



Darkest Before Dawn (KGI series)

By Maya Banks

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THE ALL-NEW KGI NOVEL from the “incredibly awesome” (Jaci Burton) #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *When Day Breaks*.

The Kelly Group International (KGI): A super-elite, top secret, family-run business.

Qualifications: High intelligence, rock-hard body, military background.

Mission: Hostage/kidnap victim recovery. Intelligence gathering. Handling jobs the U.S. government can't...

The enigmatic Hancock has been both opponent and ally to the KGI teams for as long as they've known him. Always working a deep game, Hancock's true allegiance has never been apparent, but one thing is for certain—he never lets anything get in the way of duty.

But now, his absolute belief in the primacy of his ultimate goal is challenged by a captive he's been ordered to guard, no matter how much she suffers in her prison. She's the only woman who's ever managed to penetrate the rigid walls surrounding his icy heart, but will he allow his perplexing feelings for the beautiful victim to destroy a mission he's spent years working to complete or will he be forced to sacrifice her for “the greater good.”

From the Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the novels of Maya Banks

“If you haven’t read this series yet, you totally should...Incredibly awesome...I love Maya Banks and I love her books.”—Jaci Burton, *New York Times* bestselling author

“A must-read for...Christine Feehan and Lora Leigh fans.”—*Fresh Fiction*

“Everything I love in a good book—suspense, romance, a twist, hot sex. Bring on the next one!”—*Ret Hot Books*

“Maya Banks...really dragged me through the gamut of emotions. From... ‘Is it hot in here?’ to ‘Oh my GOD’...I’m ready for the next ride now!”—*USA Today*

“[A] one-two punch of entertainment that will leave readers eager for the next book.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“For those who like it naughty, dirty, and do-me-on-the-desk HAWT!”—Examiner.com

“You’ll be on the edge of your seat with this one.”—*Night Owl Reviews*

About the Author

Maya Banks is the #1 *USA Today* and #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the Surrender trilogy, the Breathless trilogy, the Sweet series, and the Colters’ Legacy novels.

She lives in the South with her husband and three children and other assorted babies, such as her two Bengal kitties and a calico who’s been with her as long as her youngest child. She’s an avid reader of romance and loves to dish books with her fans and anyone else who’ll listen!

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Praise for the novels of Maya Banks

Titles by Maya Banks

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EPILOGUE

CHAPTER 1

HONOR Cambridge applied one of the colorful Band-Aids with yellow smiley faces over the tiny prick that had been made on the arm of the four-year-old boy and offered him a reassuring smile. In flawless Arabic, she told him how brave he'd been not to show fear or distress in front of his mother and upset her further.

He gave her a toothy grin that already showed signs of male arrogance even at such a young age, as if to tell her of *course* he'd been brave.

Though Honor held no medical degree, her training was advanced and she'd learned a lot through trial by fire. Technically her job was as a relief worker, offering aid in its many forms to the poor and oppressed in the small villages caught between warring factions and the never-ending struggle for supremacy.

Her family supported her absolutely, but she also knew they questioned her burning need to devote her life to the service of others. They were proud of her, but they also wished she had chosen other, *safer* places to offer help. Not the war-torn Middle East when the threat wasn't just from other nations but *within* their country as well from groups, divided by religious, political and cultural differences and unable to tolerate the differences of others. They all wanted to force others to bend to their way of life, and the lengths they went to impose their beliefs on those who didn't share the same ideology still managed to appall and bewilder

Honor despite the fact that she should be hardened by now. Nothing should shock her. And yet . . . Every day she managed to be surprised, because there was always more. When she thought she'd seen it all, something always managed to catch her off guard.

But to become jaded and cynical was the kiss of death. The day she could no longer feel compassion for the innocent and the oppressed and anger at the senseless violence and despair that was so pervasive in the region she served was the day she needed to find a staid, mindless nine-to-five job, have a safe life where the most dangerous thing she encountered was rush-hour traffic.

Honor put her hand on the boy's arm to direct him to his waiting mother, who was already holding the large care package filled with things most people took for granted but were precious commodities in villages where running water was a luxury.

The entire building suddenly shook and the floor buckled beneath Honor's feet as though an earthquake were occurring.

No one screamed. But looks of terror, all too common on the faces of people who'd become dear to Honor, were shared by everyone. Eerie silence ensued, and then . . .

The world exploded around them, a terrible storm, a whirling vortex of heat, fire and the acrid smell of explosives.

And blood.

Death had a smell all of its own. And Honor had seen more blood and death, had smelled it, had witnessed the horrible sight of the very essence of life slowly seep from a once-vibrant human being. An innocent child. A mother seeking only to protect her young. A father slaughtered in front of his entire family.

Chaos reigned as people ran, no clear direction in mind, and yet Honor viewed the goings-on calmly, as if she were apart from her body and viewing dispassionately the attack on the relief center. One of her coworkers—her friend—screamed at her to take cover and then went utterly still, death in her eyes as blood bloomed over her chest. She sagged like a puppet, her expression not one of pain but of great sorrow. And regret.

Tears burned the corners of Honor's eyes as she finally forced herself into motion. There were children to shield. Women to save. The vicious extremist cell would not take them all. It was an oath, a litany that repeated over and over in her mind as she shoved children and mothers alike out of the rear exit and into the desert heat.

One of the women grasped Honor's hand when Honor turned to go back in and pleaded with her in Arabic to come with them. To run. To save herself. The extremists would have no mercy. Especially for Westerners.

Honor gently extricated her hand from the woman's desperate hold. "May Allah be with you," she whispered, praying in her heart that God, any God, *every* God, would stop the hate and bloodshed. The senseless killing of the good and innocent.

Then she turned and ran back into the building, or what was left of it. Dimly she registered that the lightweight but cool western flip-flops she usually wore had somehow fallen off her feet in the chaos surrounding her, but the last thing on her mind was protecting her feet when her life was at stake.

She searched frantically for her fellow relief workers. The two doctors who worked tirelessly day and night,

sometimes going many nights without sleep because the need for medical aid was so great. The nurses who did the work that many physicians in the United States did and with far less advanced technology or diagnostic tools.

Everywhere she turned, all she saw was blood, rivers of blood. And death. The stench made her stomach revolt and she clamped a hand over her mouth to prevent herself from being violently ill and to silence the scream that welled from the very depths of her soul.

There was no solace to be found anywhere she looked, but she could at least be grateful that she didn't see the bodies of many children, or their mothers. Most had fled, well trained and accustomed to such attacks. Honor's comrades, her friends, the people who had the same calling as she, hadn't fared as well.

The very earth exploded beneath her. Around her. Stone and debris pelted her, battering her in an endless wave of pain and terror. She took a single step, wincing when something sharp cut into her tender foot. And then the already sagging roof collapsed, sending her sprawling painfully across the ravaged floor. Debris rained down on her. No, that was the ceiling caving in on her, pinning her beneath rock, rubble, a shattered beam. The cloud of dust and smoke was so thick she couldn't suck air into her tortured lungs.

She wasn't sure if it was the thickness of the smoke and decimated plaster that made it impossible for her to breathe or if it was the mountain of rubble she was buried under, pressing mercilessly down on her until she was sure every bone in her body would be crushed, unable to withstand the unbearable strain.

Pain was present. It was there. She knew it. But it was distant. As if it were trying to penetrate the thickest fog surrounding her. Numbness crawled insidiously over and through her body, and she wasn't sure if it was a blessing to be unable to feel what had to be excruciating pain or if this was the curse of death.

Her death.

Her eyelids fluttered sluggishly as she struggled to remain conscious, too afraid that if she gave in to the encroaching darkness, death would win the ultimate battle.

She wasn't a stranger to death. She saw it on a daily basis. Nor was she in denial of the enormous risk she took by working in a country not only at constant war with neighboring countries, all with different agendas, beliefs and differing levels of fanaticism, but also divided within their own borders, each region determined to overtake the entire country and force their will on those with opposing viewpoints.

And then there were those who *needed* no reason to murder, terrorize and victimize their fellow countrymen. Those were the worst of all. Unpredictable. They reeked of fanaticism, and their only agenda was to strike fear in the hearts of all who crossed them. They wanted glory. They wanted to be feared by their enemy and revered by other factions too afraid to engage them in battle.

They wanted the world to know of them. Who they were. They wanted people to whisper their name as if afraid of conjuring them by speaking of the monsters too loudly. They'd fast learned that the quickest way to elevate their status, gain worldwide media attention and be able to recruit the elite, the best of the best, ones not only unafraid to give their lives for their "cause" but who embraced the glory of being a martyr was to target Westerners. Americans in particular.

The U.S. media gave the glory seekers precisely what they craved. Around-the-clock coverage every time they launched another attack. And with that attention came ambition for more. They'd grown bolder, rapidly expanding their network, their power giving pause to the very nations that would ordinarily condone such hatred of the West.

Such power made leaders of oil-rich countries nervous. So much so that an unprecedented summit had been called, bringing together sworn enemies to discuss the ever-growing problem of a fanatical group with power, wealth, military might and unprecedented numbers joining with each passing day.

Men and women from all corners of the earth. What could possibly inspire such hatred? Such a thirst for pain, violence, hurt and suffering?

Honor shuddered as the numb shell surrounding her showed signs of fragmenting, and for a moment pain assaulted her, taking her breath. Black crept into her vision, the light growing dimmer and dimmer. Tears burned like acid, but she refused to give in to them. She was alive. At least for now. None of the other relief workers had been as fortunate.

The building looked as though a meteor had hurtled through the earth's atmosphere and decimated the entire area. Half of the roof had collapsed, and judging by the creaking and groaning that echoed with the faintest whisper of wind, the rest wasn't far behind.

She'd never get out. And for that matter, perhaps her fellow relief workers *had* received mercy from a higher being. A quick death was surely better than what awaited any survivors discovered by the bloodthirsty savages who'd wrought such devastation.

Why had she been left to suffer? Why was she without mercy and grace? What sin had she committed to survive only to be condemned to hell, a fate worse than death? A cold chill dug deep into her battered body and clung tenaciously to her bones, her blood. She was freezing from the deepest recesses of her soul when around her the world was on fire, the flames of hell greedily consuming its victims.

"Get a grip, Honor," she muttered, her words slurring, evidence that she was in shock.

Here she was whining because she was alive. She'd survived the impossible and worse, her coworkers hadn't and she'd dared to *envy* them? She'd been spared when no one else had. It had to mean something. Her life had purpose. There was still much for her to do. God wasn't finished with her yet, and here she lay amid the rubble of destruction acting the ungrateful child for having lived. Never had she felt so ashamed. What would her family think? They certainly wouldn't be upset that she was still alive. Her death would cause them endless pain. She was the baby. The youngest of six siblings and she was dearly loved by all. They might not like that she put herself at such risk, but they understood her calling and supported her. They were proud of her. If for no one else, she would survive for them.

The sound of raised voices, barked orders and debris being shoved aside froze Honor where she lay trapped. Panic welled, her heart accelerating wildly. Her breaths, already ragged and painful, grew even more so. She closed her eyes and willed herself not to make a sound.

The soldiers were picking through the ruins looking specifically for the Westerners—the people who ran the relief center and offered aid to refugees. Their triumph over the success of their attack sickened Honor. There were gleeful shouts as one after another, a worker was found dead. Tears tightened her throat when it was suggested that the bodies be dragged from the clinic and lined up so photos could be taken and shown to the world, a warning to others that their presence was offensive.

Oh God, what would happen when they found her? They were systematic in their search, almost as if they knew who the relief workers were and how many there were. If they were happy over so many dead, how much more excited would they be to have a live hostage? Someone to make an example of.

The building creaked and groaned, the remaining walls protesting the weakness of the structure. More debris

rained down, pelting the entire area. Honor barely managed to hold in a sound of pain when something hit the objects covering her, causing them to crush her even more.

The invaders were suddenly cautious and wary, their talk going to whether it was safe to continue their systematic body count. When one suggested they get out immediately—before what remained of the shell of the building fell down around their ears—an argument broke out, the voices loud and harsh and entirely too close for Honor's comfort.

They were near her and drawing closer all the time. She could all but hear their breaths, feel the urgent exhalation over her neck even though she knew that wasn't possible. But she felt hunted. Just as prey surely must feel when a predator was closing in for the kill.

She closed her eyes and prayed to live when just moments earlier she'd lamented the fact that she *hadn't* died. A fervent prayer became a litany in her mind not only to live, but to survive. To escape, unscathed, the terrible fate she'd endure were she discovered by the soldiers who thought nothing of raping, torturing and killing women. Or children, for that matter.

A shudder quaked through her body before she could call it back, and then she held her breath, hoping she hadn't betrayed herself. She forced calm she didn't feel to settle over her body, blocking out the pain and gut-wrenching fear. Never had she been more terrified than she was at this moment. No amount of preparing, no number of close calls with militants bent on destruction could possibly have given her a glimpse into the reality she'd spent too many months to count mentally bracing herself for.

In her heart she'd felt it inevitable that she would face ultimate fear, pain, but she'd never truly allowed herself to think she could be killed doing what she felt was her calling in life. Her parents had tried to convince her. They'd pleaded with her in the beginning, even going so far as to say they didn't want to lose their "baby."

Her four older brothers and older sister had all gathered to attempt to persuade her not to go, pulling out the big guns, telling her they wanted her to be a part of her nieces' and nephews' lives. Her sister had tearfully held Honor's hand tightly in hers and chokingly said she wanted her sister to be at her wedding, at her side, even though her sister had no plans to marry anytime soon.

She'd almost given in to their emotional blackmail. Inwardly she winced. *Blackmail* was too harsh a word. All they'd done and said had been out of love. It had been her mother in the end, sensing Honor's battle between wanting to please her family, wanting their happiness, and answering her need to serve others in embattled, terrorized nations, who had gathered the family together and quietly but firmly told them to stand down.

There had been so much love and understanding—and pride—in her gaze as she'd looked at Honor, tears glittering brightly in her eyes. Honor had felt it like a tidal wave, consuming her. Love, her mother's love squeezed her insides and warmed her heart as nothing else ever had.

No, her mother hadn't wanted Honor to go, but she understood. And she had told her husband and her other children that it was time to let go and allow Honor to fly. To be whom she was meant to be. It was her time to shine, when throughout her young life she'd been the quiet one, reveling in the accomplishments and happiness of her siblings as each followed their chosen paths.

Her mother's speech had shamed her siblings and her father, though that was never what Honor wanted. Each had offered their unconditional support and her father had hugged her tightly, gruffly telling her that she would always be his baby and to promise him she would make it back home.

Her chest swelled and ached, tears burning her eyelids once more as she considered the possibility that she would break her promise to her father.

Another rumble rolled through the battered building, and more debris and parts of the ceiling still intact came tumbling down on and around Honor. She heard coughing and muttered curses and then hope sprang to life when she'd thought she had none.

The militants came to the agreement—the conclusion—that they needed to evacuate the crumbling shell before they got trapped. Or killed.

The talk became lighter, relief seeping into some of the voices that had argued for their departure. They pointed out that dead bodies went nowhere and no one could have possibly have survived the explosions and deadly snipers who'd picked victims off as they attempted to flee.

Honor stifled a sob of grief. So many senseless deaths and for what? Because they were rendering aid to people desperately in need?

The next words she heard, growing fainter as the men began their retreat, froze Honor to the bone.

They would return once it was safe and locate each victim, ensuring that none of the aid workers had eluded death. God. They knew each worker. Had studied their targets. And provided Honor could even free herself before they returned to do their macabre accounting, they would know she hadn't died.

Which meant that they'd ruthlessly hunt her because above all else, this group was intolerant of failure. And if even one—Honor—escaped with her life, then their objective had not been achieved.

CHAPTER 2

HONOR came awake with dim awareness, her mind fogged. Disorientation had her in its firm grip and she struggled to make sense of her current situation. At once, pain slammed into her, as though it had simply been waiting for her awareness, annoyed that she'd slipped into unconsciousness and evaded its harsh, punishing pull.

She panted softly and peered through the piles of debris atop her and experimentally tried to wiggle her body, testing not only for more severe pain that would signal serious injury but also to see if she had any chance at getting herself out of the rubble pinning her to the floor.

It was pitch-black, signaling that night had fallen. She breathed a sigh of relief before quickly realizing that she wasn't out of the woods by a long shot. The night only helped her if she could somehow extricate herself from her prison and be mobile enough to flee into the protection of the dark.

Before despair could completely envelop her, she firmly pushed the negative emotion away. She was in enough danger without her convincing herself she had no chance. At this point, hope was all she had. And a very strong will to survive. To not be defeated by men who thrived on pain, fear and complete subjugation of everyone who didn't hold to their ideology.

She would get home. She would find a way. And by God, when she did, she'd send the biggest "fuck you" to the terrorist cell that had murdered her coworkers—her friends—and let them know that a simple American woman took their best shot and survived it.

Imbued by a new sense of purpose and determination, she set her mind to figuring out what she could move and what the best course of action was to pull herself from the carnage under which she found herself imprisoned.

The minutes ticked by with agonizing slowness. Pain was her constant companion. Sweat bathed her body, but she was too damp for only sweat. She knew she was bleeding. Not horribly so and not fast or she wouldn't be conscious. But sticky warmth clung to her skin and she could smell it now that the acrid smell of mold, plaster, destroyed stone and wood and the chemical smell of explosives had diminished, carried away by the night wind.

She took her time, testing each part of her body, starting with her feet. She wiggled her toes and then flexed her feet and then rotated her legs as best she was able, wincing when her knee bumped into a jagged piece of stone. The walls of the clinic were completely stone, the ceiling made of wood with heavy beams supporting the structure. The floor was concrete and no amount of sweeping or cleaning prevented the sand from blowing in and accumulating on every surface. It made trying to keep a sterile environment one bitch of a job, and infection was always a worry among the doctors and nurses.

Her knee felt tight. Swollen. And very sore. She bent it slowly in small increments, not wanting to do further damage if it was badly injured, but she desperately needed to have the use of her legs. Her arms weren't as important. But she needed her legs and feet to get her the hell away from this place. As quickly as humanly possible.

She couldn't count on help coming in. No rescue. The State Department had issued a decree ordering all U.S. citizens from the region, and there would be no aid for those who ignored the warning. There were no U.S. troops in the area. No embassy. No American presence here at all.

And no other group or country's military dared to oppose the militant savages for fear of reprisal. They were too busy holding a summit where everyone talked the issue to death instead of taking action, a fact that infuriated Honor.

How could any government turn away from the pain and suffering of countless men, women and children in such a widespread area? Why wasn't there more public outrage? God only knew it was reported in the media around the clock. Was everyone so fatigued by the constant coverage that it had become tedious and they'd distanced themselves? Or were they just so smug and comfortable in their safe environment that they had no care for the plight of others?

She harnessed the helpless rage that clawed at her, and she held it to her. It served to heighten her determination and strength to free herself.

After her careful examination of her limbs and the areas of her body that protected her most vital organs, she was satisfied—or perhaps merely hopeful—that she could do this.

She started with her hands, scratching and shoving away all manner of clutter, swearing when her fingers caught on sharper objects, slicing the skin and causing her to bleed. Her fingernails tore raggedly, ripping into the quick, but it was minor compared to the pulsing pain in the rest of her body and only sharpened her drive. The more setbacks she incurred, the angrier she grew, and adrenaline took the place of pain and the self-defeating thought process her mind seemed to be caught up in.

It was hard to work, positioned as she was—on her stomach or rather awkwardly angled slightly to her side. It forced her to work mostly with one hand, the one not bent under her body and useless except to clear what it could reach.

She had no concept of the passing of time, only the urgency that she escape before dawn, when the killers would no doubt return to resume their body count. She bit into her lip to hold back her tears of grief, determined that they wouldn't beat her. Only she could tell the stories of the now-dead heroes and heroines who'd devoted their lives to helping others. Only she could bear witness to the atrocity committed here, and their bravery and selflessness would not go unheralded. Not if she had anything to say about it.

After what seemed to be hours, she had uncovered the entire upper half of her body and for a moment she sank down, resting her cheek against the floor as she prepared for the next step. Somehow she had to turn over and sit as upright as possible so she could work on freeing the lower half of her body. Her legs. Her only hope for getting away from this place.

Gathering her strength—and courage—she began twisting her body, wincing as every muscle protested the awkward movement. She felt weak as a kitten. Sweat now soaked her tattered clothing. Between it and the blood coating portions of her body, her pants and shirt stuck to her like they'd been glued on.

Her injured knee would give her the greatest problem. She had to rotate her entire bottom half, regardless of the weight pressing down on it.

Gritting her teeth, she planted one palm down on the floor and twisted her upper body so that her other hand hovered inches above the floor on her other side. She pushed upward, straining, twisting and then gasping as pain splintered through her legs. Both of them.

God, would she be unable to walk after all? Had she broken them both, and was she in too much shock to feel the breaks? The only pain she could identify was in her knee.

Again, she wiggled her toes and feet, seeking reassurance that she hadn't imagined being able to do so moments earlier. She paid closer attention this time, leaning in an uncomfortable, awkward pose as she concentrated fiercely on whether she felt pain or weakness.

Then the thought occurred to her that the reason she wasn't feeling pain or weakness could be that she couldn't feel her legs at all. As soon as the panicked thought blazed through her mind, she shoved it impatiently aside. Irrational, hysterical thoughts had no place here. If she'd been paralyzed she wouldn't be able to move her feet or know that she was capable of moving them, and she wouldn't feel the throbbing pain in her knee.

Her fears at a more manageable level, Honor braced herself and stared determinedly at the mound covering her lower half. She was absurdly pleased, and excitement coursed through her veins when she felt the soft whisper of night air over the toes of her left foot. She wiggled again, paying more attention, realizing that they were poking out of the rubble.

A shudder overtook her. Thank God the militants hadn't gotten close enough to her to see the end of her foot protruding. They would have uncovered her to see if she was dead like the others. Upon finding her alive? She slammed her mind shut, refusing to continue down that thought path. They hadn't found her. They wouldn't find her. So there was no need to torment herself with what could have been. She was more focused on what would never be.

Her lips thinning, pressing together in a vow not to allow a single sound past them, she turned her body with more resolve this time instead of the experimental twisting she'd done at first. A grimace shook the line of her lips and she ground her teeth together, her jaw aching from the pressure.

Determination was alive inside her. It took over. Became her. In that moment, failure to make her escape

wasn't even a remote possibility. A pained hiss exploded from her open mouth, her breaths hard as she exerted more pressure, straining rigidly to rotate her hips and legs.

Fire blew down the back side of her legs as they scraped at the jagged edges of rock, metal, wood and glass. Her stomach jolted and squeezed inwardly as if seeking to rid itself of any content when her injured knee banged into an immovable object. She saw stars, and tears burned the edges of her eyelids. It only made her angrier. Her fury grew until she shook with it.

"Why won't you help me?" she raged, her gaze casting upward before shame fell over her much as the building had. "Sorry," she muttered, closing her eyes. "But I could really use your help right now. An angel would be nice if you're too busy to see to it personally."

She huffed in another breath, found the center of calm that was nestled in the rage boiling through her veins. Yelling at God wasn't going to get her anywhere. And as the old saying went, God helped those who helped themselves, and right now she wasn't doing anything remotely helpful. Whining, wishing she'd died and constantly battling tears weren't the hallmark of someone worthy of the gift of life. And yet, here she lay. So close to freedom while the others also lay close by, their souls already gone from this world.

She had a purpose. She thought it again. It bolstered her spirits and eased some of the fear eating away at her insides. Maybe everything up to now had merely been preparation for her true purpose instead of her having already found her purpose and serving it. She wasn't going to find out if she didn't get her ass out of here before the sun rose.

Turning off all the raging emotion building like a volcano about to erupt and refusing to acknowledge pain or the current limitations on her body, Honor attempted to turn again. This time she didn't stop when the hideous scrape seared her legs or when her knee, so tender and swollen, screamed its protest of her movements. She refused to stop until finally both heels were planted on the floor, her feet and toes directed upward.

Her knee throbbed angrily, stretched by the new position and her leg lying flat and unbent. Hastily, she pushed herself upward until she leaned forward, palms planted amid the debris surrounding her.

Though her eyes had grown accustomed to having no light, it was impossible to see anything with detail with the entire area blanketed in suffocating darkness. Tentatively she reached down, feeling her way along her legs, her fingers lightly brushing over the obstacles that lay between her and freedom.

She swore when she encountered the heavy beam that she now remembered falling on her in the explosion. It had been what banged her knee up before she'd wound up facedown on the floor, the weight of half the building bearing down on her back. When the world had come crashing down on her, she'd fallen to her back but had instinctively rolled over, trying to protect herself in any way she could.

For a moment, she paused and dug her fingers sharply into her temples, pressing and rubbing in tight circles, digging in and applying firm pressure in hopes that she could make at least the dull drum in her head go away and clear the residue of murky fog that had stubbornly clung to her ever since she'd regained consciousness.

It was sheer will that had kept her from simply acquiescing and fading and giving in to the threat of darkness in her mind, the thought that if she just let go, then the pain and fear, *everything* would simply go . . . away. But the reminder that when or even if she awakened, she would face a nightmare worse than death, that she would be thrust into the very bowels of hell and once again lament the fact that she'd survived, kept her sharply focused on her task.

It was one thing for the regret over having lived to have insidiously crept through her mind in a moment where she'd opened her eyes to pain, deep sorrow and confusion and to have briefly succumbed to the shameful thought in a moment of weakness before she'd collected her wits and regained her iron resolve—something she'd always possessed—and quite another to be in a situation where she gave the cowards responsible for this massacre the satisfaction of hearing her beg for death.

That angered her as much as the senseless deaths of so many good and generous people. People who'd never hurt another living soul. Whose only purpose was the driving desire to help those in need who couldn't help themselves.

The hell she'd ever show fear or be so cowardly as to beg those bastards for anything. She'd denounce and spit on their "beliefs," giving them the middle finger even if it wasn't the actual gesture but pronounced in her every look, her response, even her breath. Her dying breath.

Even better to flip them the bird alive. Back home, having thwarted their plan to annihilate every last one of the relief workers. Be smugly triumphant and say with more than words, *You didn't beat me. You couldn't beat me.*

It was a fantasy, a goal that kept her clawing at the remainder of her bonds. She worked with renewed energy. Faster. Angrier. Flinging rock, chunks of plaster, decimated pieces of chairs and exam tables. Everything but the beam that lay across her legs.

She felt around, noting that she'd cleared everything from atop the beam. Then her hands dipped lower and she leaned forward as far as she was able, her breath squeezing out in tortured breaths as she strained to discover a way out from underneath the heavy piece of wood.

A thoughtful frown curved her lips downward and her forehead wrinkled. She moved her hands lower to confirm the fact that the bottoms of her legs didn't in fact lie on the floor, but rather there was a layer of rubble and debris, and her legs were trapped between that layer and the beam.

She moved her hands outward, feeling to the sides to see if the beam had any support other than her legs. Sure it was heavy, but it didn't feel like she was bearing the brunt of its entire weight. She wouldn't have been able to turn over if she were.

Sure enough, the beam lay uneven across her legs but there were mounds of debris on either side of her that the beam was propped up on. She had maybe an inch of space between her leg with the injured knee and where the beam slanted across her, but on the other side, the beam pressed against her skin, but the weight wasn't unbearable.

Excited, she began to dig at the rubble underneath her legs, leaning up and this way and that in an effort to wiggle out every single obstacle between the backs of her legs and the floor. When her bleeding fingertips brushed along the rough concrete, hope flared, bursting into an inextinguishable flame. She *was* going to get out.

After shoving the rough and jagged pieces farther away from both legs, she reached behind her, leaning back as far as she could, planting her palms on the floor for leverage. Then she began the arduous task of inching backward, praying that enough space had been created between the beam and her legs to allow her to slide free from her final barrier to freedom.

It sapped every ounce of her strength. She was inhaling and exhaling noisily, trying to drag precious oxygen into her lungs as her entire body strained to pull her legs from beneath the heavy wood.

Each inch was agony. This time she didn't curse the tears that not only threatened, but slid down her cheeks. She was too focused on her goal to care. Besides, if she managed to pull off her escape, she could consider them tears of relief.

She felt a burst of exultation when the going got easier as the thicker part of her legs pulled loose. As her legs grew smaller toward her feet, she was able to move much quicker. Finally the tops of her feet bumped into the barrier and she was forced to stop, take a short break to catch her breath and then breathe away the pain and tension.

She flexed her feet forward as far as she could flatten them. She turned them to the side, gritting her teeth at the pain the twisting motion caused her battered knee. But it worked. Her feet slid under the beam, rubbing against the coarse wood. She could feel splinters embedding themselves into the soft skin of her arches, but she was too close to victory to even pause.

She welcomed the feel of the tiny wood shards piercing the tops of her feet, because it meant she was almost there. At the end, she didn't even feel the splinters cutting into her, though she felt the warmth of blood on her skin from where the beam had abraded the tender flesh.

Her hands slipped and she nearly fell back when her feet finally escaped the barrier. She scrambled upright, because if she let herself relax even for a moment, she might never muster the will to get up, get out. Flee.

Triumph surged, hot and wild in her veins. But as she lurched to her feet—or rather attempted to do so—her triumph left her sagging like a deflated balloon. Pain lanced down her spine, all the way down to her feet and then back up again, racing toward the base of her skull, where it seemed to ricochet. For several long seconds her head drew spasmodically from the pain shooting up her neck, almost as though she were having a seizure. She breathed through the pain until at last it subsided to a manageable level and the rigidity finally left her neck so she was able to move once more.

She shook like a leaf. The effort to stand, something so easy and taken for granted before, had sapped her strength and left her huddled on the floor as limp as a dishrag.

No. Not now. Damn it. She had not spent the entire night freeing herself from the wreckage of the clinic only to lie there and await her fate at the hands of men who were so evil that she couldn't comprehend such a capacity for hatred and violence. No. They would not get their hands on her. She'd take her own life before ever allowing her fate to be decided by monsters. And she wasn't ready to die yet. She had a lot of life left to live. This was only a minor—okay, a major—bump in the road.

Everyone had them. Maybe not everyone faced gun-wielding, rocket-launcher-carrying crazed maniacs who used explosives as naturally as others breathed and whose mode of transportation was tanks, but she'd survived relatively unscathed. Physically. She'd carry the mental scars from this day for the rest of her life. She had no doubt.

This time she tested her strength very carefully, pushing herself up with her hands, bending her uninjured knee down to the floor to give her lift, but she was careful to angle her hurt knee out so that it bore no weight and didn't press into the floor. Getting up with two hands and only one leg wasn't the fastest mode of travel, but it would get the job done. She was prepared this time and not acting like a hasty fool out to get herself killed by running madly from the destroyed structure that had been home to her for the last year.

She didn't allow herself to feel sorrow as she scanned the area, putting only as much pressure on the left foot bearing her swollen knee as was necessary to limp forward and make slow progress through the devastation. She had to have the necessary tools to survive on her own. In a foreign land with no American military

presence, no American embassy, no refuge or sanctuary and no way to get back home unless she could somehow get word to her family.

She couldn't look at the broken, bloodied bodies she knew were there but thankfully were hard to make out in the dark. She had to be smart, a passive observer, and look for things that would help her escape. Not just from this building and the men who'd attacked without provocation. But the entire country.

Somehow she had to find her way down the long, winding, arduous path home.

CHAPTER 3

"YOU want me and my men to do what?" Hancock asked mildly, not betraying his feeling of *What the fuck*.

Guy Hancock, or Hancock as he was generally known, although not many knew his given name, faced Russell Bristow, his incredulity over Bristow's stupidity not showing, but there nonetheless.

Hancock's identity changed with the winds, and at times it was hard for him to keep up with who he currently was. It was a tired existence, one he grew wearier of all the time. But at least he had a purpose. Or at least he had at one time. Now he wasn't as sure as he'd been earlier on. Time had robbed him of that strict code of honor until he wondered just how close to the line he was and how close he'd come to becoming the very thing he worked so tirelessly to extinguish and protect the innocent from. He knew no other life except killing. Manipulating. Mastering the masters of evil and exacting justice in his own cold, methodical way that had nothing to do with any established legal code.

He'd long ago forgone any semblance of a conscience. He had an unwavering and deeply ingrained sense of honor, but not everyone would agree that with honor came a conscience. And his personal code was just that. Personal to him. He didn't see in black and white. His world was steeped in gray. Great looming shadows that threatened to consume him. At times he felt hunted—and he was—but it was as though he knew his time was limited. The urgency of taking down his target, one he'd waited a very long time to get close to, was like a ticking time bomb. Success had eluded him, and now time had run out. Hancock would never get this close again. He knew it. His men knew it. They felt, too, that they would all likely die carrying out their mission. And yet none turned their back on their duty. They embraced death as the result of victory. Nothing more.

Russell Bristow's lips curled in distaste, anger flaring in his eyes. The stupid bastard wasn't smart enough to mask his emotions or control his temper. It would get him killed, and Hancock mentally shrugged. It would mean one less asshole in the world and one less person he had to take out himself in the end. But until his ultimate goal was achieved, he needed to keep the stupid bastard alive, though he'd love nothing more than to break his neck and rid the world of his foul presence. Bristow was a means to an end, and so Hancock had to rein in his utter distaste of the man until he served his purpose. *Then* he would die, because Hancock would never let such depravity live.

"Don't you mean *my* men?" Bristow snapped.

Hancock lifted one eyebrow and simply stared the other man down, pinning him with a gaze he knew others feared and were intimidated by, until a mottled flush worked its way up Bristow's neck and he fidgeted like a bug under a microscope. He looked away and then back but didn't meet Hancock's eyes this time. His fear was a stench in the air that offended Hancock and disgusted his men. Courage came in many forms, shapes and colors. Courage wasn't always necessary to succeed. Determination was. But fear bred stupidity. Fear caused mistakes. Fear could lead men to betray themselves, their cause and anyone impeding one's goal of

others.

Bristow was loyal to none save himself, and Hancock never made the mistake of thinking otherwise or of misjudging him—or anyone else, for that matter. Bristow would sacrifice Hancock and all his men if he felt at any time his life was in danger. And it was. It was Hancock's and his men's job to ensure that Bristow felt safe and invincible. To feed his natural arrogance and desire for power. If he knew just what he was up against, he'd crawl into a deep dark hole, terrified, and Hancock's last link to his objective would be forfeit. No, he needed Bristow in all his stupidity and vainness. Maksimov knew what he was dealing with as well. A puppet. A man who thought he was in control and yet was easily controlled by others. In a game of chess, the most important match of Hancock's life, he had to make it appear that Bristow was easily manipulated by Maksimov and yet move him in such a way that it positioned Maksimov as *Hancock* wanted. So that in fact, Hancock manipulated both men without either being aware.

"As you are all on my payroll and take orders from me, that makes all of you my men," Bristow said, his voice not as commanding as it had been a moment earlier. But then he was a coward, always employing others to do his dirty work for him. If his options were to stay and fight with his men or abandon them and run, he'd run. His kind always did. It was precisely why Hancock had his own team here under the guise of having vetted and employed them for Bristow. Bristow had no knowledge of the fact that Hancock's team had worked together for years and that their loyalty to one another ran deep. That they answered to Hancock and no other. Ever.

In a world where Hancock trusted none but a precious few, his trust was given to Titan, though it was no longer Titan. It wasn't . . . anything. The very government who'd created them, faking their deaths and then raising them from the ashes like the phoenix, had given them new identities and they were to have no ties to the outside world. The mission was all that mattered. Not people. Not politics or the delicate dance of diplomacy.

The government had created . . . monsters. Killing machines without mercy or conscience, trained to carry out orders at all cost. The good of the many always outweighed the good of the few. And when Titan grew too powerful, when they began to question their orders, their objective and how it aided the greater good, when the missions seemed to grow too personal, too inconsequential for a group of Titan's training and abilities, they'd been disbanded, branded traitors, loose cannons, murderers. Even *terrorists*. They'd been labeled the very thing they hunted and it still burned a hole in Hancock's gut. After living so many years with no feelings, no emotions, turning them off at will and doing his job with cool efficiency, he learned true rage. Not since his foster mother, a woman who'd made Hancock feel that he had worth and had given him the first and only sense of *family*, had been murdered in retaliation for her husband's mission, had Hancock felt anger and overwhelming rage. That mission had been personal. The only one. Big Eddie, the man who called him son, had come to him for help. Revenge. And even if Big Eddie hadn't asked, Hancock would have hunted Caroline Sinclair's murderer.

But things had changed since then. That was years ago, when Titan operated under the authority of the U.S. government, though only a select few even knew of Titan's existence. They had much freedom then to ferret out those who were a threat to national security, to take out any threat at will. And then, their own government turned on them, thinking them expendable and easily disposed of.

Even now the hunters had become the hunted, and any number of classified military groups had orders to kill on sight. Having gained access to a shadowy CIA operative's computer files, Hancock had learned a hell of a lot about the country he'd sworn his allegiance to.

No, not everyone charged with the defense of America and its people was evil and self-serving, betraying the

citizens they were sworn to protect and defend. There were men and women who tirelessly took up the charge. But any one of those would kill Hancock on sight, thinking him a traitor to the principles they followed, lived, and would die for.

Titan had refused to die. They had evolved far beyond what their trainers in the beginning had taught them. And now, they not only fought to protect even those who'd betrayed them and countless innocent American lives but they had expanded their reach into a world filled with the same good and bad reflected in the U.S. government and military.

Innocence had no boundaries. No one nationality. One wasn't good or bad simply because one was a certain nationality or held a different belief system. Innocents died every day simply because there was no one to fight for them. Not even their own governments. Titan couldn't save the entire world, but they saved pieces of it. One piece at a time.

Taking out Maksimov—finally—would save a lot of lives. The sheer time it would take for someone else to pick up the remnants of his empire, to pick up the reins and take over operations, would enable other countries, other special ops groups to infiltrate and shut it down before it ever got back off the ground.

Because after Maksimov . . . Hancock shut his mind down, returning to the issue at hand, before Bristow truly understood the depth of Hancock's lack of respect and the fact that he in no way feared this man, that he was so confident of his superiority that he knew he could get to Bristow at any time and end his miserable existence. Despite his attempt to silence the many voices in his head, all replaying past events and ensuring his absolute focus on this mission above all else, a whisper slid insidiously through his mind, tracing each pathway so he had no choice but to hear it. It settled deep within him, taking root as it had done so many times before, and this time Hancock didn't even bother to uproot it, push it away, force it free so he could forget it was ever there.

After Maksimov you will be free of this life. It will be time for you to rest.

He nearly gritted his teeth. The whisper bothered him when so little else did. When so little else had the power to affect him. Rest could mean many different things to a man like him. But the one prevailing thought, the suspicion that took hold when nothing else would, was that in this case, rest meant eternal rest. And worse than the thought of it being final was the fact that he didn't fear it, didn't feel sadness or regret. All he felt was . . . anticipation. He didn't share his acceptance of this with his team or with the four people he considered family, the only people in the world who mattered to him. The only people he felt real emotion for. Love. Loyalty. Respect. And the knowledge that he'd die for any one of them. No, if they knew, they'd make it much harder for him. They'd never understand. They'd want him away from this life. They'd want him to live. For them. With them. They'd never understand that he could never adapt to civilian life—normal life. He didn't even know what normal was. He didn't fit into a world where everything was black and white, where gray wasn't accepted. He couldn't live or exist in a life where if something happened to someone he loved he couldn't go after the people responsible, couldn't make them pay. He would be expected to rely on and trust law enforcement and then the justice system to get justice for the person he loved. How fucked up was that?

He was a law unto himself, and that would never change. God help him, he didn't want it to change. Never would he sit back and allow someone else to do what was his duty alone.

Bristow was seething with impatience, taking Hancock's prolonged silence for disdain and insubordination. As much as Hancock wanted to tell him to get fucked, there was a higher purpose at hand, and Bristow mattered only as much as a pawn used to achieve that higher goal. Hancock wouldn't get rid of him yet. But he would allow the man to know who was really in control. Bristow would know not to cross Hancock, even

as he wouldn't be certain why. It would be nothing Hancock said—directly. But Bristow would know absolutely.

“You pay me,” Hancock said mildly. “I hired and pay *my* men. They follow *my* orders. Never think otherwise.”

Though the statement seemed bland, a simple truth, there was a soft warning that Bristow didn't misunderstand. For a brief moment fear flashed in the career criminal's eyes before he visibly chased it away with a shake of his head, a scowl replacing any hint of intimidation. He hated the feeling of inferiority. That Hancock, so rough around the edges, hard and unyielding, not handsome or appealing by anyone's standards, could possibly make a man like Bristow feel so . . . subservient. And yet he was too aware of Hancock's power to challenge the man who worked for him. He was . . . afraid . . . of him. And that rankled most of all.

Hancock almost smiled, but he was too disciplined to do so. He wanted the little bastard afraid of him—of his men. And he damn sure wanted the power-hungry warlord to know just where his men's loyalties lay. It wasn't with Bristow, and he'd be a fool to ever believe so.

“Now, about this woman,” Hancock said, deliberately bringing them back to the original subject. “What could be so important about a lone woman that you would risk pissing off one of the most powerful men in the world?”

Once again, anger flashed in Bristow's eyes. Impatience caused a twitch to his right eyelid, and he was barely maintaining a grasp on his temper. With anyone else, he would have already acted. He would have ordered the person who dared to question him and suggest *he* wasn't the most powerful man in the world to be killed. And it wouldn't be a quick merciful death either. Hancock had witnessed Bristow's depravities firsthand. He'd been forced to participate in order to prove himself. To enter Bristow's inner circle, gain his trust—and confidence—and position himself as Bristow's second in command.

The man was foul, and only the knowledge that when Hancock brought down his primary target he would then take out Bristow and dismantle his entire organization had kept him from killing Bristow on the spot. But he needed this man—or rather pawn, as loath as he was to admit it. Any idiot with Bristow's connections would do. It wasn't personal to Bristow or any greatness he perceived on his behalf. Maksimov, the primary target, the end goal, was a cagey bastard, and Hancock had come close too many times to count, only for the Russian to elude him.

He was determined that this was his final chase. It would all end here. He would bring down every kingpin in this macabre chain of evil. They preyed on the innocent, providing the necessary tools for anyone with the money and the means to wage war on the innocent. They were the cause of so much bloodshed. Rivers of it. Hundreds of thousands of deaths could be attributed to the links in the chain, but all pieces led to the same man. Maksimov. He had his fingers in every imaginable pie there was. If there was a way to profit from pain, suffering and terrorism, he found it.

Ironically, Maksimov provided equally to opposing factions, no doubt finding it amusing to see groups waging war against one another with weapons he'd provided, his pockets fat from the veritable monopoly he held on arms, explosives, every imaginable military weapon and even the necessary components to build nuclear weapons.

He was on every civilized country's most-wanted list. He was the most-wanted man in the world, and yet no one had succeeded in taking him down. Over the years, Hancock had tasted failure more times than he wished to remember as he relentlessly pursued Maksimov. Took advantage of avenues to him. Cultivated partnerships with those high up in the chain leading to Maksimov. Were it not for an attack of the very thing

he swore he didn't possess—a *conscience*—he'd have nailed the bastard twice over.

He'd mentally berated himself a hundred times, and yet he couldn't find it within him to have true regret over the choices he'd made. The only thing he'd been able to summon was the iron will to never again put the good of the one over the good of the many. The price was too high. He'd sacrificed his objective for a single innocent. On not one, but two occasions. And when he imagined how many thousands of innocent people had died—were still dying—because he'd saved two innocents, two people who were nothing but good—everything he wasn't—it only hardened his resolve to never again forfeit his honor, his belief system. He understood that the loss of the two women he'd chosen to forfeit his mission in order to save would have been a travesty. The world needed people like Grace and Maren. But he had no choice but to once again embrace the emotionless existence he'd lived for so many years and wrap himself deep in the layers so he would feel nothing but the burning drive to complete his mission at all costs.

He would not feel guilt over sacrificing the few for the many. It was a choice no one should have to make, but it was what he'd been made into. His skills honed by fire. Taught by the best. The knowledge that completing the mission at all costs was necessary and that failure was not an option had been so solidly ingrained into him that it had become a part of him. No, not a part. It had become all-consuming, the whole of his existence. So deeply rooted in his soul that it became who he was. What he was. Until there was nothing left of the person he'd once been, and in his place a ruthless warrior had been born. Forged by fire. Resolve of steel. No hesitation to do his sworn duty and uphold the only honor and code he adhered to. His own.

"You think me a fool," Bristow hissed, some of his earlier fire once again flashing in his eyes, his temper quick and churlish. "I don't pay you to judge me. I pay you for absolute obedience. If you can't handle that, then show yourself—and your men," he added snidely, "to the door."

Hancock did smile then, but it was mocking, meant to demonstrate contempt for Bristow and his utter lack of respect or fear of a man used to inspiring both.

"No, you pay me to do your dirty work. You pay me to save your ass. And you pay me because you fear that the many enemies you've made over the years will get to you, so you sought to hire the best and you did. By all means, if you are so confident in your abilities to see to those matters yourself, then my men and I will go elsewhere. There is always someone looking for one with my capabilities and who would certainly be more appreciative of them. I'm sure you will sleep just fine at night, confident in your safety."

Fear didn't merely flicker in Bristow's eyes, like a shadow chased away nearly as soon as it appeared. His entire face whitened and he swallowed visibly. Hancock felt confident calling the coward's bluff because above all things, Bristow feared death. His own, that is. He had no regard for the death of others and enjoyed being the instrument of death. It made him feel godlike and powerful, that he could decide whether another lived or died. And he loved others to have that knowledge of who and what he was so they'd fear him, acknowledge him and placate him, even worship him.

And there was the reason he despised Hancock so much. Because not only had Hancock proven himself invincible and impervious to death, but he held Bristow in no esteem whatsoever. He was confident in his own abilities and would never have to hire others to do his bidding. And he was a man others instinctively feared and deferred to. Bristow saw everything he craved—and lacked—in the man he'd hired, and he hated Hancock for it.

Not waiting, Hancock made a motion to his men as if to go, and he simply turned his back on Bristow, making sure at least two of his men had Bristow in their sight line so he didn't do something stupid like pull a gun and shoot Hancock in the back. Which would be completely in keeping with his character, because

Bristow was both a coward and not one who could control his temper.

“Maksimov will want her,” Bristow blurted out. “You have no idea how much. You don’t know who she is, only that I told you I wanted her.”

His tone was beseeching. He hoped to get Hancock and his men to stay without begging outright. He knew better than to command them to stay. And it tore at his already tattered pride to beg, to allow Hancock to know how much Bristow did need him and feared his world without Hancock there to be a barrier between him and his enemies.

It wasn’t Bristow’s desperation that stopped Hancock and his men. It was that one magic word. Maksimov.

Hancock slowly turned so he didn’t tip his hand. He leveled a stare at Bristow.

“Maksimov wants a lot of things,” he said matter-of-factly. “What makes the woman so special?”

“It’s not her,” Bristow said impatiently. “I mean it’s not personal to her. You don’t understand. She escaped from an attack on a relief center where she and many Westerners worked. She was the only survivor, and the militant group took no chances. They recovered all bodies and compared it to the list of people they knew worked there. They were the target. Once they discovered the woman wasn’t among the dead and was nowhere to found, they launched a search for her. So far, she’s evaded them and hasn’t been discovered.”

Hancock made a motion for his men to stand down and take their places in the room once more. A protective formation so Bristow was watched from every angle, though Bristow wasn’t smart enough to know that his every action was being monitored and that he’d be taken out immediately if he made one wrong move.

Hancock crossed his arms over his stomach in a deceptively relaxed and inquisitive mode.

“And why would this woman be of interest to Maksimov? So much so that you want me to track her and be the one to capture her before this group finds her? I doubt you have any interest in protecting her or saving her life, as surely when her pursuers find her—and they will—she’ll be dead. Or wish she were dead.”

Bristow seated himself behind the ornate desk he used for his business dealings. It reeked of wealth and opulence, but then Hancock would expect nothing less from a man who made certain everyone he came into contact with knew of his wealth and imagined power.

His eyes gleamed with . . . excitement. There was obviously something about the woman that gave Bristow an edge, imagined or not. His entire body bristled with impatience and anticipation.

“Because A New Era, the terrorist cell turning the country upside down hunting the woman, is well known and ruthless. They are feared by many. Entire nations fear them, and in fact even enemy nations have joined together in a summit to focus their combined efforts to stop them. They grow more powerful every day. They have unlimited resources and operate using fear and intimidation to achieve their agenda.”

“And what is their agenda exactly?” Hancock asked.

“That’s the question, isn’t it? What does any fanatical terrorist cell truly want? They want power, reverence. They want people to not only fear them but to respect their capabilities. They want to rule the entire region, not just a single country or territory. They want nations to fear them and concede that they are superior to any military force. Their numbers grow steadily. They recruit far and wide. Men and women of any ethnicity, nationality. They are very persuasive and promise ultimate wealth, power and domination. And so far, no one, no army, no country, no organized effort has been able to get close to them. They have few

casualties and are unaffected by them. Everyone who joins feels it is a great honor to die for their cause, and that makes them even more dangerous because they have no fear of death. They are . . . unstoppable.”

“What is Maksimov’s connection to this group and why would the woman be of interest to him?” Hancock asked impatiently, tired of information he deemed useless.

There was no shortage of independent cells all seeking dominance in an already war-torn region. So what made this one any different than the others? But he’d detected a hint of fear—and respect—for this group he spoke of, and Maksimov neither feared nor respected anyone, though it made him a fool because he was weak, and without strong, ruthless people to do his bidding, he was nothing.

“They owe Maksimov money. He is their main supplier of arms and explosives. They believe themselves untouchable by anyone and have no fear of Maksimov, the fools. If Maksimov has something they want very badly, then that gives him an edge. And they do want this woman. Already word has spread through the region of a lone woman, a defenseless American woman who has evaded capture, and it makes them look weak. Like fools who can’t manage to find a woman. They are furious, no doubt, and if they do find her and I have no doubt they eventually will—their reach is too far, their power too great—she will not die quickly. They will seek to make an example of her. They’ll use her to demonstrate just how ruthless they are, and they’ll use her to send a message to all who oppose them. I have no doubt Maksimov would not only pay much to have her in his possession but he would be indebted. To me.”

He said the last with supreme satisfaction, arrogance and greed lighting his eyes. So this was his goal. To dangle something Maksimov wanted desperately in front of his nose and to be the one to deliver the woman to Maksimov. It would elevate Bristow’s status with Maksimov, which would bring him more power and wealth. It would set him up for years to come, and when he was under Maksimov’s protection as one known to be in his inner circle, Bristow’s enemies would hesitate to strike at him, knowing that whatever was done to Bristow would be taken by Maksimov to be an insult—an attack—on Maksimov himself. And few dared to take on Maksimov, which allowed Maksimov to grow in power, expanding his already enormous reach and his empire into something truly frightening. If Hancock wasn’t successful in taking him down this time, he knew his time had run out. He had firsthand experience with how ruthless Maksimov could be. He still bore the scars of his last run-in with the man, but thankfully, Hancock had been in deep cover and his appearance had been altered such that it was doubtful Maksimov would recognize the man he believed to be the minion of the man who’d gone against Maksimov. It was his only up close and personal contact with the man he’d hunted for years, and by the time Maksimov had gotten close to Hancock, his already disguised features were bloodied, bruised and swollen, so Hancock felt confident the man wouldn’t recognize him. He planned to get very close to the man this time, and perhaps this woman Bristow spoke of would afford him just that chance.

He glanced at Bristow with interest, no longer viewing the task Bristow had ordered him to do as a delay he couldn’t afford, a pointless endeavor that would only lessen his chances of striking at Maksimov at the first opportunity.

“So you want me to go after this woman, intercept her before the men hunting her find her and bring her to Maksimov?”

Bristow frowned and shook his head. “No. Not immediately. Bring her to me. I won’t simply hand her over to Maksimov before gaining what I want from the exchange. And that will take time. Maksimov is reclusive and cagey. Not much brings him to the surface. If he really wants her, and I’m positive he will, I plan to make him wait and grow restless to the point he’ll give me whatever I want. It will be a negotiation. If I don’t get what I want from Maksimov, then I will bargain with the militants who want her so desperately.

Either would give much to have the woman. Perhaps the militants would give me even more so they save face,” he added with a shrug.

It was a stupid, dangerous game to toy with and attempt to manipulate Maksimov, but Hancock didn’t warn Bristow of that fact. If the woman lured Maksimov into a personal meeting where he’d take possession of the woman, then that fit perfectly into Hancock’s agenda, and he didn’t particularly care what the consequences to Bristow were.

And it was equally stupid to bargain with a fanatical group because after giving Bristow what he wanted in exchange for the girl, they’d simply execute Bristow in very bloody fashion and take back not only what they’d given as payment for the woman but everything Bristow possessed, which would only add to their considerable wealth and power.

Anticipation licked through Hancock’s veins and his pulse sped up, the taste of victory in his mouth. If all it took was capturing a single woman who was running and hiding from a terrorist group to enable him to achieve his objective, then he’d do it without hesitation. He’d have to ensure that Maksimov took the bait because it did him no good for Bristow to turn to the terrorist cell to get what he wanted. It had to be Maksimov.

He glanced up at his men and saw answering resolve in their eyes. They wanted to take down Maksimov every bit as much as he did. And like him, they grew weary of their existence or rather nonexistence. To the world, they were dead. To their government they were traitors and had been given a death sentence. To their prey, they were angels of death, without mercy or compassion. They were feared by all and they mattered to no one. To even the strongest, unfeeling soul, such a life eventually wore on them. They were all ready to step down from their cause and allow others to do the work they’d done without thanks or regard for over a decade. And make whatever kind of life was left to them, knowing that even after they stood down, they’d always be hunted.

“Give me what intel you have,” Hancock said to Bristow, determination and resolve Bristow couldn’t possibly miss in his tone. And Bristow had seen him in action long enough to know he didn’t offer his assurances lightly. “I’ll find the woman and bring her to you.”

CHAPTER 4

HONOR clutched the heavy makeshift garment covering her entire body with one hand to keep the hem from swirling in the high wind. Not that it mattered, traveling at night as she was, with no one to see whether parts of her were exposed. But the habit was already deeply ingrained in the days she’d been running. Trying to avoid discovery.

The cloth she’d fashioned into a pack was lighter than it had been in the beginning as more and more of her supplies dwindled, so it gave her two hands to tamp down the unmanageable material instead of the one she was accustomed to having to use to wrest control of the wind-driven folds of fabric. Though her tangible burden might be lighter, the ones unseen were slowly eating away at her, pressing down on her with oppressive strength. Bone-deep weariness assailed her. And she had miles to go this night.

The sudden poetic quip that had slipped into her thoughts, *amusing* her, caused sudden alarm. There was nothing remotely humorous about her circumstances, and she was shocked that she could even conjure the trait. Maybe she was succumbing to the horror and stress of the last days. She thought “days” in general and purposely didn’t cite the *number* of days because she’d lost track of time in the aftermath of the massacre

and her frantic efforts to free herself. She had no idea how many days had passed because she'd had no opportunity to stop, slow down, process and then compartmentalize her grief so it didn't incapacitate her. And it would. She would lock down, unable to get past the horrors she'd witnessed firsthand. She couldn't afford to allow herself to think. She had to act. To keep moving. Because if she stopped she would lose.

She refused to say *die* when referring to possible failure. Nor did she say *live* or *survive* when she fantasized about making it to safety. She'd made it a game. Hide-and-seek, Rambo style. The most epic game of hide-and-seek ever. She was hiding and they were seeking. Because to give in to the terrifying truth and acknowledge that grim reality was to breed the very thing she fought with everything she had and had been thinking in terms of life and death as being the ultimate prize. Which was exactly what it was. So she retreated into denial and formed an alternate reality where it was simply a game. Or a twisted version of those reality television shows when people were forced to fend for themselves against difficult odds and the person to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles and outlast the others was declared the winner.

She *was* in an impossible situation. She *had* to fend for herself. It was her only choice. And when she outlasted her pursuers and passed over the border where there was a U.S. presence, she won. She would defeat evil and she had to believe it. It was as simple as that. She was smart. She loved challenges—though this was *not* a challenge she'd ever purposely choose. And she wasn't afraid of adversity, though her perception of adversity had been irrevocably changed the day of the attack. There was adversity and then there was this. There was nothing that could describe what she was up against. And if she had any say in the matter, she'd never face this kind of adversity again. Nothing in her young life had prepared her for such a horrific ordeal, and it had made her rethink her calling a hundred times as she'd fled for her life, having to stay a step ahead of her pursuers or . . . die.

She shook her head, refusing to let reality creep back in. She hadn't come to this area without being prepared. She hadn't woken up one morning and decided to come here on a whim. She was fluent in several of the languages in the country, even the more obscure ones, and had extensively studied the culture, the many different dialects and subtle differences that signified a different region. She knew how to blend in and what the laws were for women. Never had she been so glad for all of that information as she was now.

Her mouth was dry, her lips parched and cracking. She was nearer to the village she'd been traveling toward for the last three days, but she had to find a place to rest, a place where she could survey the village and its inhabitants from a distance and study it closely before she ventured into it.

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