

Tuesday, June 23, 2015, 1530 hours local time, off the coast of Somalia

The sudden push of acceleration meant trouble—maybe.

Crouched over her duffel bag, Doctor Tori Walters paused from gazing at a photo of her and her fiancé.

It didn't repeat, so she shrugged and returned to packing. Two more days. Then she'd be off the South African hospital ship *Peacemaker* and in his arms. She placed the picture in her duffel and reached for another one.

She rose and pulled several books from the shelves above her desk. Most went into a cardboard box. A few would go into her other duffel. She gathered several more photos. Mom with her as a child. Had she lived, Mom would have been so proud of her. With her brother, George, when he'd visited her while in college. Dad and her stepmother, Elizabeth, at her graduation from medical school.

Her phone chirped.

She snagged it from her desk and resumed her crouch as she read through the text. "Sweetie, just got off the phone. Will be unable to travel with E and J to Cape Town due to closing on a business. Will see you when you arrive in Charleston. Dad."

"Figures," she muttered. "Business once more supersedes daughter. Why should I be surprised?"

Jesus's words regarding serving God or money flew through her mind. She reached up to put her phone on the desk.

The ship made a hard turn to port. The floor tilted, and she grabbed the edge of the desk to keep from tumbling face first onto her bags. What was

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going on? It evened out. She shrugged and picked up another picture, this one of Jake and her from the night they'd gotten engaged almost nine months before. Both wore wide smiles. Then came ones of her with her half-sisters. She placed her Bible on top and left it unzipped before turning to her clothing.

The ship rolled again, this time to starboard.

She lost her balance and fell onto her rump. Pain blazed up her spine. "Ow!"

What on earth? She hauled herself to her feet, threw open the door to her cabin, and stumbled into the hall. As the ship came back to port, she staggered into a wall. Somehow, she pushed through the crowd and made it to midships where the main stairs and elevator were.

Klaus, one of the radar men, bolted up the steps from the level below and nearly knocked her off her feet. "Sorry! Sorry!"

"Easy there, little brother." The ship heaved toward starboard, and she grabbed the railing to avoid running into some of the crew who dashed downward. "What's going on?"

The klaxon that suddenly blared overhead and the words that followed told it all. "Code Black. Code Black. Enact protocol."

Pirate attack.

The hallway came to life as the crew and medical personnel began running to their assigned stations.

"Come with me!" Klaus shouted.

At least that's what she thought he said over the electronic shriek.

He grabbed her arm and dragged her up the steps to the next level. He bolted into the hot afternoon.

Even from where she stood, spray splashed across her face and left in its wake the sharp taste of the beach on her lips. Her eyes watered in the bright light.

He turned to her. "I need your help. Get the hose."

"The what?"

"The hose!" He yanked open a cabinet outside the door leading to the main deck. "Unwind it. Hurry!"

Tori grabbed the wheel of the spool and cranked it until its entire length had come loose from the spindle.

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Klaus snatched up the nozzle. “Turn the water on. That red wheel there. Now!”

Tori spun it to the left.

Like it gained mythical life, the hose filled and threatened to come out of Klaus’s hands.

She hugged it to stabilize it. Now she realized their precarious situation. A speedboat had pulled to within yards of the ship’s port side.

Pirates.

Klaus aimed the stream in their direction. It seemed to work by keeping them away.

Temporarily.

Yellow points of light flashed from the boat. Bullets pinged around them.

Klaus flinched “Get down!”

Tori fell to her knees but refused to relinquish her grip on the bucking canvas tube.

Men shouted above the noise of gunfire and the water spurting out.

Klaus cried out. He dropped the hose and fell to the deck with his hand covering his chest.

The hose jerked free and writhed like a sea snake.

“Klaus! No!” She crawled forward and cringed as more bullets popped and sparked against the metal. The fusillade ceased. She risked an upward glance.

“Oh, no.”

Grappling hooks clanged against the railing. Then came the bang of an aluminum extension ladder as their attackers bridged the chasm.

She reached for the hose.

“Tori, it’s too late.” Using the wall of the dining hall, Klaus hauled himself to his feet and left a streak of scarlet along the white paint. “We must get inside. Hurry!”

They dashed into the shadow of the ship’s superstructure. She shrieked as more bullets bit into metal behind her.

Wheezing, he collapsed. “Tori, the gate.”

“What?”

“Get the gate!”

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Inklings of the drills they'd run after leaving South Asia flew through her mind. She snatched the padlock from where it hung on the gate's hasp. With a great heave, she yanked the grate of iron bars from its clip and slammed it across the doorway leading to the outside. She shoved the padlock closed before yanking on it. Secure.

She fell to her knees.

Gasping, Klaus slumped against the wall. Blood had seeped between his fingers and stained his white uniform shirt. Blue tinged his features, and he panted as if he couldn't get enough air into his lungs.

"Klaus!" She crawled to his side. Panting. Pain. Pneumothorax. Those words swept through Tori's brain. "Your lung is collapsing. If we don't do something about it, you'll die. I need to get you to the OR."

"Get...to...your cabin," he wheezed. "Go!"

"No, I—"

"Go!"

A shadow crossed them.

Her stomach dropped. Two pirates, both armed with rifles, blocked the afternoon sun. One of them rattled the gate. "Undo lock!"

"We... don't have..." Klaus's speech faded.

"We don't have the key." Tori raised her hands.

"Open!"

Would they not understand? "No key! No key!"

The first one jabbered to his buddy in another language. He shouted something.

Tori cringed. Maybe she could escape to the operating room with Klaus. She'd lock the door, then stabilize him. She took his arm.

"No move!" the first one ordered.

She froze.

More yammering followed as another pirate handed them bolt cutters.

She couldn't let them cut the lock. Tori lunged for their tool.

The first one laughed and jabbed her hard in the chest with the muzzle of his rifle.

Pain exploded in her sternum as she stumbled over Klaus and fell heavily onto her side. Whimpering, she pushed herself to a sitting position and stared.

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The lock plunked onto the steel deck. They pushed the gate open.

They were toast. Captured now by the pirates. Three hundred souls. Tori's heart sank as the first one spoke in English into his radio. "We are in."

She clutched Klaus's arm as she rose to a crouch. Rubbing her sternum eased the pain.

Their captors muttered among themselves as they kept their rifles trained on the two hostages.

Silence fell except for the throb of the engines and the hiss of the ship's hull as they cruised through the water.

A fourth man joined them. This one? The way he carried his shoulders told it all. Arrogance. Pure and simple. He wore bandoleers across his chest like a mantle and the turban with its end trailing down his shoulder like a crown. His dark eyes glittered in features that seemed to be carved by God only for those of royalty.

The leader.

He raised his radio to his lips. In precise English, he said, "Captain, we have breeched your defense and have two hostages. You have one minute to open bridge and tell crew to stand down. Starting now."

Lord, this is not how it's supposed to end. The thought raced through Tori's mind. She had so much she wanted to do. So much! She and Jake were supposed to marry in October. She was supposed to start her practice after Labor Day and—

"Forty-five seconds, Captain."

Don't do it, Captain Jameson, she pleaded in her heart. *But do it.* The two sides warred within her.

"Thirty seconds."

She stared at the leader as the words whispered from her heart into her soul blurred too much for her to recognize.

"Fifteen seconds." The leader drew a pearl-handled pistol.

"I will." Those two words, spoken in a crisp, British accent, sealed her fate. The klaxon ceased.

The leader barked orders into his radio.

Klaus moaned and sagged completely onto his side.

Tori's attention immediately snapped to him.

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The blue had spread across his normally ruddy features.

Like a beta dog, she avoided looking directly at the leader. “Sir, with all due respect, he is wounded. I’m a doctor, and I—I need to operate on him. Otherwise, he’ll die.”

The leader pointed his pistol at the radar man. “Then I help.”

“No!” Tori scrambled over Klaus and shielded him. “Let me stabilize him.” She focused on the leader’s feet. “Please, sir. I will stabilize him. That is all.”

“Then we go.” The leader gestured with his pistol.

He snapped something at his men, who nodded and withdrew.

“Hang on, little brother. I’ll help you.” Tori carefully helped Klaus sit up before looping his good arm over her shoulders. She rose, but her knees buckled under his nearly six-one frame. *Lord, please.* They stumbled further into the dim recesses of the ship. Their footfalls echoed as they descended the steps.

Once on the first level belowdecks, Tori’s shoulder where Klaus leaned began hurting. She could have asked the pirate for help. No way, no how. She’d rather collapse in the hallway than appear as a weak and scared hostage to this man.

The leader said something at one of his men, who joined them.

Immediately, the smell of no hygiene and body odor filled her nostrils. Ick. Stinky. What a totally perfect name for him.

She shut out that and their chatter as she hit a button. The door to the prep area for the OR opened. They passed through that and into the OR itself. Her shoulder screamed for relief, and now her knees trembled. Finally, she eased Klaus onto an operating table. She took his hand and brushed a lock of hair from his forehead. “We’re here. Your lung has collapsed. I need to release some of the air in your chest cavity so you can breathe.”

He nodded.

Without wasting any time, she undid his shirt and cut away his undershirt. After donning surgical gloves, she sanitized the skin and injected a local anesthetic. “I’m sorry. This is going to hurt, but it’ll save your life.”

“Do...do...what you must.” Klaus winced.

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Get needle. Insert into chest cavity. Stabilize needle. Stop blood from bullet wound. Her mind flew through the steps of the procedure as she gathered the instruments she'd need.

The leader grabbed her arm. "I told you no operate!"

"If I don't, he dies! It's a procedure not—"

He drew his pistol and pointed it at her forehead. "Do not defy Abu Waheed!"

Heart pounding, she glared at him. She drew herself up to her full five-foot, seven-inch height and hissed, "This is *my* operating room. In here, *I'm* in charge, not you."

She braced herself for a fatal bullet.

Something like a smile crossed Abu Waheed's lips. He took a small step backward.

Skirmish won, she resumed her work until she secured the last bit of tape over the gauze and checked Klaus's blood pressure. Stable, it seemed. Good enough for now. Maybe later, she could convince Abu Waheed to let her operate.

"I'm finished." Heart pounding, she stepped back.

He came closer. "Then I take you to quarters."

She slipped away and shucked her gloves. As she did so, she noticed her engagement ring. No way would she let Jake's most precious gift to her fall into their hands. She put her body between the ring and the pirate as she slid it from her finger and into the upturned hem of her jeans shorts.

Abu Waheed grabbed her arm. "Where are your quarters?"

"Same level at the bow on the right. Klaus needs someone to monitor him. Ow!" Tori winced as his fingers tightened on her arm. They passed through the central area, where Stinky remained as Abu Waheed dragged her toward the bow. She thought she heard whimpering coming from behind some of the doors.

He didn't slow his steps. "I will consider after I get into safe."

"A woman named Nattie and I can be the two people to do so. She...she is on the second level belowdecks." Tori flinched as he slammed her into the wall at the end. A flag of fear began unfurling inside of her.

He shoved open her door. "Get in there."

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He pushed her so hard that she stumbled across the cabin and caught herself on the porthole.

Tori whipped around. The adrenaline began leaking from her body. With its departure came trembling and pure, raw fear. What had she done by standing up to him? But, she'd lived, hadn't she? And so had her friend. That knowledge shored up her fast-waning courage as she eased onto the chair at her desk. She had to hide the ring. But where?

Her gaze fell on the Bible in her duffel. She opened it toward the middle and almost laughed. The Book of Job. How fitting for the situation in which she suddenly found herself. Using a small bit of scotch tape, she secured the ring to one of the pages. Surely God would forgive her if it ripped when she removed it. She clung to that idea because if she removed the ring, it would mean they were free.

She was about to shove her duffel under her desk when she froze. Her father, Norm Walters, was Chairman and CEO of Walters Enterprises.

And a billionaire.

What would happen if Abu Waheed found out? She wouldn't let herself go there. She pulled out the frames holding the pictures of her father and her family. After popping the porthole open, she removed the photos and released those into the wind. They fluttered away.

Now to her computer. She turned it on. Maybe they'd forgotten about the ship's Internet access. Hah. Fat chance of that. Leave it to her to assume that they weren't sophisticated enough to figure out their e-mail system. She tried to log into the Internet. Already severed. Who cared? She could still access her e-mail. One click of a button highlighted all of her messages, which she deleted, first out of her in-box and then from her computer.

What else? Tori rose and eased onto the edge of her bed as she thought about that one. The captain's personal safe. In it lay not only her passport but also a listing of everyone's basic health and emergency contact information. Hers held her father's name and phone numbers.

Her breath hitched.

What could she do? Run screaming to the bridge and demand access?

Hardly.

Operation Peacemaker

Since it was his personal safe, only Captain Jameson had the combination. No one else. And he was loyal to the crew. But loyal enough not to divulge that information? She thought about what she knew about him. Career British Navy. Combat veteran. Even before joining Mercy Medical Missions, he'd been to some of the most dangerous parts of the world. He took care of his people. It was his nature.

The thought eased some of the tension in her shoulders.

She was safe.



Tuesday, June 23, 2015, 1600 hours local time, off the coast of Somalia

As he finished his initial walk-through of the ship, Abu Waheed stuffed some *khat* into his mouth. Almost immediately, the stimulant coursed through his blood.

His chest puffed out.

He lifted his chin.

The world was his, including this ship.

He sneered at the sounds of weeping coming from behind a couple of the closed cabin doors. In Somali, he said, "A most excellent idea to place the hostages in their quarters with the threat of death if they stick their noses out. No one can leave, and they can't collaborate with one another. It takes less men to watch them."

Wasim, his second-in-command, matched him step for step. "What of the safe?"

"Have you found it?" Abu Waheed entered the central core and stepped onto the elevator.

"In the captain's quarters on the level beneath the bridge."

"Most excellent." Abu Waheed jabbed the appropriate button. "Bring him to me."

Once the elevator doors opened, Wasim nodded and headed up the spiral staircase that led directly from the quarters onto the bridge.

"I will not go!" a man shouted in a British accent.

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“You will come with me,” Wasim growled. Then came the sound of skin on skin. “Now! Or shall I shoot someone to get you to obey?”

Abu Waheed chuckled. The captain would either confess or pay with his life.

“Get down there!” Wasim shoved the tall Englishman down the steps.

When he reached the bottom, the captain lost his balance and fell to his knees. Grasping the railing of the spiral staircase, he hauled himself to his feet.

Abu Waheed smirked. In English, he said, “My men have found your safe. What is inside?”

The captain clamped his jaw shut.

Hot anger burned in Abu Waheed’s gut. He popped him across the face with the butt of his pistol. The blood that now poured down his captive’s face only fueled his anger. “What is inside?”

“Nothing.” The captain nearly spat that word. He glanced toward the bookcase with an ornate cabinet beneath a wall-mounted television.

“You lie. Wasim, show me where it is.”

His lieutenant swung the door open to reveal a stout safe with a spin-combination lock.

Abu Waheed pointed to it. “Open.”

The captain shook his head. “No. I will not endanger my crew further.”

“What?” That burning anger returned, this time growing stronger as the high of the *kbat* filled him. How dare this captain, his captive, refuse an order from him? “You are fool!” In a rush of anger, Abu Waheed grabbed his arm and kicked the back of his knees. The big man collapsed, and he dragged him to the safe. “You open safe.”

“I will not.”

Al’abalab! Idiot! Didn’t he understand the dangerous game he played? Maybe. He seemed to be a battle-hardened man. Well, even those kinds of men trembled at his hands. He put his boot between the captain’s shoulders and shoved him.

With an audible crack, the captain’s face slammed into the hard metal. He moaned.

Abu Waheed grabbed his collar and twisted. The high in him increased as he growled into his ear, “Do as I say, Captain, or die. Now open safe.”

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The captain reached for the dial, then lowered his hand. “No. I will not.” Heat flooded Abu Waheed. Fed by the *kebat*, the beast of his anger roared. He pushed him again.

This time, his hostage caught himself and spun around.

That fueled his rage even more. “You dare defy me? You are fool!”

Even with blood pouring down his face, the captain remained stoic. “I will not endanger my crew. They are my responsibility to—”

“Shut up! Open safe!” Abu Waheed drew his gun. “Now!”

“No.” The corner of the captain’s mouth curled in derision.

Red filled Abu Waheed’s vision. He pounced, knocking the hostage against the cabinet. He pressed the muzzle so hard into the man’s forehead that he groaned. “Do now or die.”

“No.”

Abu Waheed pulled the trigger.

In the small quarters, the gunshot nearly deafened him.

The captain’s body sagged to the light gray carpet. His blood splattered all over the face of the safe and pooled on the floor.

Abu Waheed jabbed the body with the toe of his boot before turning to Wasim. “Take it and dump it over the railing for the sharks.”

With that, he stomped up the spiral staircase to the bridge. Someone else would have the combination, and he would shoot the lot of them until he found out who did.

The crew stared at him with wide eyes. A tear rolled down the cheek of the woman at the controls. She stared out the windows.

Abu swung around and scanned the crew. “Who is first mate?”

“I am.” An Oriental man with three bars on his shoulders stepped forward.

“Your name?”

“Commander Thomas Ching.”

“Well, Commander Thomas Ching, congratulations. You are now Captain Ching.”

“What...what of Captain Jameson?”

“He had a date with the sharks.” Abu Waheed started laughing, and Wasim, and Asam, another one of his pirates, followed suit.

The woman sent visual daggers toward him.

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He raised his hand as if to strike her.

She flinched and turned away.

Abu Waheed cut his laughter off. “Captain Ching, you will set a course for La ’Amal. And what is the combination of the safe downstairs?”

Commander Ching stared at him for a long moment.

“That was his personal safe, you dipwad. Only Captain Jameson had the combination,” the woman hissed.

Abu Waheed didn’t know what a dipwad was, but he was sure he’d been insulted. He struck her across the cheek. She cried out.

The commander’s Adam’s apple bobbed. “Madison, continue course.” He turned to another member of the crew. “Ensign Shah, determine the appropriate heading to this La ’Amal.”

“So tell me, Captain Ching. Does this whore,” Abu Waheed hitched himself onto the high captain’s chair and nodded in the woman’s direction, “does she tell the truth?”

“She does. The ship’s safe is behind me.” Commander Ching nodded over his shoulder.

“Open it!”

The commander’s fingers shook, but he obeyed and swung open the small door.

The safe was empty.

“So our access died with the captain. How clever of him,” Abu Waheed muttered in Somali. Over his shoulder, he called, “Wasim!”

His second joined him. “Yes, Abu Waheed.”

“We will sail under radio silence. Once we get to port, I want you to use your connections to find us a safecracker willing to come to La ’Amal. Do what you must, but I *will* have access to that safe. Do you understand?”

Wasim nodded.

“Good. Dismissed.” Abu Waheed swept the bridge in one look. As if satisfied, the thrum from the *kbat* eased away, leaving behind it a languid relaxation comparable to finishing a big meal. The smirk returned when he noted the arrival of Balam, another pirate, on the bridge. The crew now realized he meant business. He had several hostages, three hundred by his estimation. And a safe full of an undetermined amount of baubles. Once they got to port, he’d

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ransom the ship for fifty million as a starting point. Not bad for a day's worth of work.

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Tuesday, June 23, 2015, 1300 hours Pacific Daylight Time, Flagstaff, AZ

Today, he would die.

Suleiman al-Ibrahim knew it in his heart as he clung to the underside of a rock that capped a climb called The Mushroom.

What was he? Crazy? Crazy to think that he was a rock climber at the same level as Sana?

No.

He'd wanted to be with her now that he had the summer free from classes. Today, being with her meant going rock climbing. And going rock climbing meant saying yes to acts that defied gravity. He groaned as the pain in his fingers increased.

"This is how you do it." Sana Jain's voice floated down to him like a blessing from heaven. "Is the lip a foot in front of you?"

"Yes."

"Reach with your right hand. There's a handhold about a foot above the lip. Do you feel it?"

He reached out. His aching fingers explored the rock. There! He grabbed it. "I found it."

"Good. Now here's the tricky part. You're going to reach with your left hand. About six inches above the lip and six inches to the left of where your

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right hand is, you'll find another handhold. When you grab it, your feet are going to come off their perch."

Suleiman shuddered. He'd surely fall to his death despite the ropes to which he was attached and Sana belaying him from above.

"What you'll do is immediately swing your left foot up. You'll find a foothold at the edge. Snag it with your left foot and power up. Use your left arm to help. Then, you'll find another handhold for your right hand and put your right foot where your right hand is now."

So complicated. It was too much for his overtaxed brain to handle.

"You can do it. I know you can. The key is to move quickly."

"Sana—"

"Go for it before you get too taxed where you are."

Oh, so true. With a deep breath, he reached with his left hand. His feet came off, and he dangled by his fingertips over a thousand feet above the trees.

Visions of his life flashed before him. He was going to see Allah soon, and he wasn't in any shape to do so, not when his bad works outweighed—

"Move it!" the drill sergeant shouted from above.

Suleiman groaned as he swung his left foot up. He found the foothold and pressed his foot against it. Traction. So vital to him now.

"Now push! Hurry!"

He thrust upward. His glutes and left quad burned as he snagged the higher handhold with his right hand. He jammed his right foot onto the tiny ledge his hand had just vacated. At this point, the rock began inclining a bit more. Who cared? One small move in the wrong direction, and he'd have to repeat the whole torturous process.

Breathe. Breathe.

Gradually, his heart rate slowed.

"You did it!"

He peered upward.

His angel gazed at him. Her black, chin-length hair gleamed in the midday sun like a raven's wing.

"Just twenty feet more. It's an easy junket up because of the way the rock slopes."

"Only if you're not exhausted," he muttered.

Operation Peacemaker

She giggled. “Seriously. It’s lunchtime, and I can’t eat until you’re off belly.”

“Very funny.” His stomach growled at the mere thought of food.

“Then come on up. The handholds are laid out perfectly.” She disappeared.

Almost reluctantly, he resumed his climb. The rock tilted further, making his job easier. Finally, he crested the lip and clawed his way onto solid ground.

Sana hauled him to safety. Sana’s dark eyes sparkled as she grabbed his hand and briefly squeezed it. “Good job.”

He scrambled a few feet further, then collapsed onto his front with a loud groan. He rolled onto his back. Never again would he complain about lying on hard soil with a rock poking into him. “I...I don’t have any strength left.”

“Do you want some gorp?”

“Only if it’s separated into dried fruit, nuts, and chocolate.”

“You are so strange. Here.”

A bag landed on his chest. Suleiman opened his eyes, raised his head, and pushed himself to his elbows as she unclipped him from the ropes. For some bizarre reason, his muscles had stopped screaming at him. In the wake of the pain came a feeling of euphoria. “I have to say, I enjoyed that in a twisted, demented kind of way. And the view?” He sat all the way up as he took in the forest and ranch land below. “Incredible.”

“It’s hard to believe, but we can see Last Chance Ranch a couple of miles from here.” She turned his shoulders and pointed. “There. Can you see it?”

All he saw was forest, then a black ribbon, then more ranch land. “No. Not really.”

“I’ll show you in a minute.” Sana opened her pack and pulled out her peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a baggie of potato chips. “So how can you eat peanut butter and jelly but not gorp?”

“It is difficult to explain.” He pulled out his own lunch, which included an apple and a bag of M&Ms.

She raised a perfectly coiffed eyebrow as she uncapped her water bottle and took a swig. A grin curved her lips upwards. “That’s okay. We all have our eccentricities.”

“What is yours?”

Jennifer Haynie

“Who knows?” She shrugged. Then she grinned and cut her eyes toward him. “I can’t chew gum and walk at the same time.”

He laughed.

Sana dug into her pack and produced two small cylinders. “Vic loaned me his binoculars. You know which pair I’m talking about, right? The compact but really powerful ones?”

“I do.”

“I figured we could search out the ranch.” She lifted them to her eyes. “We’re almost two miles away, and I can see the Big House. Wow. This is so cool.”

“Let me see.” Suleiman crammed so close that their shoulders touched.

“Eat some gorp, and maybe I will.”

He chuckled and held up his M&Ms. “So sorry. I prefer pure chocolate.”

She frowned. “It looks like there’s a silver car out front, like he has a visitor. Did you talk to him at all this morning to see what was going on today?”

“At breakfast, he didn’t look happy. I didn’t want to ask him.”

“Here.” Sana placed the binoculars in his hands and began eating her sandwich. “I want to finish lunch and get everything pulled together.”

Suleiman scanned the horizon. At first, he couldn’t discern the landscape enough to find the Big House, which was what they called the main house at Last Chance Ranch. He spotted the road. From there, he followed the thread of black until he noted the entrance for the ranch. The contemporary “L” and “C” on the ironwork of the gate told him he’d found where they lived. A car sat in the circular drive next to the steps leading to the porch. Two men stepped onto the dark wood. He immediately recognized Victor Chavez’s tall, lean form. He shook hands with the shorter, stockier man, who climbed into the car.

What was that all about? He wasn’t sure, and it wasn’t any of his business.

Sana cleared her throat. “Shelly called me last night.”

“What did she have to say?”

“It was what she didn’t say that worried me.”

He lowered the binoculars. “What do you mean?”

Operation Peacemaker

“She seemed down. Like at work, they were giving her a really hard time about her brains.” She sighed. “I wish people would respect her for who she is.”

“People can be envious. It is easy to envy what you do not have.”

“I know. I guess I hurt for her. But she said she’s committed to it.” Sana heaved a sigh and set her water bottle down. “This is a change in subject, but we have about an hour’s hike back to the car. And I promised Deborah I’d help her do some unpacking at the house.”

Did they have to leave? He knew it would sound petulant, like a child. It was just that right now, he didn’t want this time alone with her to end. “Before we go, could we perhaps take a picture together?”

“Sure.”

Using that as an excuse, he crawled beside her. When he placed his left arm behind her, she leaned into him. Her black hair tickled his chin, and the olive skin of her arm brushed him. His pulse shot up. It would be so easy to nuzzle—

“Well?” She nudged him.

So much for seizing the moment. “My apologies.”

He lifted his phone and centered them on the screen.

“One, two, three, selfie!” She giggled as the phone recorded their image. “Let me see.”

He handed it to her.

“Good one.” She returned it to him.

“Now, one of you.”

She sighed. “Do I have to?”

“Please?” He gave her his best puppy dog eyes.

“Well, if you say so.” She struck a pose, and he snapped another picture before she scrambled to her feet. “Help me with the rope?”

“Of course.” As they began pulling the ropes upward, Suleiman’s phone chirped. He frowned and stared at the text.

Victor had written, “Potential job. Be at the studio at 8 sharp tonight.”

Sana’s phone beeped as well. Her pretty features knitted. “What do you think this is about?”

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Suleiman hoisted the coil and looped it over his shoulders. “Not quite sure. Maybe it has to do with Victor’s visitor. I believe we will find out very soon.”

2

Tuesday, June 23, 2015, 2000 hours Pacific Daylight Time, Flagstaff, AZ

Already?

Suleiman's shoulder muscles grumbled at him as he pulled on a fleece over his T-shirt. What had he expected after such a hard climb? At least ibuprofen would help. Stretching, too.

He popped a couple of pills into his mouth and took a swig of water. He'd stretch later, like after the meeting. Right then, getting to the outbuilding that housed Victor's office took precedence.

It was a quick stroll through the rapidly cooling evening. From the barn toward the back of the box canyon, one of the twelve ranch horses nickered. Another horse answered.

He smiled. What a pleasant evening.

He found the screened door to the studio open with Victor tapping on a laptop at his worktable. Suleiman softly called, "Victor, I'm here."

His mentor turned. "Hey. Come on in."

He stepped inside and scanned the interior. Granite slabs on the floor made it appear as if the only natural disturbances to the landscape were the glass walls and Navajo rug on the floor in front of the stone hearth. "I like this. It feels as if nature has moved inside from the outside."

Jennifer Haynie

“When Dad designed and built the ranch, he used this as his home office. I guess it’s kind of like that for me.” Victor rose. “You want something hot? It’s cooling down pretty quickly out there.”

“Please. Thank you.”

Victor poured some water into a coffeemaker. “I’ll be a bit more social when I get this finished.”

“No worries.” As Victor resumed his work, Suleiman studied the photographs littering the spacious interior. Several hung from fishing line in the windows and appeared as if they were floating. They portrayed different angles of the Chavez property. He noted one of the mountain he and Sana had climbed earlier, including the mushroom shape that gave the hellacious climb its name. Other pictures, those of friends and family, graced the sills.

He turned toward the fireplace. Another landscape, this one of buttes he recognized from Monument Valley, dominated the place of honor above the mantel. To each side were four photographs, those of each member of the Shadow Box Team. All of these photos were in black and white, which seemed to be Victor’s favorite medium.

Immediately, he picked out Sana. True to form, she hung from a rock. He traced the definition of her arms, legs, and back, which the monochromatic medium highlighted.

Behind him, the printer began whirring. Victor joined him and crouched as he lit the pine cones and kindling in the fireplace. “How was your climb today?”

Suleiman groaned. “Very difficult. She did not tell me it was the hardest in this area. She did not want me to” —he struggled to remember the phrase— “to chicken out.”

Victor chuckled. “You did The Mushroom?”

“How did you know?”

“Because I chickened out climbing that with her. You’re a brave man, Suleiman al-Ibrahim.”

“Or foolish.” Or willing to do anything to show his budding affection for Sana. Suleiman gazed at the photographs occupying the mantel. These were of Victor’s new family, especially from the wedding that had occurred only two months before. He noted each. Deborah and Victor in their finery. Victor with

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his two youngest stepdaughters kissing him on the cheeks. Deborah with Anna, her oldest child.

Then he saw one of the Shadow Box men, sans Skylar, who hadn't attended the wedding. A color photo of him and Sana that the photographer had taken at the reception caught his eye. His cheeks warmed as he gazed at her. That April evening, she'd worn a sari of deep, rich green trimmed in sequins and rhinestones. It looked as if he had his arm around her shoulders when in reality, he'd rested it along the back of her chair. One could hope the former would be true one day.

Another frame toward the back caught his attention. Like many of the others, this one was in black and white. It was of a woman. Dressed in what was most likely blue jeans and a white sweater, she sat amidst sea oats along somewhere along the ocean. Her eyes appeared pale, as did her hair. "Victor, who is this? Is she a relation to Deborah?"

"That one?" Victor came to stand beside him. Sadness filled his eyes. "No. That's a picture of my former fiancée. She died in 2012."

"I'm sorry." What else could he say? And why did the woman seem familiar to him? Had he met her somewhere? How could he have done so? He shrugged it off. Or tried to, but something bothered him about that picture.

Victor picked it up. "You know, it's not right that she's up there. Not when Deb and I have married." He stepped to the table and placed it in a small box beneath it. "Coffee's ready."

"Told you so." Sana's laughter drifted upon the currents of the breeze sifting through the screens. She pulled the door open.

"Told you, what?" Victor asked.

Butch Addison grinned and practically hurled his large frame onto one of the chairs. "Sorry we're late, boss. Gracie and Marie absolutely insisted that I get their fish tank set up before I came out here. Women. They can be so demanding."

Sana giggled. "Told you so about women."

Victor picked up two more mugs and placed them by the coffeemaker. "Get used to it. The girls love having Uncle Butch around."

"Not that I mind." Butch rubbed a hand across his bald head. "You got some coffee there?"

Jennifer Haynie

“High octane or unleaded. High octane’s ready. I can brew unleaded.”

“Oh, you know me. High octane.”

“Sana, I’ve got some tea, too.” Victor poured some more water into an electric teakettle and plugged it in. Immediately, it began hissing.

“You have a job for us, eh?” Butch rose, poured himself a mug of coffee, and returned to his place. The silver hoops in his ears glimmered in the firelight.

Suleiman seated himself on the couch. Would Sana curl up next to him? Fantasy. Complete fantasy.

She picked up her mug and settled on the other chair with her legs tucked underneath her.

He bit back his frustration.

“Yeah, it’s a job all right.” Victor took a seat next to Suleiman. “I so totally didn’t see this one coming.” He opened his folder and pulled out four sets of stapled papers. “The briefing sheet’s on top with details underneath. Each of you take a copy.”

Suleiman scanned the top sheet. Victor had titled the job Operation Peacemaker. “The *Peacemaker*? I do not understand.”

“We’re getting pulled into the *Peacemaker* thing?” Butch set his mug on a side table and leaned forward.

“Smart man.” Victor smirked at his deputy. “Or psychic.”

“Heard about it on NPR, at least until Gracie and Marie started bickering when we were coming home. I only put two and two together when at supper, Anna talked about some guy named Norm Walters showing up earlier today.”

“Let me tell you, this isn’t a good situation. Early this morning our time, Somali pirates seized a medical missions hospital ship. The organization is called Mercy Medical Missions, or MMM for short. They have works going on globally, but their flagship projects, pardon the pun, are two South African hospital ships, the *Hope* and *Peacemaker*.”

“So they’re of South African registry.” Suleiman frowned when he noted the details. “Five hundred feet in length. Three hundred crew. Based out of Cape Town, South Africa. Visited some of the poorest places in the world. En route from Mumbai to Mombasa when they were hijacked.”

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“You got it.” Victor gazed at the papers for a moment. “They got off a distress call, but that’s it.”

Sana’s brow knitted. “Does this have anything to do with your visitor?”

Victor glanced up. “How did you know?”

A grin played about her lips. “You loaned us your binoculars. What else can I say? I saw the car here.”

“It has everything to do with my visitor. The man’s name is Norman Walters, or Norm for short.”

Butch raised an eyebrow. “As in Walters Enterprises?”

“You know the name?” Victor asked.

He nodded. “I have stock in his company. Not much, but my financial adviser recommended that I invest in it. Believe me when I say I’m glad I did.”

“For the rest of you, the details are there. Suffice it to say that whatever Norm touches turns to gold.”

Sana cocked her head. “He’s that good?”

“Yep. A smart investor, first in software, but he’s gotten into international shipping and has holdings everywhere. In other words, he’s a billionaire.”

Suleiman laid the papers on the glass coffee table and studied them. “I do not understand why he came here today.”

“His daughter’s on that ship.” Victor cracked his knuckles as if to emphasize that point.

Butch stroked his goatee. “Why do I have a bad feeling about this?” He cut his eyes toward his boss. “Cause Somali pirates and a billionaire’s daughter don’t go together too well.”

Victor shifted. “Or maybe they do if you’re the pirate. Victoria Walters, or Tori to her friends, is a plastic surgeon on that ship. According to Norm, she could care less about the fact that her father has more money than a lot of developing countries. She’s at the end of a two-year tour of duty on the *Peacemaker*, and she’s engaged to be married in October.”

Sana sipped her tea as her eyes darted across the page. She rested it on her knees. “And no one knows who she is, right?”

Victor nodded. “Right. Norm reported that only the captain and her three closest friends know that her daddy’s a billionaire. But there is a catch.”

“Which is?” Butch leaned forward as if anticipating a juicy piece of news.

Jennifer Haynie

“In his personal safe, the captain stores a crew manifest that lists the basic medical and emergency contact information in case the need arises. That’s standard protocol. According to what MMM told Norm, the combination for his personal safe resides only with him. Though no one wants to acknowledge it, I think the captain might be dead.”

Sana drew in a sharp breath. “Why do you say that?”

“Just a gut feeling. Somali pirates aren’t the most sympathetic.” Victor took a deep breath. “I have his bio. Norm got it from MMM. He’s a combat veteran. Decorated for various acts of valor with the Royal Navy. He knew the dangers of sailing in that part of the world, and he insisted that each ship have a personal safe installed with the captain being the only one with the combination. He made it clear to MMM headquarters that he planned to store everyone’s personal contact information and passports in it. But that doesn’t guarantee that the copy at headquarters in Cape Town is safe. Matter of fact, they’ve told Norm that the media have been hounding the headquarters staff.”

Suleiman’s mind raced. He understood the urgency of the situation. How could he not when a father’s worry drove him to travel thousands of miles to Last Chance Ranch? “Why us?”

“He’s personal friends with President Badin. Let’s leave it at that.”

Something like a strangled cough escaped Butch. “As in, he contributed money toward Badin’s campaign. Problem is, it’s South Africa’s territory. The president ain’t gonna horn in on that because of his isolationist stance.”

“Exactly.” Victor fixed each of them in his stare. “But he told Norm about Shadow Box.”

“Um, question.” Sana raised her hand. “We were officially disbanded.”

“Right. Somehow, Norm got the impression that we could help him. Then he offered up his fee.”

“Which is?” Butch asked.

“Twenty million flat. Plus expenses and all the equipment we’d need.”

Murmurs exploded across the room as Suleiman tried to digest the number. Twenty *million*? What? Had he heard right? What did that sum look like?

“He was sincere,” Victor was saying as Suleiman tuned back into the conversation. “Each of you would get a million.”

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Again, Suleiman gawked. Forget twenty million. What would a million look like for him? Maybe going to University full time without working his way through? Even buying a house? He couldn't fathom it.

"I'd bring each of you on as contractors, so that's the mechanism I'd use." Victor closed his folder and set it on the table. "Thing is, I told him we'd take the job on two conditions. First, we get all of the hostages out, not just Tori. Second, we have to have the whole team together, or we don't go."

Forget that. Just as quickly as Suleiman's mood lifted, it deflated. It wouldn't happen. Not with having to convince Skylar and Fiona to return.

"Goodbye, twenty mil." Butch groaned. "No way you're going to get Skylar and Fi back here."

"I understand your concerns." Victor fell silent for a moment. He squinted as if seeing something that the others couldn't. "There's simply no way that we can do this without them."

Sana scowled. "Can you give Fi a personality transplant?"

"I wish. Look. We go and we ask. And we sweeten the deal."

"How?" Suleiman asked.

"We tell them it's a one-shot assignment." Victor rose and stepped to the fireplace. He turned. "Time's of the essence here. Each day we waste is another day that the press has an opportunity to get that crew manifest and that the pirates have to take everyone ashore. And I don't need to say what will probably happen when that news becomes public."

Suleiman knew all too well. He'd seen the results. Human trafficking. Tori would go for a high price. Then, she'd disappear, never to be seen again unless her body turned up floating in a river or something. Not to mention, he was sure there were other pretty ladies on that ship. During his few years in Marseille, he'd seen evidence of human trafficking in the form of prostitutes on the streets of Marseille. Their looks? Hollow. Drugged. Hopeless.

"Sana, Suleiman, call Shelly and Diana. Tell them you're headed their way tomorrow. Then use this information and all of your persuasive speaking skills to get them to join us."

"So who's going to handle Skylar and Fi?" Butch asked.

"I will. Butch, I want you to get that gate on the back part of the property up and running. I don't want to leave Deb and the kids unprotected. DJ will

Jennifer Haynie

probably be glad to help. Go ahead and start working on collecting the food and water we'll need and a list of ammunition that Skylar would need for his contacts."

"If he comes," Sana muttered.

"Let's think positive. We'll talk before I leave in the morning about how much we'll need."

"Wilco, boss." Butch rose.

Both Sana and Suleiman followed him into the night.

Suleiman's steps slowed as he thought about everything that had happened. A ship hijacked. Three hundred souls, including the daughter of a billionaire, onboard. Her identity a secret that would be disastrous if released. Twenty million to free her and the other hostages.

Victor's goal was admirable, but could the Shadow Box team put aside their differences long enough to accomplish the mission? Impossible. Simply impossible.



Tuesday, June 23, 2015, 2100 hours Pacific Daylight Time, Flagstaff, AZ

"Talk about being in pain." Suleiman winced as he climbed the steps with Sana to the Women's Building. With each move, his thighs ached. His shoulders had already tightened, and all he wanted to do was lie down on the floor and moan.

Sana turned as she opened the door. "It can't be that bad. Or can be," she added when he hobbled inside. "I know just the solution. You want a back rub? When I was in my climbing group in Texas, that's what we did all of the time."

"Sure." He eased onto the floor and leaned against the couch as he rubbed his quads. It was almost like they sighed with relief at the motion.

In the kitchen, Sana pulled open the refrigerator door. "Water?"

"That would be nice." He leaned forward and rested his arms on his knees as he turned on the television. *Deadliest Catch*, one of Sana's favorites. He gazed at the program but saw nothing. Instead, his mind darted in all directions like a cat chasing a laser dot.

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Victor's dead fiancée. The offer of twenty million dollars and one million for each of them from that. The fact that they were short half their team with two people most likely refusing to join them sent a tinge of desperation through him. Why? Because he'd envisioned an easy path for himself now?

A drop of water hit him on the arm.

"Suleiman!" Sana stood above him, her small foot tapping, two bottles of icy cold water in her hands. She must have caught him lost in his thoughts.

"I'm sorry." He shrugged. "I was thinking."

"Well, as you think, scoot forward so I can get behind you." She settled on her knees.

Fire and ice brushed the skin of his neck. Fire from her touch, and ice from her cold fingers. He jumped.

"Sorry. I know my fingers are cold."

Tingling spread from his neck outward. If she only knew what her nearness did to him. He let his chin fall to his chest.

"You like that?"

Oh, yes. He wiped suddenly sweaty palms on his jeans as he sought ways to distract himself. "Did Victor ever mention his fiancée to you?"

"Huh?"

"He had a picture up on the mantel with pictures from the wedding. It was of a woman who was his previous fiancée."

"No. I never knew he was engaged before he moved here." Her motions slowed. "Matter of fact, I don't think I ever remember him mentioning why he joined up, only that he was in California when Gary recruited him." She moved down his back. "Why so curious?"

"She seemed familiar to me. That is all." He leaned into her and tried to tell himself that it was to get maximum effect on his sore muscles.

"Maybe you've seen someone who looks like her."

"True."

Sana's phone pinged. She paused and picked it up. "It's Shelly. She said to come on down and that supper would be better than lunch because both she and Diana have stuff going on then. I wish we could go earlier. I mean, we need to get ready for the mission."

Jennifer Haynie

“You heard Victor. Butch will take care of what we need. So. We leave around two tomorrow, then.”

“I guess.” Her phone chirped again. “Huh? She says something like she hates it there. Seems that she’s still at work. Man, I’ve got to talk to her in person since she obviously won’t talk on the phone about what’s bothering her.”

She rubbed his shoulders. “Why don’t we leave earlier to avoid rush hour? Maybe we could find a Starbucks so we can get free drinks and hang out. I need to do my Bible study.”

“So says the barista.” He smiled, especially as he realized what it would mean. More time alone with her. “We can do that.”

She paused again as she tapped on her phone before setting it aside. “Done. She said that’s fine. Now back to the important stuff.”

“As in?”

“Hanging out with you.” She massaged his delts.

The tension released, and he rumbled low in his throat like a big cat.

She giggled. Her fingers slid onto his biceps.

Every nerve jumped to high alert. Her jasmine scent filled his nose. Cheeks flushing, heart suddenly hammering, he covered her left hand with his right.

As if stung, she scrambled away and staggered to her feet. “I—I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“You didn’t. Promise on that.” Suleiman tried to follow, but he slogged through the mud of his aching muscles. By the time she darted to her bedroom, he’d made it to his knees.

“See you in the morning.” With that, she shut the door.

Oh, great. His pulse slowed, leaving in its wake a bone-deep weariness. Why couldn’t he voice those feelings for her without scaring her off? How did she view him? As a friend. That seemed to be it. Nothing more.

And he saw no way to change that.



Tuesday, June 23, 2015, 2130 hours Pacific Daylight Time, Flagstaff, AZ

“Are you sure you don’t want to watch *Up* with us?” Anna Fields asked.

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“You know animated movies aren’t my thing.” Victor Chavez gazed at his oldest stepdaughter.

She sprawled on the couch next to DJ, her brother.

“Even *SpongeBob*?” she grinned as she highlighted the day Victor had taken her younger sisters, Gracie and Marie, to see it.

Busted. Caught because a year ago, he’d been the then-fiancé who’d not only wanted to impress his beloved but the young ladies who came with her. “Okay. You convinced me. Let me say goodnight to your mom and the girls, and I’ll be back.”

He climbed the steps to the second floor of the Big House. At the top, he hung a right and strolled along the walkway to the bedroom his two youngest stepdaughters shared. The lamp between their beds lit the room, which contained two overflowing toy chests, stuffed animals piled into a corner, a play table, and one gigantic plastic dinosaur that was Marie’s. The fish tank Butch had set up burbled on one of the dressers.

Marie, his youngest at six, had pulled a chair up to it and sat on her knees as she gazed at it. “Daddy, when can we get fish?”

“Uncle Butch said a couple of days.” He leaned over and tried to see whatever she did. A pirate’s chest spewed bubbles through the water.

“Can I get guppies?”

“We can do guppies.”

“And an angel fish?” She implored him with those hazel eyes he’d come to love.

“Sure. And maybe some neons too.”

She grinned. “Cool.”

“Where’s your sister?” Victor picked up *Charlotte’s Web*, which they’d begun while on their journey from North Carolina to Arizona. He settled on Gracie’s twin bed.

“She’s brushing her teeth.” Marie scrambled onto the bed and pressed into the crook of his arm.

As if on cue, the door swung open, admitting Gracie, Marie’s sister eighteen months her senior, as well as the Colonel, the family’s Belgian Malinois.

“Are your teeth brushed?” Victor asked her.

Jennifer Haynie

“Uh, huh.” The eight-year-old climbed into bed on the other side of him. “What about the Colonel?”

“He’s exempt.” Victor opened the book to where he’d placed the bookmark.

“What’s exempt?” Marie asked.

“It means he doesn’t have to brush his teeth.” Victor mussed her brown curls.

“Daddy, can we get guinea pigs again?” Gracie asked.

“Maybe.”

“Or we could get hamsters. And gerbils.” Marie glanced at her sister.

“Or maybe rats.” Gracie emitted a sinister cackle.

Victor chuckled. “We could. I know your mom and I promised that. Now. Where were we?”

“Chapter five!” they chorused.

Victor began reading aloud to them. His heart filled as each girl snuggled closer. Blessed. That’s what he’d told Deborah that first night after they’d returned from their honeymoon a couple of months before. He’d been blessed in ways he’d never expected only a year before. He wanted to freeze this moment and pull it out whenever he started feeling sorry for himself.

He couldn’t. Not when he finished the chapter. “Okay, you two. Time for prayers.”

All three slid out of bed and knelt beside it with him in the middle. On the other side of the bed, the Colonel did a trick DJ had taught him. He put his paws and muzzle on the sheets as if praying.

Victor put his hand on Marie’s light brown curls. “Marie, you start.”

“Thank You for today, Jesus. Thank You for Mommy and for Daddy and for Gracie and Anna and DJ. Thank You that we’ll have fish really soon. Amen.”

He smiled. “Gracie?”

“Thank You for Marie, for Mommy, for Daddy, for DJ and Anna. Thank You for dogs and cats and horses. Amen.”

“And bless the sleep of these two munchkins,” he added. “Okay. Into bed with both of you.”

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Once both girls had pulled the covers up, he made sure each had their respective stuffed animals, then kissed them on the forehead. The Colonel had settled on the rug between the beds. Victor scratched him behind the ears. “Keep an eye on these two.”

As if he understood, the dog waved his tail back and forth in a brief wag.

Victor pulled their door almost closed. He paused and craned his ear toward the den. The movie DJ and Anna watched still ran strong. Maybe if he procrastinated, they’d be finished. Fat chance when it paused.

“Dad!” DJ called. “We’re waiting on you.”

Oh, well. He’d take one for the team—again. But first, he had someone he needed to see. After heading toward the back of the house, he took the second stairway to the small landing leading to the master suite. Once he pushed the door open, he announced, “I somehow got roped into watching another animated movie.”

His bride of two months, one week, and four days flipped a page in her Bible.

A flush started in his cheeks. Deborah could make even a T-shirt and a pair of pajama pants with dog bones on it look sexy.

She grinned. “You set a precedent when you watched *SpongeBob* with Gracie and Marie.”

A wince crossed her pretty features as she rubbed her calf.

He sat down beside her. “Tough run?”

“Tough but good.”

“Gracie and Marie want to get their rodents.”

“Well, we did promise them in May that we’d get them replacements for their guinea pigs.”

“They want rats.” He imitated Gracie’s cackle.

Deborah giggled. “You’re too funny.” Then she sighed. “I’ve been thinking about Norm’s offer.”

“Me too. A lot. A whole lot.” Victor ran some of her blonde hair through his fingers as he considered his next question. “Did I ever share with you my vision for Sentry Securities?”

She smiled as she shut the book and laid it on the mattress. “You want the company to grow into a national presence, if not an international one.”

Jennifer Haynie

“Right.” He considered all of the thoughts that had flown through his mind ever since Norm Walters had mentioned the fee he was willing to pay for Victor and his team to rescue Tori. “Do you think my dream is foolish?”

She remained quiet for a moment. Slowly, she shook her head as she interlaced her fingers with his. “I don’t think so. I think it’s good to dream big. I believe God wants us to do that.”

“With this kind of fee, it’s like I started having all of these strange thoughts. Like maybe I’m only interested in the fee. Like maybe I don’t care about Tori and the crew at all. It’s making me question my motives.”

She drew her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. “I do think you need to be careful.”

“What do you mean?”

Deborah reached down and ran her hand along a wrinkle in the blanket. “Think of it this way. If Shadow Box were still together as a team running missions for the president and you could say yes or no, would you take this mission? Or better yet, if you were in the Army and your team was tasked with the mission as an optional project, would pay even cross your mind?”

“No.” Some of the tension in his shoulders eased when he realized how his answer was instinctive, spontaneous. “Even if I didn’t know who Tori was.”

She smiled. “Then your heart’s in the right place.” She reached up and ran her hand down his face. “Maybe this is God’s way of providing the tools you need for this dream of yours.”

Love for his bride filled him. “Maybe so.” He took her hand and kissed her palm. Then his heart sank when he realized everything that needed to happen before the team could even contemplate heading overseas. “Now I just need to convince Skylar and Fiona.”

Her smile turned impish. “I never said it would be easy.”

He laughed. As he said goodnight to her with promises to return for a nightcap within an hour, he realized that Deborah was right. A monumental task lay before him. He could only hope Sana and Suleiman would have better luck with Shelly and Diana than he probably would with Fiona and Skylar.

3

Wednesday, June 24, 2015, 1530 hours Pacific Daylight Time, Tempe, AZ

Heat blazed across the asphalt in the Phoenix suburb of Tempe, Arizona. It was so hot that the air shimmered as if the entire landscape were shifting constantly like in some alternative dimension. Inside the local Starbucks, tinted windows cut down on the glare, and cool air pumped from the vents overhead.

When under the tutelage of his half-brothers so many years before, Suleiman had learned the value of constant observation. He slouched at a table with his back to the wall so he faced the door. Some habits simply never vanished.

At a nearby table, Sana huddled with her Bible open as well as a notebook and a steaming cup of tea. She chewed on the top of her pen as she read something. Her brow furrowed as if contemplating a new concept.

He thought back to the night before. Something had startled her away from him. What? Had he come on to her? Wasn't that the term Skylar had used when describing the romancing of American women?

He thought about his conversation with her. No. That wasn't it. And it hadn't come up on the ride down to Phoenix. Instead, Sana had laughed and talked as if everything were normal.

He bit back his sigh. Women. He didn't understand them. Did Butch? Victor obviously did since he'd married. Should he go to him for advice? No. He needed to figure it out on his own.

Jennifer Haynie

After opening his book on English grammar, he began working through exercises on punctuation. Rather than focus on writing sentences, he considered the photo he'd seen in Victor's studio. Almost like a buzzard circling a dead animal, he couldn't leave it alone. He had to figure this out, had to lay it to rest once and for all.

When in doubt, Google it. He reached into his backpack and pulled out his laptop. Once connected to the Internet, he hesitated. What would he search on? He typed in "Victor Chavez" and "Secret Service."

No social media profiles popped up. Victor had been strict about that, and even though Shadow Box was no more, he'd remained off the grid. But an article appeared in *The Washington Post*. "Secret Service a New Career for Veterans." It detailed how several former soldiers had signed on with the Secret Service, including Victor. It ended by describing Victor's assignment to relocate to Raleigh and guard Maggie McCall, the First Daughter. As he reread that last paragraph, his stomach did a small flip on the hamburger he'd eaten for lunch.

He glanced at Sana. She turned a few pages in her Bible and scribbled something in her notebook.

He focused on his search. Another headline, this one from *The News and Observer* out of Raleigh, North Carolina, caught his attention. "Preliminary Results from Attempted McCall Kidnapping Released. Agents Forced to Resign." The subtitle read "Punishment as Reward for Valor? The Injustice of Government Service".

A sense of foreboding filled him. Could this be connected with his last assignment with his half-brothers? He clicked on the link.

It was a full-page article that began with a description of the events leading up to the attempted kidnapping of Maggie. Then it presented a full chronology of what had happened the night of April 10, 2012.

Suleiman didn't need to read it. He knew it all too well.

"They're coming out," Jibril, his half-brother eighteen years his senior, had whispered as he and Suleiman maintained the sniper's nest high above on the convention center's roof. Suleiman pressed his eye to the sniper rifle's night scope. In its green glow, a service door to one of the neighboring hotels opened. Five people stepped through, two women and three men with the

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brunette woman being Maggie McCall. The tall slender man had been pointed out as the whip agent and was to be the last. And the blonde? She'd not live to see the next day. He slowed his breathing and focused on the short, stocky agent scanning the buildings. His heart rate dropped. In his ear came the order from Jibril. "Now."

"Excuse me, sir." One of the baristas stood next to him with a small tray.

Suleiman jumped. He'd braced his elbows on the table and his hands against his temples as if he could shut off the flow of memories spilling into his mind and tainting his soul. He couldn't. He offered a polite smile. "Yes?"

"Would you like to try one of our complimentary cookies?"

He shook his head.

She shrugged and moved on to Sana as he returned to his memories.

"Track them," Jibril hissed as the two agents who remained alive, the whip agent and blonde, hustled Maggie down the street and toward the amphitheater. Suleiman guided their path with carefully placed shots until they were trapped. Makmoud, the leader of the team and his oldest half-brother, stepped into view. The blonde jumped in front of Maggie.

"Do it!" Makmoud hissed through the comms unit in his ear.

The gunshot again echoed off the nearby buildings.

His eyes snapped open as he sucked in a quick breath. No, he wasn't on some rooftop. He was in a Starbucks in Tempe that was a mile from where Shelly and Diana lived. Sana now gazed at him.

"Are you okay?" she mouthed.

He offered a weak smile and nodded.

She cocked her head as if doubting him before she resumed her study.

He stared at the pictures included with the article. One of Maggie McCall speaking at an event for women's rights in the Middle East. Another of—

"Not you, Victor," he muttered aloud.

His mentor stared at him from his official Secret Service portrait.

Sana glanced up. Softly, she murmured, "What's going on?"

"Nothing," he muttered. He tasted bile as his hamburger and the coffee he'd drunk tried to come back up. He turned his attention to the last picture. Similar to Victor's, it was an official portrait. The blonde wore her hair up, but it did nothing to mask the high cheekbones and facial shape of the woman

Jennifer Haynie

he'd seen in the picture in Victor's studio. Now he saw that her eyes were a violet-blue. The caption listed her as Rachel Marina, fellow agent and Victor's fiancée.

What have I done?

Suleiman slammed the lid of his laptop. His heart pounded in his ears as he made the connection.

Three years before, he'd killed Victor Chavez's fiancée.

He pushed to his feet so fast that his chair toppled backward and clattered to the terra cotta.

"Suleiman?" Eyes wide, Sana stared at him.

"Lunch hit," he muttered as he righted it and rushed to the bathroom. He locked the door before bracing his hands on the sink. Chest heaving, he stared at himself in the mirror.

Dark hair worn short and slightly thick along the top as per the current style. Two-day growth of beard, due more to laziness than trying to look suave. Skin on the fairer side than olive during the winter. Gray-brown eyes. He liked to say he favored his mother—until he noted his other features. Heavy brows, slightly aquiline nose. Firm mouth. A deeper olive tone in his skin now that summer had arrived.

A person Sana would call an Average Joe.

No, a gifted and talented killer.

Just like his half-brothers, Jibril and Makmoud Hidari, both *Quds* officers embedded with a South American Hezbollah cell, men who were brilliant and had honed their craft to perfection.

He hung his head. Fool him for thinking he'd be able to forget his past. FBI Special Agent Gary Walton had recruited him for Shadow Box almost two years ago specifically because of his observation and sniper skills. With Shadow Box, he'd taken what he'd learned at the compound in Venezuela and used it for good. He'd sworn he'd walked away from the life he'd had under Makmoud.

"You can call me Suleiman al-Ibrahim," he'd told Gary when he accepted the offer to join Shadow Box. "You are never to call me Ibrahim Hidari again because I am no longer a Hidari. Am I clear?"

He'd been wrong. His past had caught up with him.

Operation Peacemaker

Dizziness assailed him. His pulse quickened. So did his breath. Oh, no. Panic attack, his first since moving to Arizona.

Leaning against the door, he sagged downward. The world tilted. He put his head between his knees and focused on the simple act of pushing oxygen into and out of his lungs. *Breathe. In. Out. Slow it down. In. Out.* Gradually, things stopped spinning. He risked opening his eyes. Still the same tile on the floor. Same toilet. The muted noises of the espresso machines. Everything remained the same.

Hah. He wanted to laugh at that.

Nothing was the same. Nor would it ever be again.

Grasping the cold porcelain of the sink, he hauled himself upright and risked another glance in the mirror.

His discovery had destroyed his inner peace.

New dread washed over him. Sana had no idea of what he'd done. He couldn't tell her. She'd hate him.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Out in a minute," he called.

First things first. He splashed water on his face, then took several more deep, calming breaths. Time to rejoin the real world.

Sana peered at him, her dark eyes liquid with concern. "Are you okay?"

He'd never be okay. Not with the knowledge he now harbored in his heart. But he couldn't tell her that, so he lied, "Just a bit of indigestion. Look. It's almost four. I think we need to get going."

She didn't move. Instead, she glanced her notebook, then at him. She drew in a breath. Finally, she nodded and began gathering her books into a tote bag. "I think you're right."

As they strolled into the hot Arizona afternoon, Suleiman did what he had to do. He took what he'd learned and stuffed it into the deepest, darkest corners of his soul, the exact same place where he'd relegated memories of his half-brothers and his time at their Hezbollah compound in Venezuela.

Never again would he revisit it.

Never. Not ever.