just flinched forward to make a move for her. But the feel of a cool blade against his throat brought him to an instant stop.

He had never seen the knife in her hand nor had he seen her draw it.

“Whoa,” she said coolly in Levantine Arabic. “Where are you going?”

Omar slowly sat back down as Charlie and Yankee appeared from the back of the living room. They were exchanging nods when Echo returned.

“For you,” he said, handing a satellite phone to Cassidy.

She took her leave and stood looking out over the ocean. “Jackson.”

“*I’m told our friend had a little information on the ambush of your FBI team in Somalia,*” said a familiar voice.



Cassidy couldn't keep from smiling. "That's correct, boss."

*"We assumed as much. Our people on the ground there noted a connection to Omar, though he wasn't directly involved. What he told you was confirmed. A single male paid a rebel group to plant the explosives. We don't have a name yet, and all we know about him is he's Caucasian, middle-aged, gray eyes, dark hair."*

That triggered a memory in the back of her mind, but she couldn't pin it down at the moment. Her brain was going a hundred miles an hour processing other things. "So, this assignment had two purposes. The first was to close this part of the case, apprehend the man we've been tracking for a year. The second..."

*"Yes, was to get you some raw intel on the ambush. There's actually a third purpose, and it's just a simple reminder of what you're missing. When you're ready to come back to the Agency and work for someone who will actually let you off your leash, just let me know."*

That made Cassidy's smile broaden. Undoubtedly, Agency life overseas fitted her much better than cases involving domestic affairs. Her former boss fully understood because he had been the one to pick her for the experimental DIA program.

"Always appreciate it."

*"Take care of yourself, kid. I hear someone's going after the rest of your team."*

As if in response, the sun disappeared, and thunder growled close by. Darkness settled over Cassidy's face as a humid breeze tugged at her clothes. "Don't worry, sir. You know I don't go down without putting up one heck of a fight."