

**S.E.A.L. Team Omega  
Flames of Betrayal**

by

**Sierra Rose**

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Flames of Betrayal

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## Platoon Rollcall

S.E.A.L. Team Omega First Platoon are based out of Coronado, California as part of Naval Special Warfare Group-1. They have been assigned solely to the National Security Agency for use in covert actions anywhere in the world. Chain of command goes through the NSA, the Navy CNO and the President of the United States. They do not operate by standard Navy protocol.

**Rear Admiral Anthony Sanford:** Commander of all SEAL teams on either Coast. He's based between Coronado, California, and Little Creek, Virginia. Age: 56.

**Captain Montel Jackson:** He's the Commander of the NAVSPECWARGROUP-1 in Coronado, California. African-American. Age: 56.

**Commander James St. Clair:** He's the Commanding officer of the Navy Special Warfare Group-1 S.E.A.L. Team Omega in Coronado, California. Age: 49, 6'1", 225lbs. Annapolis graduate.

**Master Chief Petty Officer Douglas MacCray:** He's administrator and top enlisted man of all the SEALs in Coronado. Age: 49, 5'8", 190lbs. Former Senior Chief for S.E.A.L. Team Omega until his promotion.

**Grady Shaw:** He's the NSA liaison with S.E.A.L. Team Omega. Gives them their orders and works between the group, the CNO, the NSA, and the President. Thinning hair, loyal, and likes to hunt and fish. Age: 40.

**Commander Ethan Tremayne:** Platoon co-leader. Age: 33, 6'6", 220lbs. An Annapolis graduate, seven years in the Navy, two in the SEALs. This is first command. Father (James Douglas) is a vital ex-Senator and current Congressman from Kentucky. Owns a condominium in Coronado, drives a Jeep Cherokee. His weapon is an Alliant Bullpup 5.56mm with a 20mm grenade launcher. He speaks Arabic, French, and German. Blue eyes with collar length black hair.

**Commander Cassidy Marshall:** Platoon co-leader by special Presidential order. Age: 28, 5'4", 130lbs. Born in London, raised in Virginia at Eagle's Rock. In addition, a member of two anti-terrorist teams based from there, owns Marshall Enterprises. Weapons: 9mm Browning Hi-Power, H&K MP-5 SD sub-machine gun. She speaks fluent German, Spanish, some French, and Italian. She has blue eyes with long auburn hair.

## Alpha Squad Roster

**Michael Chaning:** He's the Senior Chief Officer and Top EM in First Platoon, third in command. Age: 35, 6'3", 220lbs. He's married to Connie, two kids. He's been in the Navy for sixteen years and a SEAL for five. Expert fisherman, plays guitar in a blue's band. His weapon is an Alliant Bullpup 5.56mm with a 20mm launcher. He's good with the men, strong and strict but not harsh. He speaks Spanish, Farsi, and some Hebrew. He has brown eyes with short dark blond hair.

**Kendal Chase 'Casey' Gibson:** Machinist Mate, 1st Class. Lead Petty Officer. Age: 28, 6', 190lbs. He has a quick mind and a good planner when he applies self to it. Drinks and gambles too much at times, when drunk he sings. He likes to flirt. He's an Idaho native. He's an expert with all small arms. Weapon: H&K MP-5 submachine gun. He will aid in planning the ops. He has green-eyes with blond hair that's often past collar.

**Rafael Chavez:** Gunner's Mate 2nd Class. Age: 29, 6'2", 190lbs. Wife is Sophia, 5-year-old daughter, Pilar. He lives with family in La Jolla. He speaks Spanish, Portuguese, Farsi, and some French. He's the Alpha Squad sniper with an H&K PSG-1 7.62 rifle. He has Brown eyes, black hair that's longer than normal.

**Jace Adams:** Quartermaster, 1st Class. Age: 24, 6'1", 240lbs. Born in Rhode Island. Ex-High School football star was going pro until he joined the Navy. He's divorced, with no kids. Quiet and enjoys readings, mainly classic horror. Platoon Radio operator who carries the SATCOM unit. Weapon is Alliant Bullpup 5.56 with a 20mm launcher. He speaks some Arabic, French, and German. He has green eyes with blond hair.

**Jake Summers:** Operations Specialist, 2nd Class. Age: 22, 5'9" 190lbs. Platoon tracker and a quick thinker. Has two years of college. Loves motorcycles and is building one. He enjoys a good party and prefers robust girls. Weapon is either an M-16 with attached grenade launcher or the Alliant Bullpup 5.56 with 20mm explosive round launcher. He speaks several Spanish languages, Farsi and some Chinese. He grew up in Puerto Rico. Has brown eyes and black hair.

**Joe 'Jo-Long' Carver:** Quartermaster, 2nd Class. Age: 24, 6'1", 185lbs. Son of an American Marine and a Chinese dancer. Platoon translator who speaks Mandarin, Cantonese and two other Chinese languages, Korean, Russian, and Japanese. He's a marathon nut. Weapon: H&K MP-5 submachine gun. He's from Sacramento. He has brown eyes with short black hair.

**Rusty Kayayan:** Electrician's Mate, 1st Class. Age: 23, 6'2", 200lbs. He was born in the U.S., parents originally from Armenia. He enlisted the day of High School graduation. Played soccer in school, wants to be professional fisherman once hitch in the Navy is up. He's a good mechanic who loves to tinker in all things electronic. He's squad machine gunner. His weapon is an H&K 21-E 7.62 NATO machine gun. He speaks Armenian, German, some Hebrew, and Arabic. He has brown-eyes with brown hair that's always in his face.

## **BRAVO SQUAD ROSTER:**

**Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Logan Brookes:** Squad leader for Bravo Squad, second in command of the platoon. Age: 33, 6'3", 220lbs. He's originally from Oregon. He's has ten years in the Navy with four in the SEALs. He loves to paraglide. He's married to Paige, a corporate lawyer, no kids. An Annapolis graduate, Father is a Navy Admiral. Grew up in 8 States and 3 countries. His weapon is an Alliant Bullpup 5.56mm with 20mm launcher or H&K MP-5. He speaks German, Italian, and Spanish with some French. He has blue eyes with thick, wavy brown hair.

**Darius Ford:** Gunner's Mate 2nd Class. Age: 26, 6'2", 220 lbs. Single, African-American, played basketball in high school. He's an artist in his free time who draws and paints in all mediums. He likes to do seascapes. He's been in the Navy for six years and a SEAL for four. He rides an old low-rider motorcycle. Bravo Squad Sniper with a H&K PSG-1 7.62 rifle. He speaks some Spanish and French. He has brown eyes with black short hair.

**Sloan O'Brien:** Hospital Corpsman, 1st Class. Age: 27, 6'6", 200 lbs. He's the Platoon Medic, a marathon swimmer, Scottish ancestry. Lifts weights and generally presses 275 pounds. He likes to surf and race. He's divorced, with no kids and dates frequently. Weapon is the Alliant Bullpup 5.56mm or a H&K G-11 caseless rifle. He has green eyes with red wavy hair. He has an easygoing manner.

**Zak Lani:** Yeoman, 2nd Class. Age: 22, 5'6", 175lbs. Hawaiian native. He loves animals, divorced with four kids. He speaks Hawaiian, Farsi, and Arabic. Expert with knives and can throw with a deadly accuracy. He uses shuriken when possible. He's very agile. Weapon is the H&K MP-5 Submachine gun. Has brown eyes with short brown hair, deeply tanned. He loves to play jokes.

**Mason Palmer:** Torpedoman's Mate, 2nd Class. Age: 28, 5'9", 195 lbs. Married to Rebecca, a Navy wife, with 4 kids. He spent ten years in the Navy and four in the SEALs. He's a demolitions expert. He's the top pick in the Navy for explosives work. His weapon is an Alliant Bullpup 5.56mm. He speaks German and some Farsi. He was born in Georgia. He has green eyes with short blond hair.

**Mark Robson:** Engineman, 1st Class. Age: 22, 5'9", 190lbs. African-American. He's an expert with most weapons and always working on them. Weapon is the Alliant Bullpup 5.56mm with 20mm launcher. He loves to play chess. He has green eyes with curly black hair.

**Perry Klein:** Radioman, 1st Class. Age: 24 6'1", 190lbs. Comes from a small town in Wyoming. On both High School and Navy rifle team. Played 2nd base in College baseball. He loves the water and is an expert in using a kayak, canoe, or small watercraft. He's single, shy with girls. Speaks excellent Japanese, good Spanish. Weapon is H&K MP-5 submachine gun. Has blue eyes and sandy blond hair.

## Other Characters:

**The Mavericks:** head subsidiary of Marshall Enterprises and also world class mercenary unit that often works with the teams out of Eagle Rock and now the SEALs.

**Aiden West:** He is leader of the Mavericks. Age: 30, 6'2", 200lbs. Born in Kentucky. Loyal to Cassidy but doesn't always agree with her choices. He's stubborn, hardheaded with a temper, but excellent at strategy planning. Speaks French, German, Russian fluently. Weapons: .357 Desert Eagle Magnum and MP-5 SD sub-machine gun. He has long black hair slightly past shoulders and brown eyes. Almost always wear mirrored sunglasses.

**Reese Fletcher:** He is 2<sup>nd</sup> in command of the Mavericks. He's a native of Boston and the only son of a Supreme Court Justice. Mild mannered and even tempered so he often gets the job of team diplomat to balance his more hot-tempered partners. He's an expert pilot who can fly anything fixed-wing or rotary. Weapon: 9mm Beretta 93-R pistol. Age: 30, 6', 195lbs. He has short, wavy dark blond hair and blue eyes.

**Lee Chan:** He is 3<sup>rd</sup> in command. Born to a British father and a Chinese artist mother, he is the second son of fourteen children. An expert in martial arts, he has an even temper but is dangerous in certain situations. He has a law degree so he's also the team lawyer. He uses his father's name when doing legal matters. Age: 31, 6'2, 200lbs. Weapons: 9mm Beretta 93-R and a 9mm Uzi. He's also an expert with silent weapons. He has short black hair and brown eyes.

**Troy McDowell:** He is 4<sup>th</sup> in command. He is British. His father is a member of Parliament. The demolitions expert for the Mavericks, he knows how to blow up anything with any type of explosive. Even tempered, well-liked. Father of twins. Weapon: 9mm Beretta 93-R. Age: 31, 6'4", 219lbs. He has sandy hair and green eyes.

**Bryden Young:** He is the Mavericks electronics expert. Age: 28, 6', 190lbs. Born in Mississippi, raised in Atlanta, Georgia he still has a heavy accent that gets stronger with stress. Weapon: either the Beretta 93-R or an H&K P-7. He has short light blond hair and jade green eyes.

**Ira Weller:** The medic for the Mavericks, he tries to balance being a licensed doctor with being a mercenary. He is a quiet man who is quite stubborn with a temper when he needs it. He has an odd accent since he picked up a German one from being raised in Germany. Weapon: 9mm H&K P-7 and H&K MP-5 SD sub-machine gun. Age: 29, 5'8", 190lbs. He has short black hair and brown eyes. He wears glasses.

**Remy D'Arcy:** A New Orleans native responsible for the team communication gear usually. Plays in his own band when not working, family involved in the New Orleans underworld. An expert on Voodoo lore. Age: 25, 5'6", 185lbs. He has wavy blond hair that touches his shoulders and blue eyes. Cajun accent. Weapon: 9mm Beretta 93-R.

**Jesse 'Bear' Tallbear:** He's the only person ever taken onto the Mavericks on a probationary status. His older brother Kirk was a founding member until his death and it was his request that his brother be allowed to join. He's a natural athlete with long legs, has an uncanny agility and senses. Age: 19, 6'1", 178lbs. He's a full-blooded Apache, with bronze skin, dark eyes with long hair. He is very



susceptible to spirits. Weapon: 9mm Beretta 93-R, though he prefers knives.

## **Lightning Team and Others**

**Eagle's Rock:** A normal looking farm hidden back in the Blue Ridge Mountains of rural Virginia, formed by Adam Olsen and the President as a base for the two teams of anti-terrorists that helped protect the U.S. and abroad. Cassidy was raised here and still considers it home when she's not with the SEALs.

**Jared Taylor:** a man of many names and talents, he was the son of parents that he believed to be hardworking and honest. He spent time in the Persian Gulf where he was known as the Lone Wolf. He returned when his mother and two sisters were killed in what was called an act of organized crime until he learned that his own father was responsible and he went on a rampage that turned this otherwise quiet man into one of America's most well-known killers as he fought the criminal underworld. Later, pardoned he started Eagle's Rock and the two teams of anti-terrorists that operate out of it as Major Jon Stone and now Colonel Samuel Barnes. He is Cassidy's adopted brother. Age: 45, 6'6", 250lbs. Weapon: .357 Magnum or 9mm Beretta. Trained in all forms of combat.

**Sean Grant:** Leader of Lightning Team, he's an ex-cop from Dallas, Texas and also a former Delta Force member. He started his career trying to stop Jared Taylor and soon became an ally. A hot headed, impatient man, he has serious issues at times with the adopted sister that he shares with Taylor. Age: 39, 6'3", 225lbs. Weapon: .45 Colt or 9mm Beretta. He has brown hair cut short and blue eyes.

**Eli Schultz:** The electronics genius for Lightning Team, he's an easy going man who likes to joke. He can hack any computer and enjoys surfing. Age: 41, 5'6", 190lbs. Weapon: 9mm Beretta 93-R. He has black hair, a thin mustache, and green eyes.

**Even Garrett:** A former Army Ranger, he shared duty time with Taylor in the Gulf and joined Eagle's Rock when asked. He's the calming influence for Lightning Team and is often at odds with his hot-tempered leader. Divorced, no kids. Age: 39, 6', 200lbs. He enjoys rock climbing and racing cars. Weapons: 9mm Beretta 93-R and any type of machine pistol. He has shoulder length blond hair and teal colored eyes.

**Ramon Lopez:** Lightning Team's medic, he was also in the military with Taylor and helped in his campaign against organized crime. He and Schultz usually enjoy playing jokes on their friends. A cheerful man. Age: 45, 5'8", 189lbs. Weapon: 9mm Beretta 93-R and 9mm H&K MP-5. He has short black hair, gray at the temples and brown eyes.

**Luke Fabrizio:** He's the main pilot for Eagle's Rock and Jared Taylor's best friend. Formally on opposing sides, the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Italian/American turned on his crime bosses after seeing what they were capable of. Expert of all aircraft, he's fluent in Italian, French, and Portuguese. Well-versed in hand-to-hand combat. Weapon: 9mm H&K P-7 pistol and 9mm Uzi. He has black hair that he keeps shoulder length and blue/green eyes.

**Adam Olsen:** The man who runs Eagle's Rock and the top Justice Department agent. He's the liaison between the two teams and the Oval Office. A serious man, he has problems accepting change and having one of his members working with a SEAL team isn't making him happy. Age: 58, 5'6", 195lbs. He's balding, always in a suit, and wonders which team will drive him crazy first.

# Chapter 1

The USS Constellation, one of the United States Navy's premier carrier flagships, patrolled between the Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic. Normal routine for the carrier involved surveillance and training...at least up until a week ago.

North Korean and Chinese terrorists claimed to possess a small nuclear weapon. Their renegade Chinese general became the focus of orders to Colonel Samuel Barnes, temporary commander, and his team.

Now the big boat trudged across the still waters, waiting for a helicopter contact that would take the commandos off ship to a new battlefield.

"Well, Colonel, I'd say this has been one wild week." Admiral James Horton, the commander of the Constellation, spoke to Barnes from the battleship's front bridge. Military to the core, having two non-military groups, covert ops Lightning Team and the mercenary Mavericks, roaming his deck gave the Admiral more tension headaches in three days than he'd had all year.

To add insult to injury, the Brit woman, Cassidy Marshall, was too young in his opinion to hold title of Commander. He knew she owned Marshall Enterprises, which housed the Mavericks, but still...

Dressed in clean fatigues, Colonel Barnes didn't reply. Instead, his ice blue eyes looked at the water, now calm after last night's brutal storm, and thought back to the previous mission.

A tall man with wavy blond hair, this soldier had gone through many names before the current guise of Samuel Barnes. Called the Lone Wolf in the killing fields of Vietnam, and Major Jon Stone in a government job, the name many recognized as the most famous killer in history was his birth name, Jared Taylor.

Now he wondered how cordial the Navy man would be if he knew who he shared the bridge with.

Barnes, or Taylor, rather, and his warriors, Grant, Schultz and Garrett, finished their mission three days earlier with the help of Marshall and her Maverick mercenaries, West, Fletcher, Chan and Troy. They now killed time either with training exercises or by driving the ship's crew crazy.

“Nah, this job was a piece of cake.” Examining electronic gear over a tech’s shoulder, Eli Schultz spoke to the Admiral from across the bridge. “Usually Sean and Aiden are at each other’s throats.” The electronic wizard for Lightning Team exchanged grins with Garrett, a comrade-in-arms. “This time, there’ve been only a few growls.”

Sean Grant, a tall, rangy brunet with cool blue eyes, cast a dry look at his teammates. “Mainly because this boat is so huge, those kids have plenty of room to play and not be in my face.”

“Yeah, but what would you guys do without us to save your butts?” Aiden West asked as he and several of his top team members entered the bridge.

Admiral Horton couldn’t keep the frown from his face at their arrival.

West, in his late twenties, smirked at the men of Lightning Team. Mirrored sunglasses hid his brown eyes, and his long black hair irritated Horton.

The mercs had been both below decks and out on the flight deck playing with paint guns. The paint splatters on their clothes showed that the war had been a massacre.

“I, for one, would live better,” Grant shot back but grinned as his adopted sister rolled her eyes and swiped at a yellow splatter on her forearm.

In her late twenties, Cassidy Marshall was the youngest of both Lightning Team and their counterpart in Omega Force and was also one of the youngest commandos anywhere.

“Admiral Horton? Admiral Miller from the USS Liberty is contacting us,” a communication tech spoke up.

Horton motioned the man to go on. “What did he want?”

“They’d like for us to send out a couple of our ‘copters to search for a SEAL team they lost contact with during the storm last night.”

No one on the bridge noticed the change that came over Cassidy or the Mavericks. Her spine stiffened and she held her breath while the men exchanged worried glances.

“Someone was out in that storm?” Evan Garret gaped. “Why?”

“According to the Liberty, the Seals were looking for a trawler carrying illegal cargo but their man on the ship lost contact with them. The Admiral wants us to send out search parties since we’re closer than they are.”

“Yes, I was informed of the situation.” Horton nodded, tight-lipped, then shook his head. “Tell Miller we are unable to comply.”

Taylor noticed his adopted sister’s blue eyes narrowing and asked the com tech, “What were the last known coordinates?”

As the tech read off the numbers, West studied a map on a wall. “That’s about thirty minutes from here. You launch a chopper or two; it would be easy to search for them.”

“Captain Lewis of Naval Intel told me this morning that any request to search for this team was to be ignored,” Horton asserted.

“What SEAL team is it?” Cassidy asked, her words clipped. A cold gut feeling told her she already knew.

“It’s the First Platoon—Team Omega based out of Coronado,” Horton replied, shrugging. “Tremayne’s team never should have been out in that weather and now he’ll learn.”

The young woman knew that SEAL team well after spending several months with them as co-leader. She’d grown close to their leader, Commander Ethan Tremayne. At Horton’s callous response, heat flushed up her throat.

West grabbed Cassidy by the arm and whispered before she could spit a harsh reply. “Cool it. We need to stay calm.” Eyeing the map, he spoke up, “Admiral, one of my men is a licensed pilot. How about letting us look for Tremayne’s team?”

Horton sneered at the merc leader. “No mercenary is touching one of my aircraft! I have my orders for Tremayne’s unit. They’re dead.”

Cassidy frowned, flipping her long auburn braid over her shoulder. “Aiden, *do* something.”

West nodded, and took stock. He had three members with him armed with only realistic looking paint guns.

Small, sensitive microphones taped to each member's throat connected the Mavericks. West spoke under his breath, knowing his second in command could hear him. "Reese, you still up on deck with the guys?"

"Yep, got our gear packed and we're ready to scoot," Reese Fletcher acknowledged keeping an eye on his team and the sailors on deck.

"How much trouble would it be for you guys to *acquire* two Blackhawk's?" West asked, silently signaling to his men.

While Taylor argued with Horton, Grant watched his sister and the boys, noticing the change in their behavior.

Silence answered West while the dark blond Boston native hesitated over the question, not sure that he had heard correctly. "Ah, yeah, I'm looking at some right now. Is there a reason we're going to commit a major felony against the Navy?"

"Explain later. Tell the boys, no deaths. Just hold the Navy boys off until we get up to you," West ordered, then, with one eyebrow arched, warned Cassidy. "If we get caught, we blow our freedom and our clearances."

"I need to find them," she answered, wishing she didn't have to involve the Mavericks. "I have my Browning. You have a plan?"

West sighed, then nodded. "Shoot the radio panel and we'll hope that we can pull this off."

In the middle of the bridge, frustration laced Horton's voice. "I'm sorry, Colonel Barnes. My orders are firm and..." The gunshot from the 9mm pistol sounded like a cannon blast. It shattered the radio panel and sent the technician running for cover.

People whirled and reached for weapons, the Mavericks drawing first.

"Let's not do that, boys." West aimed his 'gun' at the Admiral but eyed Jared Taylor while Lee Chan collected the sailors' weapons. "Rules are very simple: no one moves or tries anything and things stay fine. Do something stupid and someone gets hurt."

"What the hell are you doing?" Eli demanded.

Troy McDowell, the Mavericks 4<sup>th</sup> in command, shrugged. "I think we're borrowing a couple choppers and going SEAL hunting."

“Cass, don’t do this,” Taylor ordered, reading her eyes. “Let me call Washington. Adam can sort this out.”

“That’s too late. By the time Adam and the President decide what to do, Ethan and the lads could be dead.” She backed toward the door with a look of apology. “I’m sorry but...they’re my friends and this stinks too much for me to let them die.”

West jerked his head toward the deck. “Don’t worry, Admiral. If at all possible, your aircraft will be returned.” He paused at the bulkhead door. “Oh, we’re jamming this, but I’m sure one of your sailors will let you out.”

“West!” Grant snapped, uncertain if he should be amused or angry. “You really think you’ll get away with this?”

“Probably not, Sean. At least you won’t have to worry about putting up with us any more.” The merc leader shrugged, then added, “They mean a lot to her and what the boss says goes.” He slammed the door with a bang while Troy and Lee blocked the handle with pipes.

“This won’t keep Taylor very long,” Lee remarked as they ran up to the flight deck.

“It won’t have to.” Cassidy reached the deck to find the ship’s on-deck crew locked in a shed and the rest of the Mavericks racing to two already-running Blackhawk helicopters.

Reese sat in the cockpit of the lead chopper, waiting for his team to board. When the door slammed shut, he spoke into his headset, “Does anyone care to tell me what in the hell we’re doing and, more to the point, why?”

“Tremayne’s team was out in the storm last night and now no one can raise them. Admiral Horton knew about it already but refused to send help so we’re...doing it.” West explained, turning to look at his employer. “I just hope they’re worth it.”

Cassidy didn’t reply. Instead, she dug in a duffel bag for a small metallic box. “Does anyone have a bloody clue what frequency Shaw uses on the SATCOM?” she asked, turning the box over to a mercenary.

Remy D’Arcy, a native of New Orleans, expertly handled the SATCOM device. “I got it. What makes you think Shaw’s on board the Liberty?” He typed numbers in to connect his device with the other.

“Shaw’s usually the only contact we have in the field. He’ll be on the Liberty.” Cassidy heard her headset switch to a different frequency and, seeing Remy nod, spoke into the mouthpiece. “Spook-1, this is your second worst nightmare calling. You listening or napping?”

She heard several Mavericks snickering, followed by a hiss on the SATCOM, then an incredulous voice.

“Who’s my *main* worst nightmare?” NSA agent Grady Shaw asked.

“Oh, I figure Adam Olsen, when Jared and Lightning Team get to a working radio,” Cassidy replied, rolling her eyes. “C’mon Grady, cut the chatter. The Navy boys on the Constellation are after us. What the bloody hell have you got Ethan into *this* time?”

“Oh, sweet Jesus, this can’t be good.” Shaw groaned, leaned back in his chair and ran fingers through his thinning hair. He shook his head as if the girl or the mercs could see him. “Do I want to know what you and those wonder boys of yours did?”

“No, now give,” she snapped.

“Short of it, the platoon got a job to look for a trawler believed to be carrying several hundred tons of pure uranium, drugs, and other illegal cargo. We had no clue what ship or even what nation it’s floating under. Last night, Tremayne and the boys went out to search, but the storm blew in.”

“Why the hell didn’t you call them back?” Cassidy demanded. “You knew how bad that storm was going to be.”

“No doubt, kid. The group was dropped off in two IBS boats. By the time we learned about that storm, it was too late. No chopper could get to them and back before it hit.”

West jumped in. “When did you lose contact?”

“The group separated to search for two targets. We lost contact with Ethan’s unit before the storm hit. I was on the radio with him when I heard a shot, then nothing. I haven’t been able to reach Channing’s team since the storm.”

Cassidy swore. “Alright, give me the last coordinates for both teams and...Grady, see if you can’t buy us some time. Call Shaun or Steven if you need help. Just try to buy some time.”

“What in hell did you guys do?” the NSA man demanded, staring at a paper just handed to him. “You stole two Blackhawk’s? Horton wants the Liberty to send jets after you guys.”



“First off, we *borrowed* the choppers and second, tell him to go to hell. He refused to send help because he was ordered not to.” Cassidy replied. Seeing Remy look at his watch and knowing SATCOM transmissions could be traced, she cut the call short. “Got to go, Grady. I’ll call back soon.”

Shaw tried to cut in, but heard the link cut off and swore to himself.

Admiral Lawrence Miller watched him. “More bad news, I take it?”

“Oh, *great* news if you like a bunch of loose cannons with Presidential clearance running around with two *borrowed* Navy Blackhawk helicopters.” He reached for the radio. “The President’s going to *love* this.”

## Chapter 2

“So do we have an idea where to look?” West split his unit up with one chopper going to one set of coordinates while his Blackhawk went to search the other. “Trying to find fifteen SEALs in the middle of the ocean will be like finding a flyspeck in black pepper.”

Cassidy Marshall searched the ocean with telescopic sights of a rifle. “They have a beacon and we have the frequency. Reese, any luck?”

Multitasking, Fletcher was trying to fly low to the water without crashing, and keep an eye on the panels in front of him, as well as work the cloaking device. “The fact that I haven’t got us killed yet is luck, but picking up any signals — no.” He met his best friend’s eyes and acknowledged the grim truth.

With tension sparking from Cassidy, West wanted to prepare her. “The odds of finding them alive are slim, Cass. You have to accept that. No human being, not even a SEAL, could survive a storm like that.”

Ignoring him, she continued to watch for any signs of life in the miles of empty water.

“Eventually we’re going to have to face facts that Tremayne and the platoon are dead and return to ship.” West prepared himself for her anger.

“We turn back when *I* say.” With her chin jutting, she met and held his eyes. “And they aren’t dead until I see the bleedin’ bodies.”

A weak beep from the radio stopped West’s argument.

Remy’s fingers flew over the buttons to trace the signal. “Reese, 6.5 miles from us is the strongest reading,” Fletcher was already adjusting their course.

“We have bodies in the water,” McDowell announced when they reached the site.

“How many are there?” Cassidy asked.

“Not sure yet, luv,” the sandy haired Briton replied, jerking the zipper of his wetsuit up.

West opened the chopper door and nodded to his men. Already in wetsuits, Fletcher lowered them a few feet from the two inflatable rafts. Troy reached the men first. Some floated on their own and the raft held a few injured SEALs. He chose to ignore the zipped bag bobbing in the water.

“Hey, Sloan, need a lift?” he asked one of the floating SEALs.

Sloan O’Brien, the platoon medic, raised an eyebrow. “Damn! Getting rescued by Marines is insult enough, but rescued by *you* guys...?” In spite of his objection, the man swam around the raft to grasp the hand Troy offered.

“What’s your situation report?” Troy asked, eyeing the other men, seeing some he knew and some he didn’t.

A man he didn’t know replied. “The storm hit us hard. One killed and one seriously injured. Anything else is minor.”

“Our medic will see to those and we’ll get you back to the Liberty as soon as everyone’s on board,” Troy assured him, trying to place the man from files he’d glimpsed. He gave his report into the radio. “Aiden, we need to get these blokes outta the water. No life threatening injuries, just minor ones, but one death.”

Out of fifteen SEALs of First Platoon, they had rescued eight living and one dead. Including O’Brien, there were just three other SEALs the Mavericks knew.

Cassidy tried to pace in the small confines of the cabin as West and Remy helped waterlogged SEALs up the rope ladder. Someone stowed the black zippered bag from view.

“You’re not Navy. I can tell that already,” Lieutenant junior grade Logan Brookes, Bravo Squad leader, observed.

“No, not exactly, Lt. Brookes, but that’s a topic for a later time.” Cassidy spoke to him, but her gaze followed a Hispanic SEAL who was helped on board with his arm in a sling. His dark hair, flouting Navy regulations by its length, laid slick against his scalp in sopping clumps.

“Rafael?”

Rafael Chavez had been with the First Platoon since its founding and one who Cassidy had known the longest. A handsome man in his middle twenties, his eyes locked on hers and he smiled.

West waited until the last of the SEALs came on board, then sealed the door. “Got a mixture of Alpha and Bravo squads I see.” With a nod to Fletcher, the chopper started back to the Liberty. “We’re called Mavericks, Lieutenant. And as some of your men can attest to, we’ve worked with your outfit before.”

“Any word on the LT’s squad?” Kendall C. ‘Casey’ Gibson asked, batting Ira Weller’s probing fingers away from his wound.

Cassidy shook her head just when the second Blackhawk radioed.

“Aiden, we found the second site.” Lee Chan’s British accent sounded tight, a sure sign his next words were going to be bad.

West waited a beat before asking, “What else are you going to drop on me?”

“We have a raft shot full of holes and three bodies. No sign of the rest, either living or dead.”

“The bodies, we know them?” West asked.

“No.” Lee looked at the corpses his unit brought onto the hovering Blackhawk. “Probably SEALs, but none we knew. My guess is the bloody terrorists captured the others. We passed a ship on the way here.”

West made a quick decision before his leader could cut in. “Alright, pull back and meet us at the Liberty. Get the coordinates of that ship cause I figure we’ll be back.” Needing to determine that all the dead were SEALs, West asked the Lieutenant sitting across from him, “Did you have any other people out on this recon?”

Brookes shook his head, accepting the bottle of water handed to him. “No, but Ethan had extra men from another squad.”

Cassidy did quick mental calculations. “That leaves six still unaccounted for.”

“If they were dead, the bodies would have been left.” Casey replied, not caring for what that meant.

“So, they’re prisoners, then,” Rafael nodded, wincing as O’Brien rechecked his arm.

“Wonderful.” West rubbed his eyes. “First we get these guys back to ship, talk to Shaw, and see how much time we have. Let me talk to Shaun back in the States. If he can keep the Constellation and Lightning Team off our backs, then maybe we find Tremayne.”

“I will not leave those men!” Cassidy declared, eyes sparking, arms crossed. “Washington can go to hell! I’ve never left anyone behind and I won’t start now.”

West blew out a breath, trying to rein in his temper. He knew how she felt, but he also knew how much trouble they were asking for. “Damn it, Cassidy! We’ll be lucky if we aren’t arrested on sight as soon as we land on the Liberty. Trying another move this soon without any backup or authorization is slitting our own throats.”

Rafael Chavez, the sniper for Alpha Squad, coughed to break the tension. “I’m taking a wild guess. You guys shouldn’t be out here, should you?” His dark eyes locked onto Cassidy, knowing by her body language that something was wrong. “Cassidy Renee, what did you do?” he asked more firmly.

The British girl slowly looked around at the SEALs before finally meeting Rafael’s eyes. “We were on the Constellation when the call came in that you had been lost in the storm. Some bloke from Navy Intel had already been in touch with Horton, and he refused to send out any search parties... so we came.”

Brookes raised his eyebrows. “I can’t see a Navy Admiral lending two Blackhawks out to...whatever you guys are.”

As the Mavericks avoided that and Cassidy shifted, Casey finally read the signs and gaped. “Oh, my God, you stole two Navy helicopters?”

“*Borrowed*. We only borrowed them for a little while.” Cassidy corrected over Rafael’s groan.

“And you had the nerve to lecture us on some of the stunts we pulled,” he muttered, eyeing her warily. “Do I want to ask how exactly you got past the Navy to *borrow* these things?”

West coughed. “Doubt it.”

Brookes stared between them, getting a gut feeling that he should have stayed in the water. “Just who the hell *are* you people and what the hell kinds of clearances do you have?”

“Before this stunt, we had both Presidential and U.N. clearances along with diplomatic immunity,” West sighed, eyeing his friend. “After this, I doubt if we have anything but the Grace of God looking after us and, since we’re all atheists, that ain’t much.”

“The Liberty is coming up,” Fletcher called back. “So far they haven’t locked missiles or the big guns on us.”

“Shut up, Reese,” West snapped, catching his Magnum that Remy tossed to him. “No chances, so make sure your sidearms are ready.”

As Fletcher landed, he saw the other team had beaten them back. They stood on the flight deck, talking with Navy officers and Grady Shaw. “Lee and the boys aren’t in chains yet, so it could still be clear.” He shut down the engines and heard his best friend growl a curse at him.

Deckhands and medics rushed to help the injured SEALs as Shaw came over with a middle-aged man wearing Admiral’s stripes.

“Welcome back, Logan.” Shaw shook hands with Brookes, amused at the look he got.

Logan Brookes knew he needed to see that his men were taken care of, but his questions demanded immediate answers. “Can you explain what the hell is going on?”

The NSA man knew what he was referring to even before he looked up at West. “Get the others settled and meet me in the recreation room. I’ll have answers for you then,” Shaw replied, noticing that Cassidy seemed torn between wanting to follow the SEALs and hearing what he had to say.

Admiral William Miller eyed the two choppers and the young people he now had on his carrier. “I was just telling Grady that we don’t get enough interesting things here,” he remarked. “It’s odd that just when Horton *loses* two Navy choppers, my ship’s communication center develops a serious bug and can’t reply to his bellowing.”

West eyed the man, gauging his words. “I suppose those things can happen from time to time. Even the U.S. Navy can’t tell when things will break down.”

“Yep, and I figure my men won’t be able to fix that bug for quite some time. So if someone say...wanted to launch a couple misplaced birds to track down a ship, I sure wouldn’t be able to say anything about it.” Mischief filled Miller’s eyes. “You go with Grady while my boys wash these birds.”

As the Admiral went off whistling, the confused mercenaries looked to Grady Shaw who busted out laughing. “He thinks it’s great that someone took Horton down a notch.” He headed into the ship. “Let’s go talk.”

## Chapter 3

Shaw sat down in the ship's rec room and raked the new arrivals with a critical eye. Not even the sight of some of them smeared in paint splatters lightened his mood. "You guys are in deep shit. Horton's in a rage. Washington is incensed. Hell, even the President isn't sure what to do with you. Olsen is spitting nails and it's all I can do to keep his team outta this. What in the hell happened?" His jaws clenched. "None of you are this reckless."

Before West could speak, Cassidy stood, her feet planted, her shoulders squared. She explained the sequence of events to Shaw and ended with, "That bastard Horton wasn't going to do anything. By the time Olsen could've gotten around Navy Intel, it would've been too late."

Shaw rubbed his face, glad she hadn't killed anyone — yet. "Alright, I think I can buy some time since you *did* find Brooke's team." He sighed, tallying how many favors he'd need to pull in.

"I *won't* abandon Ethan and the others." Cassidy cut into his thoughts. "Aiden and the lads can stay out of it if they want to."

"How'd I know you were going to say that? You sound too much like Tremayne to suit me."

She smiled but her eyes remained firm. "No SEAL will ever be left behind on my watch. They're my men, too."

"Have you told Brookes who you are?" Shaw asked, knowing that she hadn't.

Cassidy ran a finger down a map. "No, I don't think he can handle having a woman as First platoon's co-leader. I'll tell him... just not yet."

The NSA case officer hated that he couldn't read West, so he reminded him, "Brookes doesn't have enough men left to take on a ship full of terrorists."

"We're *handling* it," West grouched, kissing his life and career goodbye. "You just keep Taylor and Lightning Team off our backs."

Shaw could have laughed aloud at that, but Lt. (J.G.) Logan Brookes entered the room, tight-lipped and grim. "Alright, Shaw, tell me what's going on and how we're going to them back."

“Okay, ladies, here’s how it pans out. Since only three bodies have been recovered, it’s safe to assume the rest of the platoon has been captured on board the trawler *Arcadia*.” Shaw noticed that several SEALs cast wary looks at the Mavericks, wondering if they had the chops for this mission.

Jake Summers, the platoon scout, frowned. “That’s an odd name. What banner’s this ship flying under?”

“It doesn’t have a banner. It’s a Japanese ship that sailed from Cyprus. We believe terrorists commandeered it,” Shaw replied, adding, “We wanted it stopped before it reached port.”

“And of course *only* the 1<sup>st</sup> platoon could handle it.” Cassidy spoke, leaning against the back wall. The woman’s tone warned Shaw what would come next. It had been an old argument between them. “Doesn’t the NSA or CIA have any other black bag group they could sacrifice? Why is it *always* Ethan and the lads?” She pushed away from the wall and walked toward the NSA man. “Want to know offhand how many men your black ops have cost the platoon?”

Brookes didn’t know this strange British woman, except that she was connected to his unit. The too quiet tone and the look in her eyes unnerved him. “Chavez, O’Brien.” He called in the two men who knew something about these strangers.

Cassidy’s mood grew darker. “Let’s start with Syria. Simple job. Go in, blow up a town, get out, and make pick up. It was *supposed* to be a real bloody cake-walk.”

Shaw coughed. “Cass, this isn’t the time for...”

She jabbed a finger inches from his face. “That job cost Sully his life, and knocked Tex out of the SEALs. Two good men, *my* men, and they weren’t the only ones.” Her icy blue eyes locked on his. “You want me to name others? *Do you?*” When she didn’t get an answer, she spouted, “Keith! Scotty! Abel!...and now this! You sent them in with *no* information and four are dead — *more*, if I raid that boat and Ethan...” She cut off, refusing to think that. Leaning in, she glared directly into his eyes and hissed, “If any one of them is dead, you had better pray I die, too, because I *will* find you and...”

Needing to regain control, Brooke nodded to O’Brien who strode across the room. With a deft move, he lifted the woman and set her down a few feet back. “That’s enough of that, little skipper.” He spoke softly, but it cleared the roar in Cassidy’s mind.



“I’m fine!” she protested, then spoke to Shaw again. “Do you have any actual details, or am I flying blind as usual?”

Figuring it was finally safe to speak, Shaw cleared his throat. “We know that ship has a crew of one hundred, but it can house twice that many. We don’t know how many men are on board or if they’re all terrorists. The crew could be innocent, but then...” he shrugged. “You’ll have to use your own discretion.”

“What about prisoners?” West asked.

“Our priority is to take possession of the uranium. A prisoner would be fine, but don’t get killed if you can’t.”

Shaw knew that both the SEALs and the Mavericks worked better unencumbered with restrictions. Therefore, even though his superiors expected prisoners, he wasn’t going to distract them from their main goal.

“A stupid question, but do we have the green light for this?” Jace Adams asked.

Adams was the platoon’s radio operator and took care of all their SATCOM transmissions.

Shaw hesitated, meeting Cassidy’s eyes. “Officially no, and that brings us to my statement of liability.”

“Uh-oh, here it comes.” Gibson slid lower in his chair and closed his green eyes. “The old deniability line that if we’re killed or captured, the United States will disavow any knowledge of our existence. Been there, done that.”

Laughter spread over the room. Even Shaw smiled briefly before waving for silence. “That’s usually the case, but...”

“This job’s illegal as hell,” Cassidy snapped. “I fully intend on finding those men, come hell or high water.

“My mates and I broke a few rules getting you guys, and we’ll probably break a few more before we’re done. This time it’s different, though.” She paused to look at each man. “Someone high up wants you guys to rot in the wind. Shaw can’t get an official green light to raid that boat. Any action taken is illegal and could be considered an act of war.

“Right now, you blokes are legal. But, if you choose to go on this mission and things go badly, you’re risking your careers, your freedom *and* your lives. We still have a few hours, so think it over because, once we move, there’s no turning back.” She paused for a moment. “Give them your usual speech, Shaw. You don’t need us for that.” Cassidy read Shaw’s concern, but ignored it to motion to West.

As Cassidy and the Mavericks left, an awkward silence filled the room until Shaw broke it. “Damn.”

## Chapter 4

### U.S.S. Liberty Deck

Cassidy stared at the twilight sky as she stood on the flight deck, her thoughts a jumble of memory and planning.

After several minutes of silence, West spoke from off her shoulder. “We’re doing this alone.” It wasn’t a question, just a statement that he could feel from her mood.

“I can’t ask them to do this,” she sighed, not looking at him. “It’s illegal, with no promise of success. It’s too big a risk to ask of them.”

“Oh, but it is alright to ask it of us?” he countered.

Her gaze slid to look at his face, then returned to the water. “No,” she whispered. “I won’t ask it of you or the Mavericks either, Aiden. I made this choice and I’ll live or die by it.”

Not caring for that comment, West turned to go below. “Just make sure you’re certain they’re worth this, Cass. Make sure *he’s* worth the damn risk.”

After a long time of silence, she turned to go inside and ran right into the chest of Casey Gibson.

“I wondered if you weren’t planning on ditching the rest of us.” He held her arms to steady her,

Cassidy scowled, hating it when one of them snuck up on her. “Damn it, Gibson, what’s with you grabbing me tonight? And shouldn’t you be with the rest of your squad?”

“Yes, ma’am, but I thought I’d check on the CO. I know what a devious mind my co-commanding officer has.” He grinned at her. “You’re not going off with just the Mavericks are you, Cass?”

“No,” she replied, walking away from him. “I’m going by myself.”

Gibson blinked at that and swore under his breath, bolting after her. “Have you lost your mind?” he demanded. “You can’t seriously think about doing this alone.”

“I got the Mavericks into enough trouble already. And this is too illegal for SEALs.” She waited for his string of oaths to end, then added, “Trust me, Case. I know what I’m doing.”

“No doubt; but you can’t do it alone.” He sighed, going in search of his team.

### **Officer’s Cabins:**

Cassidy entered a small cabin, sat down and rubbed her face. “I hate these choices...no choice at all.”

She finished hooking the Browning shoulder holster when the knock came. Expecting Aiden or one of the others, it surprised her to see Brookes on the other side.

“Lieutenant.” She stepped back so he could enter

Brooke stopped inside the door and studied her.

“Am I under inspection, lieutenant?” she asked mildly.

“What? No, I’m sorry. It’s just...you surprise me,” he admitted

Shifting a curious look to him, Cassidy lifted a brow. “Care to explain that?”

“Your eyes are older than the rest of you.”

She checked the clip in the Browning Hi-Power and put it in the holster. “My eyes? Hell, you outta see my liver.” Pointing to a second chair, she sat down. “Can I help you with something?”

“Actually, since I’m officer in charge while Tremayne is...I mean, I told them I wanted to talk to you,” he stated.

“Rank hath its privileges.” Cassidy nodded, wincing as she heard her own words, and waved a hand. “Sorry.”

He nodded, watching as she shifted her shoulders like they ached. “Gibson says you plan on going after the squad alone.”

“Gibson!” she spit. Hesitating, she nodded, “Yes, that’s my plan.”

“Why?” he asked curiously, seeing her frown at him.

“My mates are in enough trouble and this is too illegal for the SEALs.” She was tired of explaining it. She just wanted it over with.

Brookes considered that. He also thought on what Chavez had told him about this woman. “You plan to take on a ship with an unknown amount of terrorists on board? Is that stupid or suicidal?”

Cassidy’s eyes narrowed at that. “Neither, just devoted. There shouldn’t be too many people on board. It would have been too hard to sneak that many on.”

“You don’t have a plan, do you?” he asked, knowing already.

“Yeah, I had one, just not for this action,” she shot back, and then sighed. “Look, Lieutenant, it’s not your problem...”

“That’s my commanding officer and squad out there.” Brookes barked, pulling the chair over to sit in front of her. “So how about we shelf the worry about our careers and toss the heroics? Maybe between all of us we can get the others out alive.”

Cassidy looked at him. “I can’t promise this will work.”

“You’ve worked with SEALs before. You know we don’t like promises. The only easy day to a SEAL was...”

“Yesterday,” Cassidy smiled, remembering Ethan saying that to her. “Okay, Lieutenant, we’ll see what we can do.”

The J.G. for First platoon smiled. “Good, because if my talking didn’t work, Chavez said to tell you that he was calling his wife.” It surprised him to see the woman’s eyes narrow in thought.

“Fine! For that, on his daughter’s next birthday, I’m buying her that bloody set of drums.”

As Cassidy went out the door, yelling for Rafael Chavez, Brookes looked at West in the door. “Is this good?”

The merc leader thought about taking pity on the clueless man, but shrugged it off. “Oh, sure, it is. She’s been yelling at him since the platoon formed.”

When they got to the recreation room, they saw Cassidy shouting at Chavez while Gibson snickered close by.

Cassidy stood nose-to-chin with Chavez, her face red, her arms flailing, expletives filling the air. Her fearlessness at the man towering over her amused the onlookers. Even Chavez seemed amused... until she mentioned the drums. “You’re always buying Pilar too many gifts, but you’re not, let me repeat, *not* buying her drums! End of conversation.”

“You threatened to call your *wife*,” Cassidy retorted, ignoring the other men.

“You were being stupid, so of course I was going to call Sofia.” Chavez shrugged.

Gibson laughed. “See, I told you it was a stupid plan.”

“And you have a big mouth,” she snapped back, whirling to pin the SEAL with her glare. “How many of these new blokes know about your little interesting habits, Gibs?” she asked sweetly.

That shut the laughter off as Gibson paled. “Oh, c’mon chief, you wouldn’t dare.”

Cassidy’s smile turned wicked. “You mean they don’t know that you have a very obscure and strange fondness for...”

“Don’t worry, Lieutenant, they’re always like this.” West assured the man as Shaw hurried in. “Uh-oh, that’s his bad news look.”

“Uh-oh is right,” Shaw muttered, taking calming breaths. “I was able to pull strings and get the Constellation put on a course away from us, but a chopper already picked up Lightning Team. From what I can learn, they aren’t happy.”

West swore, knowing involvement by Jared Taylor’s team would mess things up. “How long until that chopper gets here?”

“You have about an hour.” Shaw glanced at his watch, adding, “Both choppers have been refueled and the gear is stowed. You need to move, and move *now*.”

“Work on getting some kind of clearance for this gig and keep them outta my hair.” West whistled sharply and saw several heads snap around. “Anybody going on this trek move now! Timetable was upped.”

The SEALs took the change of circumstances in stride and headed to the choppers. Cassidy looked at her friend’s blue eyes and guessed what happened.

“Have Shaun, he should be in his office at the Capital, contact Ethan’s dad. Between him and Shaun, they may get Olsen to recall Lightning Team.” She saw doubt fill Shaw’s eyes.

“Marshall, be careful on this,” Shaw urged. “It stinks more than usual.”

The young woman paused at the bulkhead door to look back, considering the odds then gave the NSA man her best smile. “What could go wrong?”

Knowing he’d heard that tone and those words too often, Shaw shook his head and headed for the radio room to get clearance.

## Chapter 5

### **Aboard the lead Blackhawk, ten minutes later:**

“The best way is to split up once we’re on board the ship.” West sighed from his place on the lead chopper, looking at the boat plans. “This thing is huge, but any hostages are probably below decks.”

Brookes had to agree. “We need to find them, call for pickup and scrap the rest. It’s the only way to reduce the risk of casualties.”

“I’ll put most of mine up front to distract the terrorists and send a few with your SEALs.” West wished he had more of his team.

“Aren’t they cute?” Cassidy sat on the bench seat and stretched her legs while looking at West and Brookes. “Just so adorable sitting there, planning the op.” Both men glanced up as she straightened. “Just remember one thing, this is *my* op.”

Brookes started to reply when O’Brien, the medic, laid a hand on his shoulder. “Let her go, sir,” he urged, watching the woman. “Trust her.”

Cassidy sighed, pulling her auburn hair back and under a black cap. “There is no bloody way in hell to approach and board her without them knowing it, so we’ll try a different way. Fast rappel while our ever present gunners give covering fire.”

“They could kill the hostages,” Darius Ford warned. The Bravo Squad’s Gunners Mate ran a hand across his rifle butt.

“Or us, as we rappel down,” Joe Carver, Alpha Squad’s Quartermaster, cut in and tightened his Nomex gloves.

Brookes began to speak, but stopped as Cassidy looked up.

“Both points are true,” she agreed, going on in a tone born of years dealing with Lightning Team. “But, we’re going to be on the ground and moving before these sorry lads realize what’s happening. Anymore questions, gentlemen?”

Several heads shook and Gibson grinned. “God, I have missed her.”

“Well, that being the case, Mr. Gibson is first man down with these handy new concussive smoke grenades. Everyone, have your masks on.” Cassidy smiled as Gibson sputtered. “Days like this, you miss Tex, don’t you?”

“You’re prettier, ma’am,” Gibson replied, pleased to see surprise in her eyes for once. “Don’t gawk, boys,” he snapped at his teammates.

Adams adjusted his mask and nodded toward the front. “She...got a... y’know... boyfriend, Case?”

Gibson paused to consider that before grinning. “Yeah, she does.” He waited a beat to drop the other shoe. “The skipper has that honor.”

That announcement caught the SEALs by surprise and McDowell laughed as he passed. “That was low, mate.”

“I figured I may as well stop ‘em now.” Gibson shrugged, feeling the chopper change its pitch. “It’s show time, boys. Suit up.” The Arcadia floated below them.

“Second unit wants to know if they go now or wait,” Reese Fletcher called from up front.

Looking down at the ship, West saw covered boxes on the old boat’s deck, but no movement. The lack of activity bothered him “We go down together,” he decided, pausing. “Reese, if anything happens, you and Kyle get your birds up and call for help from the carrier.”

As his best friend nodded, West looked at the assembled SEALs. “There’s still time to back out, boys.”

He got several laughs and snorts in response. “Yeah, like that would happen, Aiden,” O’Brien joked. He adjusted his weapons so they wouldn’t move, then slid open the door. “Are we going or what?”

Cassidy looked at their target again and nodded. “Go, Gibson!”

He threw off a quick salute, then went out a side door, his gloved hands sliding down the heavy ropes until his non-skid boots hit the deck. At the front of the ship, he saw several figures landing from the other chopper, but no hostiles. “So where the hell *is* everyone?”

Within seconds, all the warriors were on board, scrambling in different directions.

“Aiden, take the others and search here and on the bridge. We’ll go below.” Cassidy ordered into her lip mike.

West hesitated a second. “Keep in touch.” He nodded at several of his team to follow him.

Once split up, Brookes knew they would have to split again for speed. He saw how easily she gave orders and, much to his surprise, how quickly his SEALs responded. He touched her arm. "Take Chavez and a few others with you. We'll start searching the cabins and the holds."

Cassidy nodded, whistling lowly, and motioning to the men she wanted to follow her.

After twenty minutes, West scowled when they still hadn't located any enemy agents. "This is wrong," he muttered, eyes scanning for trouble when Bryden Young called him from the bridge. "You have news?"

"Yeah, but I don't think you'll like it." The light haired Southern merc nodded toward to where their medic was swearing over a bleeding man. "That's the ship's captain."

West could have guessed that. He could also tell by the amount of exposed intestines that the man was dying. "He do this or did the terrorists?"

The Maverick 3<sup>rd</sup> in command Chan, while of part Chinese descent, spoke Japanese and listened to the older man's pained whispered words.

"He says he and the crew were hired without knowing what or who they were carrying. Within an hour of leaving port, armed men took control of the ship and killed many crew. They were supposed to meet another ship within a few days, but the encounter with the Americans upset everything."

Chan paused as the man took a ragged breath before continuing. "The terrorists killed the rest of the crew except him when the helicopter flew over earlier. He locked himself in here and chose to die in his own way by committing seppuku."

"That's great, just great," West swore. "Where are the Americans and what the hell happened to the terrorists?"

Chan asked the questions and frowned. "Oh, bloody hell," he muttered, looking up. "Tremayne and the lads are in the hold with the bleedin' uranium, and the bad guys are..." A burst of gunfire and explosives shook them before Chan finished, "...below decks and under those tarps."



“I hate this!” West swore, worried that the SEALs had no idea the ‘crew’ would try to kill them. West was on the stairs leading to the main deck when his radio buzzed in his ear. “What? I’m kinda busy trying not to get killed here,” he snapped, expecting the voice of his second in command.

“You damn well *better* not get killed, you stupid, moronic, dimwitted idiot, because I want to be the one to kill you!”

“Ahh, God.” West squeezed his eyes shut, wondering who in the heavens had it in for him. “Grant.”

Sean Grant snarled into the mike as he paced in the small confines of their helicopter. Eli Schultz, Ramon Lopez and Evan Garrett looked on in amusement.

“Kid, I’ve seen you to do some really dumb stunts, but this last one has got to take the prize.” He yelled to be heard over the rotors. “Have you got any clue how much trouble you guys are in? And I don’t just mean with me!”

West didn’t have time to debate, ducking a bullet whizzing past his ear. “Can we have this discussion later, Grant? I’m more than a little busy here.”

Listening to gunshots and explosions, Grant frowned. “Damn it, we’re twenty minutes from the trawler. Can you hold on that long?”

Whirling to fire his Magnum at a lunging dark skinned killer, West swore under his breath. “Do I have a choice?” he asked, and then caught himself. “No clearance, Grant. We got ourselves into this and we can...” a loud concussive blast knocked him down and out.

“*West?* What the hell happened?” Grant yelled again, swearing as he looked toward the cockpit. “Tell Fabrizio to push this thing, Jared! Those damn brats are going to get killed before I get a shot at ‘em.”

Hearing a low chuckle, Taylor looked down at his longtime friend and pilot, Luke Fabrizio.

“Yeah, but Grant doesn’t care about the kids or anything,” the former Mafia flyboy commented.

Taylor looked back as Grant yelled orders to his partners. “He cares, Luke. He cares. Twenty still our ETA?”

Fabrizio looked up with a grin on his tanned face. “For my best girl and her squad of hotshots, I can cut it to ten.” He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt.

## Chapter 6

### **Trawler Arcadia, upper deck:**

Lee Chan had seen his leader fall and roll to his side. He didn't see any blood and was relieved when his friend started to come around. "Enough is bloody well enough. Young, get to a good position and blast anything that moves that isn't one of us or a SEAL." He switched frequencies to reach the SEALs below but only got static. "D'Arcy!"

"Yo!" Keeping his head down, the New Orleans native called back. "Messenger?" he guessed.

Chan smiled, pleased at his teammates. "Grab Bear and get below. Find Cassidy and the others and warn them."

"Gotcha, boss." D'Arcy looked next to him at a lean bronze-skinned dark eyed man. "Okay, Bear, here's where we see if you're as fast as Kirk. Keep up with me and don't get killed."

Jesse Tallbear wasn't yet twenty-one, the age where one could become a full-fledged Maverick; in fact, he just turned nineteen. Tall, lean with the long legs of a runner, his slender build didn't tell of his real strength.

Bear's older brother Kirk had been a full-fledged founding member of the. When he had died in combat, it was in his will that Jesse be given a chance to follow in his footsteps. The younger man knew he had been accepted with caution and he wanted to prove it was the right choice.

Now he ran behind D'Arcy through a barrage of gunfire. D'Arcy hit the deck next to the door leading below, sliding behind a beam for cover, then looked for the boy.

Bear, he admitted, was as good as or, in some cases, better than Kirk. Quick on his feet, he seemed to guess where the bullets would strike. "Another Apache wonder." He grinned as the boy dove next to him, not even breathing hard.

"Into the deep dark that is shadow?" Bear asked, nodding at the door and recalling a line from a book he'd read once.

“*Oui, mon ami.*” D’Arcy checked his semi-auto rifle and reached for the handle. “Oh, and, Bear?” He waited for those bright dark eyes to look his way. “We old men hate to be shown up, so anytime you run, try to *appear* to be out of breath, huh?”

Bear grinned wider and nodded, following his teammate into the dark corridor, where they heard gunfire. “That’s got to be trouble.”

“No kidding.” D’Arcy muttered.

### **Below Deck:**

Things had seemed easy enough, perhaps too easy as the SEALs searched the cabins below deck.

“This makes no sense,” Gibson muttered, shifting his H&K MP-5 submachine gun on his shoulder. “Where the hell are these guys?”

“Maybe they jumped ship,” Carver suggested, eyes darting in search of a hidden enemy,

Cassidy Marshall stared at the MP-5 she carried. “If another ship or even a sub had been in the area, the Liberty would have picked it up. Either we have the wrong ship, which I doubt, or these blokes are VERY good at hiding.”

“Obviously, boss,” Chavez muttered, then stopped, cocked his head, and motioned to his teammates.

Cassidy and Gibson exchanged looks as Carver eased closer to a cabin they hadn’t searched yet.

“There are noises.” He looked around. “Anyone got any ideas?”

“Open the door?” Gibson rolled his eyes, reaching for the handle when Cassidy rapped his hand. “Huh?”

Something didn’t feel right. She motioned him to one side next to Carver while she and Chavez took the other side. A second later, she nodded to Carver who took a firm hold of the handle and jerked it open

“Come out, hands up!” he yelled.

A babble of voices came from inside, then the lone head of a dark skinned man appeared. “Americans!” he cried, dropping to his knees in the corridor as if in praise. “We are saved!”

While he cried and praised, his fellow crew in the cabin also yelled and shouted. Something still felt wrong.

Chavez watched the man with his long bushy hair, when something Shaw said clicked in his mind. “The boat sailed from Cyprus. Its crew was Japanese.”

“Shit!” He brought his gun to bear on the men just as one pulled a handgun from beneath his shirt and aimed at Cassidy. “Down!” he yelled, firing into the man’s chest.

The sudden move didn’t startle the SEALs as Gibson had seen the man in the hall go for a knife.

“We have ringers!” he shouted, bringing the butt of his weapon down on the man’s head just as Carver fired his weapon.

At the first shot, armed men poured out of three other cabins.

“This hall is too close for us to fight in and live.” Cassidy looked around and saw what she wanted. “Down the corridor, if we can get to a larger space, we’ll be fine.”

“I love her confidence,” Carver muttered, fired two more short bursts and took off running. “Is she usually so bright and chipper in a firefight?”

Chavez spun and fired off another shot, catching a man in the face. “Sure, it was all her time around Keith. He got her into the metaphysical crap of good feelings in a fight mean good things.”

“Oh, don’t you dare start that crap,” Gibson muttered, glancing over his shoulder to see they still had company. “All through the damn Syrian job, he kept harping at me with that stuff.”

“And you were the only one to come out of that job without one bloody scratch,” Cassidy reminded him. “Keith said you had a strong and clear aura about you.”

Gibson rolled his eyes, but froze in step to bring his gun to bear at a side door as it slammed open. “Cass!”

The woman started to whirl when a huge arm caught her waist and lifted her.

“Nice to see you too, little skipper,” O’Brien muttered setting her down and letting loose a burst from his Alliant Bullpup rifle. “No time to chat. We have trouble.”

“We already have trouble, in case you didn’t notice,” Carver replied, wincing as a bullet went past his ear. “You didn’t have to bring more!”

Brookes hit the hallway with the rest of the troops behind. He slammed the door and looked around. “I’m guessing the hold?”

“Only choice. It’s big enough to have a decent chance until we get help from above,” she agreed, frowning when she noticed D’Arcy and Bear. “I don’t think I like seeing you here.”

“Boys are in huge fight up top so them getting down here is iffy,” D’Arcy replied, then added, “On a lighter note, we’re heading for the captured SEALs.”

Adams let out a sigh. “At least we got *some* good news.”

Cassidy’s expression pierced her man. “What else is there?”

“It’s also the same room with the uranium.” He winced when O’Brien slapped his head. “Hey, don’t kill the messenger.”

When they hit the hold, Ford groaned. “We have water in here.”

Cassidy gauged the water level. “It’s slow rising yet, so we have a chance to get them out. McDowell, check the map. There has to be another way out of this hold.”

As McDowell checked his wrist map, Brookes tapped his men to hold the terrorists from gaining entrance while the rest looked for their objectives.

“Hey, Cass, if we live through this, will you marry me?” Gibson asked, wading through water past his ankles.

Brookes started to tell his man to quit joking around but saw the woman already grinning.

“You have too many strange habits, Gibs,” she laughed. “I couldn’t let any husband of mine play in poker games for four days straight or start howling at the sky after a few drinks.”

O’Brien busted out laughing while he laid down covering fire. “We really should have had him de-hypnotized after that.”

“No, you and Lani shouldn’t have had him hypnotized in the first bloody place.” The young woman snapped back at him while she ignored the look Brookes gave her. “Ethan and Stern should have had both you shot for that.”

“Here.” Bear called from a door halfway down the hall. “It’s sealed.”

Cassidy swore, feeling the boat shake from an explosion. “Damn, what in the bloody hell are they doing up there?”

“Oh, did I mention Lightning Team was coming?” D’Arcy called over his shoulder and grinned at the swearing he heard in return.

Brookes brought them back on point. “It’s been sealed with a torch. It’ll take another torch to get us through and we don’t have time.” He saw her face tighten. “The water is rising faster.”

“McDowell, front and center!” she yelled for the Mavericks main demolition expert.

Leaving his current task, the sandy haired demo man hummed when he looked at the door. “Bloody thing is reinforced heavy duty steel. This door isn’t made to be opened when it’s been sealed,” he declared, feeling her eyes.

“I’m not asking what it’s made to do, mate. I’m asking if you can blow it without sinking us,” she replied.

A voice shouted from the corridor they had just left. “Americans you have sealed yourself into a tomb! Save yourselves the pain! Surrender! We will be merciful.”

“Yeah and I’m a little blue alien,” Adams returned, ducking. “Their aim is getting better.”

“Gibson, get up there and toss a couple frag grenades to keep them busy,” she ordered, then slapped McDowell’s arm. “I need it down.”

McDowell swore, but dug in his shoulder pack for explosives and wires. “Get back and I mean *way* back.”

The frag grenades Gibson tossed caused a rumble that had radios blasting with questions, but it stopped the shooting.

“What in the hell is going on down there?” West radioed from the deck, trying to think in six different ways.

“We have some very persistent bad guys and Gibson gave them a present.” Cassidy looked over her shoulder. “Aiden, we won’t be coming out the way we came into this room. Fletcher will have to take his chopper around to the other side.”

West looked on his map to see where they were and where they’d come out. “Did you fine Tremayne and the boys?” he asked, ignoring the yelling in his other ear.

“Yeah, but McDowell has to blow a door down.” She watched as he slapped several pounds of demo charges on the door.

A sputtering came in her ear. “If there’s uranium in that room, you can’t blow the door!” Schultz exclaimed from the Lighting Team chopper.

“Well, I have water seeping in already, so I figure blowing the door can’t make it worse. Do *you?*” she bit off, shutting the radio down.

Brookes saw her expression and guessed the cause. “Not happy with the cavalry?”

“I would be happier if it had been little green men from space,” she sighed, hearing McDowell shout to stay down.

After checking on the placement of the SEALs and his own boss, the sandy haired Briton said a quick prayer and pushed the button. A loud sound and a flash filled the hall and shook the whole boat.

“McDowell?” Chavez called. “You okay?”

“I bloody well better get a raise for this whole mess.” McDowell growled through the smoke, moving closer to inspect his work. Water seeped out the loose door. “Hey, Adams, c’mere and yank this monster off the rest of the way.”

Jace Adams had played high school football and had been on the fast track to the professionals until he joined the Navy. So the brawny SEAL had no trouble removing a half-exploded door.

Cassidy had to force herself not to charge into the room even as she felt McDowell’s hand on her arm.

Brookes shined his light into the room and swore. “O’Brien, get over here. The rest of you keep an eye on those doors.”

O’Brien shouldered his weapon as soon as he stepped through the door, swearing under his breath. The huge room was originally made to hold cargo. Now it held floating containers and several men tied to chairs.

McDowell, allowing the SEALs to care for their own, was most concerned with the containers. He took a small box from his pack and turned it on, instantly picking up a reading. “Background radiation is up, but not dangerous. None of the boxes have been punctured.”

Brookes acknowledged this news with a nod, allowing O’Brien to check one man at a time while he centered on Mike Channing, the platoon chief, and the unit’s commanding officer, Ethan Tremayne.

“Okay, guys, time to wake up.” O’Brien spoke loudly, checking pulses and injuries, finding none life threatening. “The air in this place had all but run out, skippers.”

“Quiet, I have a hangover,” a low voice groaned from a turned over chair.

O'Brien laughed, pulling the chair upright. "Nah, but you'll probably feel like you wrestled a dolphin."

Rusty Kayayan forced his eyes to focus, spitting blood from his mouth. "Damn, you're ugly, O'Brien."

"Save a guy and get grief," the red-haired medic returned, knowing he had to keep it light. He glanced down as more water rushed in. "We need these chains off *now*."

Cassidy looked out the door at the others trading shots with the enemy. "Chavez!" she shouted. "Come here and play lock pick."

Chavez paused at the door, then squeezed her shoulder. "You guys have caused us so much grief, it isn't funny." With a wink, he went to work freeing the hostages.

"Commander?" Brookes knelt in front of Tremayne, feeling for a pulse and not liking it.

Chaning winced as he rubbed his wrists, not trying to stand yet. "They worked him over the worst," he explained, seeing Cassidy in the door. "He tried to deflect them from the rest of us."

"That bloody well figures," Cassidy muttered, fighting her urge to enter the room.

With voices around and fresh air coming in, consciousness returned to Tremayne and, like any true SEAL, he woke up swinging.

"LT!" O'Brien shouted, seeing his CO swing, and winced as Brookes took the blow on the side of his head.



## Chapter 7

Though unsure of his surroundings, Tremayne knew his men were in danger. He started to grab for a weapon when a foot stepped on the gun barrel.

“No, Ethan.”

The soft voice froze him. It didn't belong here among the loud, cruel guttural voices wielding devices and fists that hurt. This new voice, this soft voice with the lilting accent...he knew it, but from where? Bewildered and impatient, he tugged on the rifle again.

“Ethan, stop and listen to me.” The foot remained on the gun. Someone knelt in front of him and touched his hands. “I know this is probably confusing for you, but you're safe now.”

Jerking his hands away, he shielded his face with his arm, waiting for the blow to fall.

“No one is going to hurt you. Ethan?...Ethan?”

The soft voice, the voice that didn't belong here, kept calling his name. If he could only remember who it belonged to. Risking a look, he squinted his glassy blue eyes and focused on the face.

“The rest of First Platoon is here, Ethan, and we're going home,” the voice promised.

Ethan stared into those big blue eyes, the lashes fringed with tears and he let his hand rest on her face.

“Cassidy?” he whispered, then passed out, falling forward.

The British woman held him up as O'Brien swore. “He needs more medical help than I can give him here.”

Carver ran in. “The bad guys just got some help; we need to get outta here!”

Brookes had regained his feet, though he still shook his head. He glanced at Cassidy. “Do you have any ideas?”

“I might have *one* left,” she frowned, then spoke over her shoulder, “Gibson, toss another frag out there, then bar the door and get back here!” Seeing the unspoken questions, she explained, “We go out the back door and hope your ride is there.”

The grenade blast resonated, followed by the sound of feet.

“We have maybe ten minutes before they regroup,” Gibson reported surveying his rescued comrades. “How many can move on their own?”

“If I had my way, none of them,” O’Brien replied, and then sighed. “But we can’t carry them all. Kayayan for sure, Lani is iffy; Klein and Clay are shaky but can move. The Chief and the Skipper are a big fat no.”

“I sure as hell can move under my own power,” Channing stood, ignoring his buzzing head. “It’ll take all of you to help Tremayne and cover our rear. Just give me a gun and...”

“Chief, even if you could go on your own, I wouldn’t give you a damn gun,” O’Brien barked.

“Enough!” Cassidy snapped, eyes bright. She’d perfected that whip-cracking tone by bossing around stubborn SEALs. “McDowell, get out that door and contact Fletcher. Tell him where the pick-up is and then cover it. Adams, grab Tremayne and get going. Put the injured in the middle and, Channing, stop yelling and let someone help you. Gibson, up front and, Summers, cover the rear with that Bullpup you have. Does everyone have an order? Good, let’s go.”

“God, I have so missed her,” Gibson repeated, heading up the other set of stairs. The door behind them crashed in. “We have company!”

Cassidy swore, needing more time for that chopper. “Gibson, Carver, give me your grenades and then go!”

Both men paused to look at her. “You go and I’ll toss ‘em,” Gibson volunteered.

“I can handle it, mate,” she promised, seeing his concern. “Despite what certain people think, I know how to throw, so get going.”

“You better be right behind us,” he warned, then turned and ran for the steps, leading the wounded toward escape on Fletcher’s Blackhawk.

Cassidy took a deep breath when armed men enter the hall. With eerie certainty, she threw all four grenades in rapid succession before slamming the door and locking it from the outside.

Halfway to the evacuation site, she felt the blast. A few feet later, a bullet struck her lower back toward her hip. She went down, rolling, pulled her Browning and fired, pleased to hear a scream.

She swore when she heard the fight on top of the trawler still going on. This needed to end, and quickly, in order to get her people off the boat.

Struggling to her feet, hunched over in pain, she saw Fletcher's chopper had enough space to hover near deck. "Aiden, pull back."

West's answer distorted briefly, then he came back in a clearer tone. "We still have shooters. They'll pick the choppers off if..."

"Tell Fabrizio to strafe the front bow. He's armored. We just need enough time for Reese to make his pick up. Get clear, Aiden." Satisfied with that, she turned toward the chopper on deck. "Brookes, get those men on board ASAP, then take off!"

He turned to throw a look at her and frowned. "We're almost ready to go."

"Fletcher, get them on board and take off!" she commanded. "Do not, no matter what, turn around."

Fletcher almost laughed into his radio. "Once I'm clear, why in the hell would I want to come...?" His words dried off as suspicion entered his mind. "Oh, shit."

Cassidy helped Brookes get Lani on board the chopper. "We're in," Brookes nodded, but frowned when she jumped onto the boat. "What the...?"

"Cassidy, what the hell are you doing?" Chavez lunged toward the door of the Blackhawk.

"Lt. Brookes, do not let any of those men out of that chopper," she snapped, eyes locking with his. "As co-commanding officer of First Platoon of S.E.A.L. Team Omega, I am ordering you out of this area ASAP." She watched realization dawn in Brookes' eyes at her status.

"I'm sorry, Rafael. Take care of Ethan and the other wounded." She stepped further back, and then limped off while the chopper lifted skyward, dodging shots whizzing past it.

"Cassidy Renee, you're wounded! Get back here!" Chavez yelled into the wind even as O'Brien and Adams grabbed his belt.

"You jump from this height, you'll kill yourself," the Platoon medic snapped

"Fletcher, you have to go back!" Gibson screamed through his headset to the other chopper. "We can't leave her!"

"I'm under orders." Bitterness filled Fletcher's voice. "I can't go back and neither can you."

Brookes swore, jerking his cap off. "Damn it! Why the hell didn't one of you tell me who she was?"

Chavez growled, "She didn't want you to know yet. She said you wouldn't take it too well."

"I'm *not* taking this too well." he snapped.

"Kyle's bird's clear. He's got the Mavericks with him," West called through his radio as bullets clanged off the armored hull of the Eagle, Eagle Rock's own super helicopter. He hated having to ride with Lightning Team, but Grant had pulled him on by his hair.

"Good, then get clear yourself, mate," Cassidy ordered, firing the last round from her Browning Hi-Power at a shooter determined to put a hole in the chopper.

Catching something in her tone, West opened his mouth to speak when Schultz let out a shout.

"Holy jumping green cows! Cass is still down there!"

"Cassidy, what are you *doing*?" West demanded. Taylor came from the front with an outraged Grant behind him. "Hold on. Garret will toss the ladder down."

Even from this distance, he could see his friend shake her head. "No good, mate. Someone on board needs to trigger the explosive charges Chavez and Summers planted and I'm the one with the remote. Now get going."

"What in hell is she playing at?" Grant demanded, his blood running cold. "Jared, get her out of there!"

Fabrizio swore as a 7.62 rifle shot hit the bulletproof hull. "I can't stay this close."

West forced the words from his throat. "Don't do this, Cass."

"I started this mess, Aiden, and I told you that I'd live or die by that choice. It's my choice to die here because I couldn't stand losing everything else. Tell Ethan I'm sorry."

Cassidy jerked her radio away, letting it drop to the deck.

"Come and get me, you bastards!" she screamed, deliberately pulling their attention away from the choppers. Shots pinged against metal and thudded into wood around her. She doubled over, keeping her profile low among the boxes on deck.

In an awkward step-hobble dance favoring her bleeding left hip, she reached the ship's side away from the explosives. Footsteps clanging against metal stairs drew closer. Pulling herself onto the ship's rail, she fumbled in her pocket for the detonator. A bullet split the air beside her ear and someone yelled a few feet behind her.

Shock collided with adrenalin and her trembling fingers almost dropped the detonator into the murky water. Catching it at the last second, she pushed it just as a hand grabbed for her shoulder.

She jerked free and dove into the ocean now reflecting flames and filled with flying shrapnel while explosions tore through the Arcadia.

The severity of the blasts made all three pilots fight to keep their birds in the air.

"Aiden, she ordered us not to go back," Fletcher's resigned voice reported to his leader. "What do I do?"

West still stared at the blazing ship sinking into the oil slick water. Ignoring everyone around him, his thoughts centered elsewhere. "Damn it!" he jerked his radio off.

"We have to go down. She could have..." Gibson cut off, eyes burning and not caring. "LT, we have to..."

Brookes met the pilot's grim eyes, both understanding. "Head back to the Liberty, Fletcher. They'll send out search squads."

The Idaho native stared at his leader. "She's hurt! We *can't* leave her."

"Even if she survived the blast, there's no way choppers could get close enough with that blaze." O'Brien spoke slowly, knowing his friend's feelings. "We need to wait."

Chaning leaned over to look out a window. "I'm not the one breaking this to Tremayne."

## Chapter 8

The water boiled with the heat of the sinking trawler's flames. Cassidy Marshall surfaced several feet from the wreckage, gulping for air and paddling away from the fire. Pleased that the demo charges worked, it took several minutes before she noticed the pain of her wounds.

Fighting to stay afloat, she hoped neither the boiling water nor flying shrapnel had punctured the single raft she freed from the side of the ship. The raft floated close by and she pulled herself inside, covering her head in the face of more explosions. When they ended, she flopped onto her back and forced her mind to concentrate on the immediate future.

*A Navy salvage team can...get to the sealed hold and take out... She winced at the stabbing pain in her gut. ...the uranium containers.... Realizing her mind had drifted, she fought to refocus. With the SEALs rescued, either Shaw or my two inside men in Washington should be able to get the Mavericks cleared of any wrong doing.*

"You think it's so simple?" a voice spoke.

Too weak from loss of blood and shock to lift her head, Cassidy opened one eye and frowned at the man sitting on the raft's edge.

"You really think dying will erase all this?" he asked, clucking his tongue. "Cowardice really doesn't suit you, Skipper."

Reality phased in and out. Her back felt on fire, but the raft rolling in the waves soothed her. "Back talking me wasn't your strong suit either, Dylan," she murmured, staring at the night sky and praying the dizziness would pass.

Dylan Fuller had been a founding member of S.E.A.L. Team Omega until his death in combat. Now he sat on the raft, chuckling, his straw colored hair blowing in the cool wind. "What're you gonna do, chief? Court martial me?" he teased, then grew serious. "I know what you did, Cass. We all do. This wasn't your fault."

"If I had stayed with the platoon, they wouldn't have been caught in that storm," she sighed. Lifting her head, she inspected the burns and blood on her right arm. "I had to save them."

She felt Fuller push some hair off her face when he said, “You didn’t tell Rafe those charges were rigged to a remote device. You knew you would have to stay behind to work it. So, was it guilt or fear?”

Silence answered him even though she knew what he meant. The raft rolled with a swell and time passed as she allowed memories of the better times in her life flicker in her thoughts before she finally remembered the question. “It would have caused too much trouble if I had gone back. This way, Shaw can get the Mavericks cleared and the SEALs won’t be in the middle of any fight between me and Washington.”

“Got it all figured out, right? You planned it down to the last goddamn detail.” Fuller’s eyes held hers. “Except for one thing. Did you factor in Ethan’s reaction?”

Uncertainty flickered in her eyes and she tried to swallow at the specter’s next question. “Did you consider how the Skipper will take it when he learns the full outcome? Did you think of how he’ll feel when someone has to tell him you sacrificed yourself for them...for him?”

Cassidy forced her eyes closed, fighting tears of pain and guilt. “It’s best for him, Dylan,” she whispered, feeling the breeze pick up and seeing a light nearing. “If I die, then he isn’t forced to choose between me and his mother.” Her eyes opened wide, drinking in the inky firmament. “Oh, look, I can see Sully and the others...*way* over there.” She struggled to sit up. “Wait, guys! Wait for me!”

Dylan Fuller touched her hand. “It’s not time for you to come home yet.” She didn’t hear his last words or the sounds of the approaching helicopter. Darkness enveloped her.

### **In a Helicopter, scanning the area:**

“We are so screwed.” A black man in his middle thirties kept muttering, his fingers white-knuckling on the seat’s armrest.

His companion, a young man with short blond hair and deep blue eyes looked away from the binoculars to glare at his friend. “Shut up, Shaun. We’ll *find* her.

Shaun Richardson had grown up in the projects of Chicago and spent his formative years as a thief.

His companion grew up in a wealthy military family, but Steven Michaelson had struck out early to make his own way. Now the youngest full Colonel in the Marines, he strived to make sure both sides of his life stayed sane.

On their way to the U.S.S. Liberty, the two best friends made a detour past the sunken trawler in hopes of seeing survivors.

As Michaelson glanced down at the water, he refocused the binoculars on a particular section and felt his heart freeze. “Call!”

The pilot waved that he saw the object and picked up the homing beacon signal. As the chopper got close enough, two Marines in wetsuits went down the ladder and reached the raft. The first man to arrive thought the woman lying inside was already dead but, when he felt for a pulse, he laughed aloud.

“Tell those fools up there to lower a stretcher. Our girl’s still kicking.”

When the pilot passed word back to his two high ranking VIPs, Michaelson slumped on the seat. “She’s alive,” he whispered in relief, hearing Richardson release a breath. Both men wondered the same thing: *How long would she live, considering the rumors in D.C.?*

### **U.S.S. Liberty Infirmary**

Once the three helicopters returned to the U.S.S. Liberty and the injured men went to the ship’s sickbay, all hell broke loose.

“I should break your face!” Grant yelled while a white smocked Navy doctor looked at a graze on West’s arm. “This stunt was...”

“...stupid, lame, dumb, harebrained.” West finished for him, voice expressionless as he sat, body and mind numb. “I’ve heard it all before.”

Grant started to explode but backed off when Grady Shaw entered.

“Cool it, Grant. As far as anyone can prove, Cassidy and the boys were working under my orders so, if you’ve got a beef with them, take it up with me, outside.” The NSA man didn’t mention just how many favors he had to call in to get that order in writing.

While Grant bellowed, Ira Weller and Sloan O’Brien tried to help the stressed out Navy doctors.



“Look, Tremayne, be reasonable about this and I’ll get you a cookie.” The medic, Weller, used his most patient tone with the upset SEAL.

It hadn’t taken long for Tremayne to come around to consciousness. It took much longer to calm him down when he learned what had happened

“Leave it, Weller,” he snapped, wincing as a medic applied antibiotics to a wound on his back. “Get somebody to tell me again how in God’s name you let her do this.” The pain evident in his voice and eyes didn’t all come from his injuries. “I don’t give a damn if she ordered you out or that you didn’t know who she was. This squad has never left a member behind and the first time it did it should not have been...”

“None of us expected it, Tremayne,” Brookes spoke. “I take full responsibility.”

“No one takes responsibility for Cassidy *but* Cassidy, Brookes,” Tremayne replied, shaking his head. “She needs to care for everyone else but refuses to let anyone care for her.”

Still shrugging off the medics, Tremayne knew he shouldn’t be taking all of his anger out on his men but the very thought that Cassidy had been left, essentially to die, just wasn’t sitting well with him and he didn’t give a damn if he was showing emotions unbecoming an officer and a SEAL.

A shout caused heads to turn when Gibson skidded to a halt, ignoring the glares of the medics. “I was up with the Admiral when he got the call from the Marine Recon unit,” he gasped, eyes bright. “She’s alive! Hurt pretty badly, but alive.”

Several hours passed before they heard anything else, despite Weller’s best attempts to threaten the Navy doctors.

Tremayne stayed in sickbay where most of his men had been restricted. While he knew his injuries were serious, he hated lying around. Cassidy had been in surgery for five hours and they wheeled her into a different section of sickbay, which bothered him.

“That is one lucky young lady.” A doctor spoke quietly to another as they walked through. “One bullet that close to her spine...and the other could have ripped her guts apart.”

The other man shook his head. “From what I hear, her troubles are just starting. Injuries notwithstanding, a lot of powerful people want an example made of her and those boys.”

Ethan sighed, knowing he would do what he could to see his friends cleared, whatever the charges. He waited for both men to leave before getting up to go see his friend.

Cassidy lay in a bed surround by wires, looking smaller than he remembered. He knew she had suffered burns and bullet wounds, but her emotional wounds concerned him most. How would she handle the events to come?

“Oh, baby, what have you done?” he whispered, pulling a chair closer. He gently lifted one hand in his and swore he and his platoon would see this through with her.

### **The U.S.S. Liberty, sometime later:**

“Olsen needs to call the dogs off or I get in touch with my man at the United Press and start to remember some things I shouldn’t.”

A mass a voices along with shooting pain brought Cassidy Marshall out of blissful oblivion. She recognized West’s voice and wondered who he was snarling at.

“It’s not that simple, Aiden,” Taylor countered. “You and I both know that.”

“Shaw got us cleared. There are no loopholes in his paperwork.” West lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. “I’ll be *damned* if they’ll haul her off in chains.”

She remembered more of recent events and forced her eyes open, needing to get her people out before they could be arrested. A dull, sick panic set in. Struggling to sit up, things got blurry and she gasped at the wave of pain. Determined to move, she threw one leg over the bed’s edge.

“Hey now, whoa, little Skipper,” O’Brien soothed, catching the girl before she fell and easing her back on the bed. “You aren’t going anywhere.”

Cassidy grappled with him. “Have to get out...can’t let ‘em...”

The big man barked over his shoulder, “Kayayan, get the Skipper.”

Kayayan nodded and took off running to find his commanding officers.

“Cass, calm down,” West urged, shooting Taylor a look. “You’re safe.”

The British woman continued to struggle against O’Brien “Aiden...you can’t let them...we need to get out.”

“No one is taking you or the boys anywhere, Cass.” Tremayne’s voice cut through her panic.

Tremayne had been meeting with Shaw and Admiral Lawrence when Kayayan found him. Now he entered sickbay with his gaze centered on one bed, crossing over to sit on the bedside.

“It’s alright,” he promised, reaching to touch her face. “You’re safe here and I’m with you.”

Still unsure, the girl relaxed until Shaw walked in with men she didn’t know.

“Ethan?” Her hand tightened around his as West swore.

Taylor stepped into her sightline, his features grim but calm. “The SEALs are taking a different flight back to their base in Coronado,” he explained to her “You and the Mavericks will come back with the Team and me.”

“Prison, huh?” Her voice didn’t betray the fear in her heart.

“No, but some people do have questions,” Taylor replied, trying to reassure her.

Tremayne had fought against this and he planned to fight more as soon as he got back to base, even if it meant calling on his father to see what he could do.

“It’ll be okay, baby,” he whispered: “It’ll take a few days and then you can come out and yell at Gibson and the guys.”

She knew Ethan believed that, even though she knew better. “I love you,” she murmured.

Something in her tone worried Ethan, but a shout that the platoon’s flight would be leaving ended any further conversation.

“I’ll see you soon,” he promised from the door.

Cassidy’s smile didn’t reach her eyes. “I doubt it, luv,” she whispered.

“It’ll be fine, Cass,” Taylor assured her, missing West rolling his eyes. “Olsen’s told me it’s a simple debriefing.”

West shot a dry look at his second in command. Both men knew that nothing was ever simple in the covert world of Washington, D.C. Cassidy had too many foes for this to be simple.

## Chapter 9

### Coronado, Ca., U.S. Naval Base: One Month later:

“Ethan, not to second-guess you,” Lieutenant (j.g.) Logan Brookes began, slumped in a chair in Ethan’s office. “But-are you sure you’re up to a full training schedule?”

The men of First Platoon had been training hard and fast for the past two weeks since Tremayne was given a clean bill of health.

Ethan eyed his second in command wryly, tossing him a bottle of water. “Get out of shape while I was laid up, Brookes?”

The other man snorted. “I just don’t think this is what the medics had in mind for you.”

“Maybe, but I need the activity to take my mind off of other things. I can’t get Shaw to call me back about Cassidy and I can’t reach her.” he hated to voice how much that worried him.

Brookes set his water down, sitting up straight. “Think we made a mistake by leaving her?”

“I think I made a *huge* mistake, pal. Orders were from too high up to ignore, though.” Tremayne muttered.

“You have a plan?” Brookes asked, figuring he didn’t.

Ethan considered his next words. “I have some time off coming so...I figure maybe I’ll head up to D.C.”

“Ah.” The lieutenant leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. “I hear the Capitol’s pretty this time of year.”

“Yeah, it usually is.”

“It may be a good idea to make a trip east part of the training roster, have the boys brush up on their history and such.” A twinkle filled Brookes’ eyes.

Before Ethan could reply, a knock on his door sounded and Channing stuck his head in. “Sorry to bust in, sirs, but Commander St. Clair wants you at his office as of yesterday.”

News that Commander James St. Clair, the platoon and Tremayne's CO, wanted him did not fill Ethan with cheer. "Something just went seriously wrong," he muttered and stood. "You may as well tag along." He spoke to Brookes, but paused to look back at his Senior Chief. "Find out if Gibson has done anything wrong, illegal, or just annoying recently."

Nearing headquarters, Ethan recognized a certain tension in the air. The black car with tinted windows and government plates didn't inspire confidence either.

"Uh-oh," both SEALs muttered in unison.

In the Commanders' office, they realized the situation involved more than just the SEALs. In addition, beside St. Clair, they saw Shaw, Colonel Michaelson and a man neither SEAL knew.

"Come in, sit down and I'll get out of the way." St. Clair ushered his men in. He gave the stranger a hard look before excusing himself.

Ethan's bad feeling got worse. St. Clair wasn't a man easily cowed nor would he walk away concerning business with his team.

"Tremayne, Brookes, I'm glad you were here and not on training." Shaw motioned to chairs while glaring at the man Tremayne didn't recognize. "You know Col. Michaelson, and this is Adam Olsen. I'm sure you've heard of him."

"He's the top Justice Department agent and head liaison between the White House and the Special Operations Group," the Colonel said, adding with more than a touch of sarcasm, "You could also call him Cassidy's boss."

Tremayne glanced at Olsen and his unlit pipe clenched in his teeth, then ignored his angry expression to focus on the NSA contact. "I've been trying to contact you, Shaw. I can't reach Cass."

Shaw sighed, sitting on the desk. "Yeah, I know. We can't reach her either."

Brookes looked up at that comment. "What do you mean? Where is she?"

"I honestly don't know." Shaw prepared himself for the impending outburst.

Ethan leaned forward in his chair, staring hard at all three men. "You told me she was just wanted for a short debriefing. That she and the boys were in the clear. What the hell happened?"

“That’s where she went at first, Tremayne,” Shaw replied, shrugging. “But then the kid started bleeding inside and ended up in Bethesda.”

“Cassidy’s injuries couldn’t take the stress and she collapsed. We put her in the hospital under guard.” Olsen winced when he saw the flash in the hardened SEAL’s eyes. “My people were placed with her to keep her safe.”

“The boss has a lot of enemies, both on our side and others,” Michaelson brooded. “This whole mess seemed too easy from the start.”

Tremayne’s mind refused to focus so Brookes spoke up. “So what the hell happened?”

“The Mavericks were deployed out of the country with another of Olsen’s teams. I got a call late one night that the hospital had been hit.” Shaw sounded disgusted. “It was professional. They took out Olsen’s people and Cassidy’s gone.”

“Look out,” Michaelson muttered, stepping out of the way of Tremayne’s temper.

Despite the fury Ethan felt, and the guilt and helplessness threatening to overwhelm him, when he could finally speak, the calm in his voice surprised him. “How long ago?” he asked, not seeing the cautious look Brookes gave him. “How long ago did this happen?”

“Two weeks,” Olsen answered.

Brookes slid lower in the chair, rubbing his face. “Oh, shit.”

Ethan leapt to his feet, unaware of his shaking hands, and roared, “Someone kidnapped Cassidy two weeks ago and *this* is the first you think to tell me about it?”

Olsen stiffened and drew his head back. “She’s a member of my group, Commander Tremayne and therefore *my* problem.” His shoulders slumped when he added, “But, despite my best efforts, all my sources have dried up.”

Shaw managed to get between the two men while Brookes took a hold of his leader’s shoulder.

“I know how you feel, Commander, but...”

“You don’t know anything about what I feel!” Ethan snapped back, pacing. “I told her she’d be safe and all the time she knew it was a damn lie. I should have listened to her.” He stopped in front of Olsen to ask, “Where is she?”

Olsen started to say they didn't know when Shaw cut him off. "We believe in a remote place in Virginia. It used to be used as a safe house by Langley, but a few years ago it was written off."

"Why?" Brookes asked, still keeping a firm hold of his friend.

Shaw's grin looked sardonic. "The big joke in the spook business is everyone's playing a different game. Rumors have been flying for at least a decade of a black op team out of Langley. They'd do jobs so black, no one else would touch.

"Michaelson was right when he said Cass had enemies. She and West's people both have. It looks like some of them are trying to get rid of her." Shaw glanced at Tremayne's thunderous expression before adding, "This group is unofficial and doesn't exist, but I have contacts who told me this was one big set-up."

Ethan waved an impatient hand. "Later. Do you know where they're at?"

"Yep, or I wouldn't be here now." Shaw laid blueprints and folders on the desk. "It's a risky job, pulling an assault on U.S. soil against men who are technically U.S. agents."

Just as the NSA man knew he would, Tremayne ignored the implied warning.

"She took risks to come after us. I'll do no less, and you damn well know it," Tremayne stated, then paused, "We'll need weapons and gear. What about them?"

"Your weapons won't be traceable back to the Navy or the SEALs," Olsen told him. "In case you have to leave them behind."

"Unless you leave a body behind, so don't," Shaw put in.

Tremayne picked up the plans. "Straight in and out, shoot and scoot, as the boys like to say. That's our kind of job."

"Finding out who's the brain behind this stunt wouldn't hurt either." Shaw shrugged. "It'll give me some weight if anyone starts screaming about this."

"My first and top priority is finding Cassidy and getting her out safely. Then we'll see what else we can find." Ethan walked out without another word, Brookes following close behind.

"Can he do this job?" Olsen demanded. "Lightning Team..."

Shaw whirled and, in a rare show of anger, shoved a finger into the Fed's chest. "It was *your* people who made this harder. Tremayne's men are the best and I wouldn't trust anybody else with this. Olsen, I'll warn you now, if that girl has been hurt worse, you'd better pray to God Tremayne doesn't come after you."

### **S.E.A.L. Team Omega First Platoon Barracks:**

"C'mon Chief, you know I'll be good." Casey Gibson tried to assure his chief that he wasn't planning on anything wild or weird with this weekend pass. It wasn't working.

Most of the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon had just showered away that day's dust and training sweat. Amid exchanging plans for the weekend, their C.O. walked in.

"Listen up, guys!" From his expression, the men knew immediately something was wrong.

"Problems, Skipper?" Ford asked.

Brookes had followed Ethan in and addressed the squads. "As of right now, all leaves are canceled. I want you packed and ready to move in two hours."

Groans and muttered oaths came from the men.

"Oh, come on, Lieutenant, have a heart," Summers pleaded. "I have a hot date lined up and if I cancel on her one more time, she'll never speak to me again."

"Chance you'll have to take, Summers," Brookes replied. "Our good friend, Mr. Shaw, has brought us another job."

This time the groans included threats and various unkind words toward Grady Shaw.

"Last time Shaw gave us a job, we all ended up nearly glowing in the dark," Carver retorted, sitting on his locker.

"Consider this an add-on to that last job," Brookes replied, looking up as Ethan went into his office and closed the door.

Chief Channing caught the tension. "What's wrong?"

"We got a group of black bag spooks operating out of Virginia that we get to shut down," Brookes told them.

This was certainly not their normal job. Others could handle this as well, if not better than the First Platoon, and they all knew it.



“Before one of you starts pointing out how this isn’t in our usual area...,” he took a second to look at each man, “...these men attacked, captured, and are holding Cassidy.”

Silence extended though the barracks until Gibson exploded. “Goddamn! I *knew* we shouldn’t have left her! I *knew* it!”

“Get packed. There’ll be plenty of time for that later,” Channing ordered, then he and Brookes headed for the office.

“Tremayne?” Brookes hesitated. He had seen how much the British woman cared for his leader and now he could see how much Ethan returned those feelings. Emotions on missions could be deadly. “We need a plan.”

Ethan Tremayne nodded, pushing the folders over to his 2-IC and Chief.

“I *want* to say we’ll blaze right through that building and leave burning carcasses for the big shots to find,” he muttered.

“That’s your heart talking, not your head,” Channing replied, knowing he needed to speak out. “You need a clear head for this, sir, or you’ll be not only a liability to yourself, but to your men *and* to Cassidy.”

“I know that, Chief.” Ethan sighed, pushing back in his chair. “We have the floor plan and security plans and how to disable them. It’s really a by-the-book, in-and-out job.”

“If you say so.” Brookes arched an eyebrow.

“You don’t have to tell me. I know, with a hostage, the risks triple, but I have to tell myself it’s by-the-book.”

Not only did Tremayne have an emotional stake in this, but so did Casey, Chavez, and O’Brien, the three-squad members who knew the woman well. Aware of the burden this imposed, Brookes shook away his worry. “We’ll study the plans in the air. Shaw said he’d have weapons and more information once we land.” Brookes laid a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “We’ll get her back.”

Tremayne smiled. “I know.” When Brookes left the office, Tremayne looked at the small snapshot in his hand, recalling when it had been taken.

A summer afternoon by the lake, a picnic basket and wine, and Cassidy sitting in the middle of the blue and white checked blanket, blowing kisses to the camera.

“Hang on, baby. I’m coming.”

## Chapter 10

### **Rural Virginia, twenty-four hours later:**

“This is still a bad idea.” Congressman Shaun Richardson absently tapped a pen on the desk. He and his best friend waited in a rural Virginia warehouse and neither one liked it. Olsen still wants his spooks to do the job,” he added. “How exactly did we manage to keep them out of it?”

“Olsen screwed up. That’s how,” Steven Michaelson replied without halting his restless pacing. “He should have had men from Eagle’s Rock in the hospital with her, not some suits from the Justice Department. So he got outvoted this time.”

Richardson watched his friend pace. “The question is, can the SEALs do this job any better than the Team?”

“Shaw says so and I trust Tremayne, so we just have to hope so.” Michaelson glanced at his watch, scowling. “Where in the hell are they, though?”

A low chuckle made him look back and glare. “What’s so funny, Mr. Congressman?”

“You trust me?” Richardson asked.

“You’re my best friend, so I trust you with my life. I trust you not to cause a war in Congress, and I trust that you won’t go climbing buildings at 3:00 in the morning just to see if you can still do it.” Michaelson’s eyebrows pursed. “Why?”

Richardson leaned back in the chair to stretch. “The SEALs have been here for the last thirty minutes.”

“What?” Michaelson whirled as a side door opened. “I hate it when you do that.”

Ethan Tremayne raised a curious eyebrow at the black man. “My unit takes pride on making sure no one knows when we’re around, so can I ask how you knew?”

“I grew up on the streets, Commander, and I was a thief for the better part of my life. I learned early to spots cops and to know when I wasn’t alone.” Richardson grinned. “Your boys are good, but I’ve had the training to get around things like that.”

As the rest of First Platoon entered the warehouse, Michaelson met Tremayne's grim eyes. "Still want to do this?"

The electric blue eyes turned cold. "We don't leave anyone behind."

"Is there any kind of clearance for this?" Chief Channing asked, making sure the entire unit checked in.

"Officially, no, there isn't." Michaelson sat on the edge of the desk and studied the men. "Officially, First Platoon of S.E.A.L. Team Omega is on a job in Peru. There are documents to prove that if anyone starts to get too nosy."

Richardson rolled his eyes; silently praying no one got that curious.

"What about weapons?" Chavez asked since the unit had left California without theirs.

The blond Marine waved a hand toward several wooden crates. "We think this should do. Your usual weapons with a few surprises thrown in."

The SEALs went to work looking in the crates when Gibson let out a shout, holding up odd shaped gun. "There are more SAW guns here than we have at base." He noticed it had been modified. SAW or Sub-Acoustic Weapon was a non-lethal rifle that used high impact sounds rather than bullets to knock out a foe.

"How'd you get all this stuff so fast...and from where?" Brookes asked, not sure that he wanted to know.

Michaelson grinned, waving hand. "Lieutenant, I am a Marine officer. I work with the best mercenaries in the world and know quite a few illegal gun dealers. Getting guns when I want has never been a problem for me."

"Though in this case, Olsen supplied the gear. He has a wonder boy of a weapons geek. None of this is traceable," Shaun put in, adding. "Besides, there is paperwork showing it was part of an assortment of weapons stolen from an armory in Kentucky three months ago."

"Covering all the bases, right?" Ethan commented, allowing his boys to go through the gear as he, Brookes and Channing concentrated on the details. "We have a rough plan on how to go in, but I have questions I need answered."

“Shoot.” Michaelson expected this based on Tremayne’s reputation.

Tremayne took a deep breath. “What’s the rule on prisoners?” SEALs rarely took live captives unless directed to.

“Commander Tremayne, these are black op agents, the blackest ever known to exist — or not to exist, in this case. These men do not believe in rules of engagement,” Michaelson replied with a shake of his head. “If roles were reversed, they would not hesitate to kill you. As far as they go, your team is free to handle this as you would any terrorists. “However,” he reached behind him for a photo. “If at all possible, we would like this man alive.”

Ethan took the photo of a large man with a rugged face and long red hair. “Who is he?” he asked, passing it to his officers.

“Shamus Flynn is the head of this group and he would go a long way to cutting off any trouble this raid may cause.” Michaelson explained.

“What about cleanup?” Channing asked. “Who will handle that if we leave prisoners?”

“Olsen will have a team waiting to clean up once your team pulls out,” Richardson answered. “There will also be a helicopter close to airlift you out, considering Cassidy’s need for medical help.”

Ethan refused to think on that and focused on another thing that bothered him. “If Olsen has the men and the authority, why is he backing off to let us handle it?”

“Olsen didn’t like it and still doesn’t, but he knows West can cause one hell of a scene, and he also knows he screwed up,” Michaelson replied. “Cassidy’s the third highest Justice Department agent, so who ever grabbed her pulled such an illegal op that no agency will want to claim it. However, Olsen screwed up by not having men from Eagle Rock with her. His people will offer back-up, but that’s it.”

“It’s your show, Commander Tremayne.” Richardson told him. “If you want out, you need to say so now.”

“I have never left one of my people behind.” Ethan declared, and then added in an unmistakable tone. “But, you better warn everyone involved in this that once we get her clear, Cassidy comes home with *us*. If she needs a hospital, it’ll be Balboa.”

Michaelson supposed he should have expected that. When he looked into the SEAL officer's eyes, he decided to let Shaw and the President handle Tremayne's demand.

"There's a truck out back for you. When you're ready, just click the remote and the chopper will come in," Richardson finished, seeing the SEALs had already loaded the gear onto the truck.

"Alright, let's get going. We want to be in position to strike early," Chaning snapped to the men. "Klein, you drive. The Skipper will be up front and the rest of you had better have those weapons ready."

Ethan paused before leaving. "How much trouble will you guys be in? Or Shaw or Olsen?"

"This group pulled an illegal op on the third top Justice agent in Wonderland. Olsen and Shaw can easily handle it if anyone starts whining," Michaelson assured him, extending a hand. "Just get her out, Commander."

"That's the plan." Tremayne returned, climbing into the truck cab just before it rumbled off into the night.

"What are the odds of them pulling this off?" Richardson asked as they watched the taillights disappear.

His friend considered before sighing. "Pulling it off is one thing. Finding Cass alive is the part that worries me."

"Keeping the Eagle's Rock boys out of this should be what's concerning you." Richardson knew no matter how much Olsen may have agreed to this, he would still be watching over their shoulders.

## Chapter 11

### Rural Virginia, 1500 Hours

“The way the blueprints read, it’s a two story brick Colonial, but it has an underground section.” Lt. Brookes spoke through the window that separated the truck cab from the bed. “Realistically, they should have her downstairs.”

Tremayne looked over the plans and the security setup again. “There are supposed to be six men on patrol outside. We need to take them out first.”

Gibson broke off the internal debate about wearing night camo paint or a full mask in order to comment. “It’s good they included a few SAW guns, huh, boss?”

“I figure that’s why Shaw put ‘em on the list,” Tremayne agreed. “They probably have a generator for backup power. We’ll leave ‘em with lights, but kill the security systems for the inside. Shaw’s report says a computer in a shed next to the main building controls all the systems. Palmer, that’s your job.”

Mason Palmer, the unit’s main demo man, nodded. “Not a problem, sir.”

Chaning examined the floor plan again. “We’ll have to split up the squads to cover all three sections.”

Tremayne leaned forward, elbows on knees, and considered for the millionth time what they were about to do. Fifteen men to cover three floors and an unclear number of foes presented no unusual problem for his platoon...except these foes weren’t usual. Once they realized they were under attack, they’d kill their hostage.

Breaking his reverie, he straightened. “We’ll let Olsen’s men handle the outside once we go in. Brookes, take Chavez, Gibson, Summers and O’Brien and hit the basement. We need to secure that area first. I’ll have Ford, Carver, Robson, and Kayayan with me on the first floor. Chief, you’ll take Klein, Palmer, Adams and Lani and secure the second floor. Other than the man we want alive, everyone else is open. If you have a live one, secure them for the cleanup crew. Any questions?”

The truck rumbled down the road a while before Chavez voiced one. “What if Cassidy’s...I mean, what if it’s too late?”

Brookes saw his leader’s eyes, already grim, go dark and dangerous.

“If she’s dead, Chavez, we take her body out and then we raze this goddamn place to the ground.” Ethan felt the truck slow down. “We’re here.”

The SEALs wore night black combat clothes complete with full masks, weapons secured so they wouldn’t make noise.

Brookes motioned the men into teams so they could approach the house from three different directions. “Use SAWs on the guards and hide the bodies,” he whispered into the Motorola radios they all had. “Signal when you’re in place.”

Casey gave a mock salute then turned serious as he started out for the position his team was scheduled to have.

Normally laid back and jovial, he could be serious when he needed to be and while every mission was serious, he took this one especially so.

While technically and officially, Cassidy Marshall was First Platoon’s co-commander and could be, at times, harder on them than Tremayne.

She had covered for him on more times than he could recall and had stood up for the platoon more than she had needed to.

The SEALs were a family that looked after one another, Cassidy was one of them no matter what anyone said, and Gibson was determined to bring her back.

While they waited for the teams to check in, Ethan tried to center on the here and now, but his thoughts kept trailing back to his memories.

The first time he met the British woman he had just been assigned to be the commanding officer of S.E.A.L. Team Omega’s First platoon. The Annapolis graduate, used to following regulations, found himself in a unit that disregarded rules.

Cassidy had been on special assignment with the platoon when he came on board and she had stayed to make sure the shift of power went smoothly.

They spent days dancing around each other, her presence sending sparks down his arms and through his chest. It didn’t matter where, either — the rifle range, gym, on training exercises.

One evening, ready to head home, he crossed the parking lot and found her parked beside him, fumbling for her keys. They hit the pavement and bounced underneath his truck. He dropped to his knees and retrieved them, holding them up to her.

“Here.”

“Thanks.” Instead of taking the keys, she took his hands and pulled him to his feet. “I get nervous when a man gets on his knees like that. Looks too much like a proposal.”

Tremayne dusted his khakis and grinned. “Skittish, huh?”

“Oh, like you’re not?” She tilted her head, teasing him.

“Me? I’m not afraid of anything.”

“Really?” She grabbed his collar in both hands and pulled him to her, inches from her face. Moving her mouth close to his, she whispered, “Scared yet?”

His grin faded; his eyes changed to deep blue; the wall he’d built so carefully crashed. “To death,” he whispered back, then leaned in and kissed her soft, enticing lips.

“That’s the signal. All units are in place and Palmer is waiting your word,” Brookes spoke softly, looking over. “Tremayne?”

Ethan shook himself out of the past, swearing silently. “He’s got it. We go on your count, Chief.”

Listening, it seemed to take a lifetime before the security shed exploded. Channing brought his arm down. “Go! Go! Go!”

The SEALs leapt out of the darkness and took the agents by surprise.

Another team a few miles out heard the explosion.

“Well, it’s started.” A black-suited agent spoke.

The agents were a specially created top-secret covert agency that answered to only the President. Normally, this would have been their assignment. This night, though, they were the reserves.

Duke Chambers, a former Green Beret and head of security for Eagle’s Rock, leaned back in the van’s front seat and closed his eyes. “God help those stupid sons of bitches if the kid’s hurt. Those Navy boys are playing for keeps.”



## **CIA Safehouse, rural Virginia: 1700 Hours**

“Team one, get going!” Tremayne snapped into his microphone, bringing his Alliant Bullpup to bear on a pair of men approaching with submachine guns.

The unit led by Brookes split from the main attack force as soon as they hit the house. “Summers, find that door to the basement. O’Brien, cover the rear, and someone find us a prisoner to talk to.”

“We need to clear the top floor to keep anymore from joining the parties downstairs,” Chaning told his men, taking the side stairs to the second floor two at a time. “Adams, toss a couple flash grenades. Lani and Klein, get ready to deal with anyone who comes your way. Palmer, nobody goes down those steps. Lani, you have this set. Go.”

Once orders were given, the SEALs reacted with practiced skill and launched. The blast woke men upstairs, sending them scrambling into the hall and straight into armed SEALs.

“Clear these rooms!” Chaning snapped.

Downstairs, Ford charged into the living room and dove behind the couch as a burst of auto fire shot his way.

“Don’t know who you cowboys think you are, but you sure made a mistake coming here,” an arrogant male voice shouted.

*Yeah, I bet.* Ford thought to himself, staying low as he crawled behind the couch.

“You good ole boys don’t have the guts to take on real black ops men,” the man went on, shooting another burst off. “The old man must be desperate to send his wet behind the ears kiddie squad in. Grant’s team too busy to be bothered or just scared of us?”

Ford blinked, understanding as a voice came in his ear.

“This yo-yo thinks we’re Olsen’s outfit,” Carver said. “You cool, Ford?”

A tsk sounded which meant his teammate was safe but didn’t want to reveal his location.

“Fine, stay low. Robson’s about to send this guy a present.” Carver nodded to the skinny black man next to him. “The yo-yo is behind that little wall he made with the desk and end table. Can you land it in one?”

Robson rolled his eyes while cracking open the chamber of his Bullpup and inserting a 20mm explosive round.

“Can Gibbs still break glass while singing?” he returned, whirling around the doorframe and launching the round.

The 20mm shell landed next to the loudmouth man who screamed, scrambling over his barricade just as it exploded. The blast sent the man flying, on fire. He hit the floor, writhing to extinguish the flames.

Carver placed the barrel of his H&K MP-5 in the man’s face. “You have a shot at living. Where’s the girl you’re holding?”

The man panted as his clothes and skin smoldered. “Go look for yourself, Chinaman,” he spat, bleeding from the mouth. “Better yet, save yourself the trouble...not much left to find.”

“Hey, guys!” Kayayan shouted from the doorway. “The Skipper has lost it! The Flynn guy the Feds wanted alive said something to set him off.”

Carver swore, running from the living room and shooting another man. “Finish these bastards and yell for the Chief!” he told them as he went in the direction Kayayan indicated.

The upstairs team went to the next room. “These guys sure liked their vices,” Klein remarked, moving bags of cocaine with his gun barrel. The fight upstairs hadn’t lasted long and several men had been tied and knocked out. Now they were just searching for any evidence.

“They’ve got drugs, beer, and women, not very professional,” Adams agreed, opening a drawer full of Playboy magazines. A Polaroid photo caught his eye. “Oh damn,” he breathed, holding it out to Klein.

“We’ll be lucky if he doesn’t kill someone.” Perry was grim when they heard Robson calling over the radios.

“Chief, we need you on the first floor! The Skipper’s lost his cool!”

Chaning had been tying their last prisoner when he got the message. “Get downstairs and help the others!” he snapped, knowing this had been bound to happen even before Adams passed him the photo.

## Chapter 12

### **Inside the CIA target, safehouse:**

While his men went on a room-to-room search, Tremayne stepped into a den, looking for evidence.

“Your lot is too by-the-book to be the old man’s boys. Besides, if you were Olsen’s do-gooders, there’d be choppers buzzing overhead.” The heavy Irish brogue sent Ethan whirling, his Bullpup aimed at Shamus Flynn. The red-haired Irishman dwarfed the desk; his heavily muscled limbs overflowed his chair. Barrel chested and thick necked, he appeared smug and unconcerned. My lads are the best in this business, but you’re going through them like water.”

“What are they best at, Flynn? Killing old women and children? Assassinating people? Kidnapping?” Tremayne didn’t lower his weapon.

“We’re best at winning, boyo.” Flynn studied him. “No, since you’re none of the above, I’d guess you and your lads are SEALs—looking for something in particular.”

“It doesn’t matter what we are. You and your rabid dogs are finished.”

“Rabid dogs, you say?” Flynn leaned back in his chair and laughed. “Such a brilliant phrase, but then you’ve always been a bright lad, haven’t you, Ethan Tremayne?”

When the SEAL made no comment, Flynn opened a folder in his hand. “Oh, I know who you are, laddie and I know you and your outfit are here looking for Olsen’s pretty little girl. Don’t be so surprised. Since my backer said SEALs would show up, I wanted to be prepared.”

Tremayne fought down the sick feeling in his gut “Where is she?” he demanded, fighting to keep his voice steady.

Ignoring the question, Flynn went on, pressing the fingertips of both hands together. “I know your type, Commander Tremayne. Raised in a wealthy Kentucky family, educated at Annapolis, joined the Navy and then the SEALs. All this to prove a point to your folks and to control of your life and emotions.

“Then along comes a sadistic bloke like myself. I tell you how pretty your girlfriend was. Notice the past tense, mate? I say how much fun my lads had with her. Though I’m sure you know how soft that near perfect skin was, how she’d whimper your name while I was with her, how she’d scream as we’d...play.”

Flynn clucked his tongue and tossed the folder on the floor, scattering photos at Tremayne’s feet. “Girl’s tough. She held out through the drugs, the beatings, and torture. Oh, she screamed, but that wasn’t what I wanted. No, I wanted her broken.”

Tremayne glanced at the photos and felt his heartbeat slow. A rage, so hot it blistered his lungs, began to rise from his gut. He could barely hear Flynn over a roar filling his ears.

“Wasn’t ‘til I took her that I got what I wanted. First time, despite the drugs and injuries, she fought me. That, mate, is satisfaction. Winning a hard fought battle it was when I finally forced her to open for me. So tight and hot she was that I took her three times and then, because she still had a little fight in her, I rolled her over and took her for what she really was.”

Flynn met Tremayne’s disgust-filled eyes as he waited a beat. “I took her like the bitch she is and then gave her to my lads to play with. I figure, after I beat the hell out of you and before I slit your throat, I’d drag your carcass downstairs and let you watch while I rape your woman in front of...”

Tremayne’s self-control snapped. In one lightning move, he tossed the gun down and lunged straight for the jugular, his only focus to choke the life out of that twisted bastard.

Flynn sidestepped the move and brought his massive elbow down on the SEAL’s back, driving him to the floor.

“Shame on you, laddie, for getting so distracted.” Flynn taunted, kicking the Bullpup away and reaching down to pull his dazed opponent to his feet. “This’ll be easier than I thought.”

Tremayne smashed his forehead against Flynn's. It caused him one hell of a headache but it broke the hold and allowed him to grab the Irishman's arm and throw him over in a classic judo throw.

He let the images and words fuel him. Tremayne didn't recall driving Flynn down to the floor with a swift knee in the stomach. His fists flew, sending punch after bloody punch, while grunts left his throat with each swing.

"Oh, sweet Jesus, this doesn't look good." Chaning stepped into the room and stopped, looking at the carnage. Broken furniture and sickening photos littered the plush carpet. In the middle of it all, his commanding officer, normally composed in a fight, sat on a man they needed alive, pummeling him to death.

"Sir?" he called. "Commander, are you listening?"

"Get out!" Ethan snapped.

Chaning bent down to pick up the photos, tossing them in the fire that was burning in the stone fireplace across the room. "Adams, Ford! Get in here and help me stop this."

"Hey, Skipper!" Ford called as he and Adams took a firm hold of Tremayne's shoulders and pulled him off Flynn. "Cool it, you'll kill him."

"Let go!" He jerked loose and shrugged his shoulders to straighten his shirt.

Chaning noticed Flynn's broken nose and other broken bones, along with heavy bruises. "Carver, secure him and get Robson to guard him." He looked at Tremayne. "You calm now?"

Tremayne didn't feel calm. He still felt like killing the son of a bitch lying on the floor. "No, but it's as close as I'll be for a long time." He looked around. "Has Brookes called in yet?"

His Senior Chief started to reply when Summers ran in. "The radios don't work in the basement. Skipper, we need you."

For a brief second he hesitated, not sure he wanted to face it, then swallowed and went out.

"Hey," Chaning caught Summer's arm and pointed to the bloodied Flynn. "He did that with his bare hands. Now, is what you found downstairs going to set him off like this again — or worse?"

Summer looked at the beaten man, then back at his Chief. "Worse."

“Shit,” Channing swore. “One of you guys radio that chopper and get those cleanup crews in here, ASAP,” he snapped, heading for the basement at a run.

### **Basement:**

Knowing their detail was the most dangerous, Summers used caution when he found the basement door and jerked it open. He took a smoke and a flash grenade from his webbing, pulled the pins, then lobbed them down the stairs. “Fire in the hole!” he shouted, holding the door closed as the blasts went off.

“Well, that should wake ‘em up,” Gibson grinned, adjusting his mask before going down the steps. He pulled the trigger to take out the knee of one man grabbing for his weapon.

“Summers, stay by the steps,” Lieutenant Brookes ordered, walking into the hall and frowning at the row of doors. “Look for anything they’d use for cells.”

A door two down from them opened and a man in a lab coat came out, coughing. He froze when he saw the SEALs. “Don’t shoot!” he pleaded, dropping to his knees. “I...didn’t do anything!”

“Why don’t I like the sound of that?” Chavez muttered, covering the man.

O’Brien looked in the room and lifted the shaking man by the shirtfront. “So, are you a mad scientist or just into torture for kicks?”

“Look, I...was only following orders.” The skinny, balding man paled in the face of the dangerous and angry men. “You know orders. If I didn’t do what they said, they would have killed me.”

“Depending on what you did, *we* may kill you,” Gibson snapped, nudging the man’s ribs with the muzzle of his H&K MP-5 submachine gun. “What *did* you do, Doc?”

The man considered his chances, then sagged. “I didn’t want to hurt her, but I had to.”

Brookes swore and saw his men tense. “The woman, where is she?”

“Talk, little man, or I recall anatomy class real fast.” O’Brien shook the man again.

A trembling hand pointed down the hall. “Last room, but it’s too late. He took the rest of the drugs to kill her.”

“Gibs, Chavez, go!” Brookes snapped as O’Brien bound the man. “Summers, find Tremayne.”

As their scout took off running, Gibson and Chavez had already reached the door they needed. Chavez didn’t wait to try the knob; he shot the handle off, then his teammate kicked the door in.

“Freeze!” Gibson snapped at a uniformed man leaning over the bed.

The soldier whirled with a syringe in one hand and pistol in the other, surprise and anger showing on his face. Gibson raised his MP-5 and emptied the entire clip into the man, stitching him from stomach to head. The full burst tossed the man over the bed, where he slid down the wall, leaving a bloodstained streak behind him.

Gibson crossed the room to check the man, when the insignia on his shirt collar caught his eye and froze him. “Holy hell, Rafe, this guy was...” He had turned to look at his teammate, but caught himself and stared. “Oh, my God, what did they...?”

“Go get O’Brien and the Lieutenant.” Chavez ordered him, forcing himself to stay calm. The sight in the small room froze him as soon as he had entered. It contained only a double bed and, on the other side, a wall of chains with carts of various tools. At the sight of the bed, his stomach dropped to his boots.

Ever since Chavez had known Cassidy Marshall, she had seemed like a little sister to him, despite her temper and abilities. He, like the rest of the platoon, doted on her. He had seen her injured; he had seen her angry and scared, but this...Tied, spread-eagled and naked, to the bedrails, she was pale, covered in blood and bruises. He swore between his teeth as he sat on the edge of the bed and, with his knife, began to cut her ropes.

“O’Brien?” He finished removing the ropes and...his mind blanked, unable to handle his rage.

The Scottish/American medic didn’t need any closer look to know they were in deep trouble. He grabbed a sheet lying on the floor and wrapped it around her.

“She’s alive, but barely. Deep shock, bad burns and...” It surprised him that his hands shook.

He had handled wounded and dying teammates before. “We need to get her...oh shit,” he swore, seeing her eyes flicker. “She’s coming around. I wanted her to stay asleep ‘til we got her out of here.”

The woman whimpered at the voices near her and the hands on her. "...please...not again."

The whimper made Chavez boil, but he kept his voice soft as he brushed her hair back. "No, boss, you're safe." He swallowed his fear and anger when her swollen eyes opened. She didn't recognize him and pulled away in terror.

Brookes stood in the doorway. "Can we move her?" he asked, blocking Gibson from going back in.

"No choice. She needs more help than I can do here," O'Brien replied. "But, from the corpse over there, going to Bethesda is a bad idea, boss."

"Why can't I go in?" Gibson demanded, almost like a pouting child. "She's my friend."

Brookes started to snap something when he saw Tremayne behind Gibson and read the waves of anger radiating off him.

"How bad?" Tremayne didn't stop for an answer, but walked into the room to see for himself.

"From what little I can see and can guess, we're talking broken or fractured ribs, burns in several places, multiple contusions, infected lacerations and..." The medic stopped, wondering if it was wise to continue.

"I know she was raped," Tremayne told him. "The bastard bragged about it."

The tone made Brookes wary and he could see O'Brien ready to intervene as Tremayne neared the bed.

The photos upstairs were seared into his brain and he thought he knew what to expect. Seeing her huddled in the corner of the filthy bed, covered by an even filthier sheet, and her face a map of abuse made his knees buckle and his stomach revolt. Tremayne knelt next to the bed, tracing his fingers along the bruises and marks on her throat while his eyes burned with unshed tears. "Cassidy, sweetheart, can you hear me? We need to leave now. You're safe and I swear I am not leaving your side again." He stood and gathered her in his arms.

Cassidy was drugged and disoriented, scared and confused. They had tried to make her believe things before and she refused to trust the illusions again. Her ragged scream jolted the men, but Chavez caught her hand and held it while tucking the sheet around her.



“Calm down, Cass. It’s Ethan. You know he won’t hurt you.” Chavez spoke normally, easing her hand to rest on Tremayne’s chest. It took several long moments before the woman relaxed and let her head fall on his shoulder.

“...Eth?”

He kissed the top of her head. “Sshh, sleep now. We’ll be home soon.”

The response went unheard as the SEALs moved slowly with Jake in the lead, meeting Chaning on the way down.

“Chopper’s out front and the cleanup crews are arriving,” he announced, swearing at the sight of Cassidy.

Tremayne nodded, allowing his two senior officers to handle regrouping the SEALs.

“Sweet Mary, what *is* that?” Kayayan asked when he saw the helicopter waiting for them.

The refashioned Sea Stallion had been overhauled; the side door was already open so the SEALs tossed in their gear, then themselves.

Tremayne hesitated on handing Cassidy to O’Brien but did so without jarring the sleeping woman.

Before entering the Sea Stallion, he looked behind him as several vans arrived. He would let Shaw deal with this part. He boarded, only wanting to get his woman somewhere safe. However, to do that required convincing the pilot not to go to the prearranged place.

When Lani let out a yelp, he looked to see what alarmed his man.

“Hey, this isn’t the way to Maryland.”

Tremayne and Brookes exchanged looks, then pulled and cocked their guns. A laugh from the cockpit stopped them.

“The Boss said a SEAL couldn’t tell directions unless they had that nifty little floating compass you guys use.” The voice came over the inside speakers. Tremayne thought he should know it.

Gibson definitely did. “Hell, Bear. Are you old enough to have a pilot’s license?” he asked, settling back on the padded bench.

Jesse Tallbear grinned under his helmet. “I could fly before I knew how to drive. And who said I had a license?”

“Oh, God, not these guys again,” Brookes groaned

“I thought one of Olsen’s pilots’ would fly us to Bethesda.” Tremayne knelt next to Cassidy’s stretcher and watched O’Brien hook up IVs.

“That was the plan, but Aiden and Mr. Shaw thought you’d prefer having a pilot you knew, as well as not having to go to Bethesda.” Bear watched his screens and made sure his radio was off. “So...we made a small change in the plan.”

“You guys getting in the habit of stealing aircraft?” Chavez asked, opening a cooler and handing out bottled water.

A disgusted snort came back. “*Borrow*, not steal. A Maverick never steals anything.” Bear adjusted his flight course. “So, you guys just relax and I’ll have you back in Coronado ASAP.”

Carver looked toward the front of the chopper. “Can this thing make it all that way without stopping for fuel?”

“Sure, it’s been overhauled so it doesn’t use as much fuel and I’m carrying extra tanks.” Bear sounded cheerful, but he didn’t mention the possibility of Olsen putting jets on their tail.

Tremayne ignored him when Cassidy whimpered and twisted.

O’Brien gave a closer look to an oozing wound on her back. “She’s running a fever from the infections. I can give her antibiotics, but she needs a hospital.”

“Balboa is expecting us,” Bear assured them.

“Your boss believes in preparing for everything, doesn’t he?” Brookes asked.

“The Mavericks motto is always prepare for everything ‘cause it’ll most likely happen.” The young Apache saw a light indicating he’d picked up other aircraft. “Damn.”

An F-16 flew next to them. “Sea Stallion 1267, you are off your prearranged course.”

“Oh shit,” Adams muttered. “We have jets tailing us.”

“No, I’m not, Captain. Check with your base command.” Bear returned, flipping switches with one hand.

He knew the machine could handle it. He knew he had the firepower for it. He just didn’t want to give the SEALs in the back a heart attack.

“You are off course. Return to the proper course or be shot down,” the F-16 pilot warned.

Tremayne swore violently when he saw the pilot flick a switch to warm up his weapons system.

“This type of bird doesn’t have a weapon system,” Ford exclaimed, getting a queasy feeling.

“Captain, have your base commander call this number and you can see I’m perfectly legal.” Bear rattled off a set of numbers. “Besides, we’re over a heavily populated city. I’m armored and have a fully operating weapon system complete with missiles and guns. Do you really want to get into a fight with me?”

Several moments of tense silence passed before the fighter pilot replied, “Base command confirms your heading is correct. Good trip, Stallion.”

The two F-16s pulled back and Bear let out a breath. “I didn’t think Olsen would pull that card yet. Damn good thing West and Shaw are five steps ahead of him.”

Tremayne could have asked about that but chose not to, deciding instead to focus on Cassidy and getting them all home alive.

“Bear, what’s Shaw doing?” he asked as an afterthought.

“Oh, I figure having the time of his life,” the young pilot replied, turning them toward California and help.

### **Same time in Washington, D.C.:**

“Where in the hell are they?” Adam Olsen roared as he stormed into Grady Shaw’s office.

Shaw looked up from his paperwork with an expression of complete and total innocence even though he knew exactly what the Fed meant. “Where are who?” he deadpanned. “If you mean Lightning Team, how should I...?”

“You know damn well who,” Olsen snarled, slamming both hands on the desk. “Your SEALs, where are they?”

Shaw coughed as he picked up papers that had gone flying. “Last I heard, they were in the middle of a raid in Virginia. Weren’t your boys playing cleanup?”

“Yeah and Duke said when he got to the house your SEALs left in the chopper.”

“So what’s the issue?” Shaw asked, adding. “And they aren’t my SEALs.”

Olsen snarled, furious. “The issue, smart guy, is two of my men found the pilot knocked out and tied up. Now, *where are they?*”

“How should I know?” he countered, playing on his own anger. “If someone hijacked your chopper, why blame me?”

“I can’t blame West because I know he’s in Columbia!” Olsen snapped, sitting finally. “They were supposed to take Cassidy to Bethesda.”

The door to Shaw’s office open and Steven Michaelson leaned on it, his blue eyes looking dangerous.

“No, they were supposed to take her someplace safe and after I got to the safe-house and saw what I did, Bethesda sure as hell isn’t it.”

He tossed a folder on the desk so Shaw could see. “Tell me, Olsen, how long have you known that someone in Navy Intelligence was playing both sides?” he asked, pulling out a photo of the man Gibson killed.

“This is one of Admiral Keller’s staff and I don’t like what that means.” Michaelson looked grim. “I talked to Shamus Flynn, which wasn’t easy since Tremayne did a nifty job of rearranging his face.”

Shaw frowned, rarely seeing Tremayne that mad. “What did he say to set Tremayne off?”

“Oh nothing, just bragged how he raped Cassidy.” Michaelson raised an eyebrow as Olsen paled. “Think Taylor will like that, Olsen?”

He paused for effect. “Eagle’s Rock is out of this. You want to help? Find the son of a bitch in Navy Intelligence who’s behind this, but stay the hell away from Cassidy.”

“Where is she?” Olsen demanded. “Damn it!”

“Drop it! It’s over! She was happy with them, but you guys dragged her back,” Michaelson snapped, anger blurring his vision. “Until this is over and assuming she recovers, you better stay away from Tremayne and the boys. I mean it, Olsen. You may have power, but you screw with us, and West can bury you.”

As Olsen stomped out, Shaw raised his eyes. “Bear picked them up, right?”

“Yeah and I’ve already had to deflect a couple F-16s,” Michaelson muttered, suddenly tired as he slumped in a chair. “I talked with Bear and he says she’s bad.”

Shaw reached for his coat. “C’mon, the best place for us is Coronado ‘cause it won’t take Olsen long to figure out where the boys went.”

## Chapter 13

### **Balboa Naval Hospital, Coronado, California:**

Ethan Tremayne couldn't recall how many times he'd been in this place for various members of his platoon. However, this time felt different.

Now, as he sat in a waiting room that smelled of antiseptic, he wondered what the ultimate outcome would be of this visit.

Jesse Tallbear had flown them directly to the hospital, landing on the roof emergency pad where a team of the best Navy trauma doctors waited.

Tremayne fought them when they reached for Cassidy, but finally a senior nurse and Brookes convinced him that she'd be in the best hands.

"I thought that before," he muttered, not realizing he had spoken aloud until he heard his own voice.

The rest of First platoon scattered to other places in the waiting room, sleeping, talking, or reading old magazines.

He tried to get them to leave but none listened. Gibson said it for them.

"We stay until we know for sure she's safe."

In his current mood, Tremayne could have laughed at the word 'safe'. What did it mean? He thought she was safe when he left her the last time. "There is no such thing as 'safe'," he sighed, looking up as he heard a step.

Lieutenant Brookes held out a cup of coffee. "I thought you could use this."

He had been watching his friend and commanding officer, getting more concerned by the minute.

"Thanks." Tremayne took the coffee and blew in it before sipping, wincing at the taste. "This stuff coffee or motor oil?"

"Nurse Lacey said it was guaranteed to either keep you awake or kill you," Brookes replied, dumping another creamer into his cup. "After ten of these, it's almost drinkable."

Tremayne nearly smiled, leaning back. “Go home, Logan. Take them to the base to shower or whatever. No sense in all of you hanging around.”

“You could go home, too.” Brookes knew it was futile but felt he had to try even as his boss shook his head.

“I want to be here when she’s out of surgery. I want to be here when she wakes up,” he stated, ignoring the cold spot in his heart and the nagging voice that said she might not wake up.

Brookes looked at Chief Channing, shrugging. “Alright, I’ll take these guys so they can shower, but I probably won’t be able to keep Chavez or Gibson from coming back. If they do, at least go take a shower and get some food.”

Tremayne nodded, barely aware of the near mutiny his officers had while trying to get the other SEALs to leave the hospital.

“Besides outranking me, what makes you think I’m leaving?” Gibson demanded.

“Because once you guys get cleaned up and get a few hours sleep, some of you can come back and convince him to do the same,” Channing snapped, rolling his eyes.

Gibson considered this and grinned. “Oh, okay. No problem, Chief.”

Once his men left, Tremayne felt himself slipping further away. His exhaustion melded with his guilt and anger.

“Damn.” He rubbed his eyes, looking up as the waiting room doors opened. He felt tired enough to bite the head off of anyone brave enough to cross him. “Dad?”

James Douglas Tremayne’s blue eyes looked like his son’s. The well-respected ex-Senator and current Congressman from Kentucky had been a friend to the SEALs in a time when budget cuts could kill them faster than a bullet.

Even at that time of night, his father looked ready to face the world in a pressed three-piece suit and tie.

Often at odds with what his only child wanted to do for a living, they had recently come to a truce.

“I was in the area on business and thought I’d see if you were off duty. Your base commander told me you were here.” He set his briefcase and overcoat on a chair to look at his son.

He'd often seen Ethan in the middle of missions or during training or even after a job if he'd been injured, but he had never seen him look so tired or worn down.

"Ethan, what happened?" he asked in a deep voice that reflected his Kentucky accent.

He didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to think about it, but found the words coming out of him.

"There was nothing I could do, Dad," he said when he finished, staring at his hands and the blood still on them. "What can I do now?"

"Be here for her. Help her get over the rough spots," James replied, hearing the pain in his son's voice. "You know, after Monica, I wasn't sure if you'd fall in love again."

Ethan tensed at the mention of his former girlfriend. Her suicide and his family's reaction pushed him into the Navy.

"But after the first time I saw you with Miss Marshall, I knew you had fallen hard." James smiled at his son's look. "She's a very special young woman, Ethan."

"I know. I love her and I need her." Ethan sighed, standing as the doctor entered. "How is she?"

Doctor Young smiled. "Sit down, Commander Tremayne." He motioned to the chairs, but Ethan shook his head.

"I've been sitting since I brought her here," he complained. "How is she? Can I see her?"

Dr. Young looked at his chart, considering his words. "Miss Marshall is in critical but stable condition. She has several wounds. The infection in some of them is severe. She has three broken ribs, second degree burns and minor ones she received from an earlier injury. In addition, her leg injury has deteriorated. That will need therapy. She was tortured by experts and she was also sexually assaulted multiple times, as well as sodomized."

Both the doctor and the senior Tremayne saw Ethan tense, his fingers clenching, then relax.

"And?" Ethan prodded.

"She seems strong willed, but her physical and emotional recovery needs to be handled carefully. She'll be in a delicate state for some time," the doctor put in.

“You mean you don’t think SEALs can handle her.” Ethan smiled fully for the first time that night. “Doctor, you’d better warn your staff that I have a platoon of fourteen men. Until she’s out of here, one or more of them will be here day and night. That doesn’t include former platoon members when word of this gets out.”

Young didn’t say anything right away, then nodded. “I was told that would probably be the case. Your men have been given clearance for twenty-four hour guard if you want.”

“Can I see her?” Ethan asked, needing that more than anything right then.

“She’s in a private I.C.U. room on the fourth floor. I can’t tell you when she may wake up or how she’ll be.”

“I know how she’ll be, Doctor, but I need to be with her.” Ethan turned to his father. “Dad, I...”

James waved his son away. “Go, Ethan. I’ll be in town a few more days if you need me.”

As Ethan nodded and went out the door, he saw Bear sitting on the nurses’ station desk. “You got all the power here, Bear?”

“Nah, Aiden and Michaelson have that but, until one of them gets here, I’m just a tool,” Bear replied, grinning at an older nurse who patted his cheek.

“And what a cute tool he is, too,” she smiled, throwing Ethan a knowing wink. “This boy here has all of his brother’s charm and more.”

Ethan Tremayne shook his head and headed for the fourth floor, pausing by the door to take a steadying breath.

The room looked like any other he’d seen in his career except this one held the woman he loved.

“Cassidy,” he breathed.

She looked paler, lying in the huge bed surround with wires and tubes. Her face, now cleaned of blood, showed the massive amount of bruises and swelling. Her arms, which had tubes dripping liquid, were molted with marks ranging from bruises to burns.

He knew the soft flannel hospital gown covered more injuries while Cassidy herself covered the worst injuries of them all. How much damage had this done to an already fragile soul?

Ethan sat in the chair closest to the bed, reaching through the rail to lift one sleeping hand in his.



“I love you so much, baby.” he whispered and hoped she could hear him. He held her hand to his lips and closed his eyes. Finally alone with her, alone with himself, he didn’t need to be strong anymore. Those earlier unshed tears now jeweled his lashes and one had the audacity to escape down his cheek. The beeping monitors made the only sound and, with weariness crashing down on him, he let their lullaby sing him to sleep, laying his head on the edge of her bed, her hand still pressed to his mouth.

**Some time later:**

A hand touching his shoulder caused Tremayne to snap awake, jerking around.

“Whoa there, tiger, slow down.” Shaw raised his hands, backing away. “I’m still on your side.”

With a sore body and numb mind, it took a minute for him to recognize Shaw. He looked back to see Cassidy still asleep.

“When did you get here?” he asked the NSA man, rubbing a hand over his eyes to clear them.

“I got in about an hour ago. I had to handle a few things,” Shaw explained, getting a good look at Tremayne and agreeing with Brookes’ assessment. “You need to get some sleep, a shower, and some food, in that order.”

“I don’t want to leave her alone,” Ethan refused, fighting the exhaustion. “I can’t trust...”

Shaw overrode that, waving a hand out the door. “You’ve got a squad of SEALs out there and more on the way. I’m supposed to take you home to get some rest or MacCray’s coming here personally to kick your butt all the way to the border.”

Tremayne started to argue when Brookes entered the room, prepared to back up Shaw.

“You’ve been here for over forty-eight hours straight, Tremayne. You’re about to crash and burn if you don’t get some sleep. What good are you to the platoon or to her if that happens?” he demanded, going on. “I have a squad here now and the Chief will have another squad here tonight. Cassidy won’t be alone and I’ll make sure Gibs or Chavez is with her if she wakes up.”

Tremayne knew what they said made sense and he would have been the first one to lecture his men on going past their body's endurance, but this was different.

"Alright, I'll go," he agreed reluctantly, eyeing his second in command and walking into the hallway. "If anything happens or if she wakes up, call me."

Brookes smiled. "First thing I'll do," he promised, meeting Shaw's eyes.

"Okay, Eth, I'm driving." Shaw caught the younger man's arm. "When you're clear and awake, we need to talk."

Knowing that usually meant something bad, he felt too tired to say anything.

"Is the Skipper alright?" Adams asked when Tremayne walked by him.

"He's just tired and worried," Brookes replied, looking around at the men. "I want at least one of you with her at all times. No one goes in that room without us knowing, and they *better* have a need to be there."

Zak Lani looked up, frowning. "Still think she's in danger?"

"We're not taking any chances," Brookes answered. "Chavez, she knows you the best so you stay with her, though I'm sure Gibson will pop in soon."

Chavez grinned and went in, careful his weapon stayed within easy reach.

Satisfied that his men were in good position, Brookes went down the hall and found the young Marine Colonel waiting for him.

"This isn't over, is it?" he asked.

"Not if I'm right, no." Michaelson sighed. "The fact that Navy Intel wanted your team left to hang made me suspicious but, when I add that to the guy Gibson killed, someone's in deep and we need to draw them out."

Brookes glanced back, realizing what that meant. "Tremayne won't like using her as bait."

"I don't think it'll come to that. These people will panic and slip up. We'll just have to be ready."

"SEALs are always ready." Brookes hoped they would be this time.

## Chapter 14

### **Ethan Tremayne's Condo, Coronado, Ca.:**

Ethan Tremayne forced his eyes open to look toward his clock. He had no real idea how long he had slept or even the day of the week. Lumbering out of bed, he headed for the shower.

The water hit him like a wall of ice water and he cursed, waiting until it had regulated before sticking his head back under the spray.

The water cleared his thoughts and he started swearing more. How long had he slept? He knew if anything happened with Cassidy, Brookes or Chaning would have contacted him. Still, he couldn't get rid of the cold lump in his stomach.

After shaving and dressing, he stepped out his bedroom to the smell of coffee and food.

"You got your orders, Commander. They came from the top. You have no clue where the First Platoon is. That's the story and you'll stick to it." Grady Shaw talked into his phone while flipping pancakes. "I'll handle them; you just handle your end."

As he hung up, the NSA man shook his head. "I swear, for all the static Olsen's causing me, I should give back some the next time Grant's crew gets into a mess."

"What are you doing and who are you?" Ethan stared at the man, looking around his condo's living room to see it covered with a laptop, papers and cups of stale coffee.

"Ha-ha, very funny." Shaw laughed, handing him a cup of coffee. "Sit, eat and then we need to talk."

"I need to go to the hospital," Ethan countered but drank the coffee. "How long have I been sleeping?"

Shaw considered that answer, putting pancakes, eggs, and bacon on a plate. "Seventy-five hours and some odd minutes and, before you start yelling, Cass is still unconscious, and your boys are always there."

"Damn." Ethan felt guilty about sleeping while his men were doing what he should have been. "No change?"

“Eat,” Shaw urged, frowning. “Her vitals are stronger and the infections are clearing up.” He paused for a moment before adding, “Gibson says she screams in her sleep and her eyes open, but they’re glassy.”

“She isn’t going to recover, is she?” Ethan knew he needed to face that reality sooner rather than later.

The other man sipped his coffee. “She’s a tough girl and has pulled through things I never thought she would but...I’ll admit this time may be tougher.” He looked at the younger man and tapped the table once. “You’ll go to the hospital, talk to her and she’ll come around. It’s never failed yet.”

Ethan appreciated Shaw’s effort to keep things positive. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Yeah, that.” Shaw hated to dump more problems on Tremayne, but didn’t see as he had a choice. “I’ll lay it all out and you can make your own call. Someone in Navy Intelligence had already told Horton on the Constellation to write your people off. Our enemy knew Cassidy was on the Constellation and knew how she’d react to that order. It was a simple matter of letting her emotions put her and the boys in the right place.”

“You think all of this was just to get Cass involved. Why?” that didn’t make sense to him.

“Admiral Sanford is under heat to order a full investigation of Cassidy’s involvement and, if needed, act on it.” Shaw saw Ethan’s frown deepen. “Whoever in Keller’s office is behind this wants our girl out of the way or dead. That’s what we have to watch for.”

Tremayne pushed his plate aside, deciding he needed to pace. “She’s still in danger then.”

“Michaelson talked to Flynn, and he let it slip that the man behind this was at that house with Cassidy,” Shaw declared, and then shrugged. “She saw him, so allowing her to wake up isn’t in his best interest.”

“Why didn’t Michaelson get Flynn to tell him who this person was?” Ethan demanded.

Shaw coughed, clearly hesitant. “We might have gotten him to do that but...uh... Flynn had an *accident* while in custody.”

“Someone needed him dealt with so he couldn’t talk.” Tremayne grimaced. “He had papers...photos...maybe something in them...?”

“I have people going through all that,” Shaw assured him. “Our best bet is to let the Navy have their inquest and try to draw the mole out.”

“That’s assuming Cass wakes up,” Ethan muttered, looking at the agent. “What about Olsen? I can’t see him being happy with the way the plan got changed.”

“He’s frothing at the mouth, but he’s being held at bay,” Shaw replied, grinning. “He can’t afford to come on too strong because Aiden West could cause some trouble.”

Tremayne reached for his jacket. “Which squad is with Cass now?” he asked, jingling his keys.

“Bravo Squad.” Shaw started to say something else when his phone rang. “Damn...Yeah? Shaw.”

He listened briefly, then barked, “Close the whole damn place off and get the other squad there! We’re on our way.” Ethan tensed at Shaw’s grim countenance. “Someone attacked the hospital.”

## Chapter 15

### Balboa Naval Hospital, Coronado, Ca.:

“So anyway, boss, you wouldn’t *believe* the woman I met a few weeks back.” Casey Gibson sat beside the bed, talking with Cassidy Marshall.

Even though technically part of Alpha Squad and not supposed to be there, he hung around the hospital until either Channing or the LT kicked him out.

Right then, he stretched out in the chair, telling of his latest conquest.

“I met her at Nick’s and, Lord, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. Not too bright, but that’s cool because the rest of her makes up for it.” He glanced over and frowned.

The British woman didn’t look as pale, but she still seemed so fragile with all those tubes and bruises. It scared Gibson to even touch her fingers.

“Anyway, I was *going* to go out with her, but then I remembered another girl who picked me up in a bar.” He grinned at the memory. “You remember before that job in Syria? I had to call base for someone to pick me up after this chick stranded me in a motel near Niland. She’d taken off with everything I had on me. You, the Commander and Tex showed up. Man, I thought Tex was gonna *kill* me. I never did get my wallet or clothes back.”

He patted her fingers. “I know I have a bad habit of doing things to get you mad but I promise, if you wake up, I’ll be good for a whole month...Damn,” he muttered, blinking when he thought he felt her fingers move in his. “Cassidy?”

A quick rap on the door distracted him. A tall, striking blond nurse and a shorter stockier male doctor entered the room.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but we need to take blood samples and change a few dressings,” the woman smiled, putting a tray on a table near the bed. “It won’t be more than a few minutes.”

Gibson frowned, not wanting to leave his friend, but knowing he didn’t want to see anymore of her wounds.

“Okay, I’ll send in one of the others.” He squeezed Cassidy’s hand. “Be right back, boss.”

He let the door close behind him and saw Sloan O'Brien and Rafael Chavez talking down the hall while Jesse Tallbear paced the floor, his ear to his cell phone.

"Hey guys, I swear Cass's fingers moved."

"That's good," Chavez said, raising his eyebrows. "Now what the hell are you doing out here?"

"Oh, a nurse and a doctor said they needed to take some blood and change a few dressings." Gibson shrugged, running his fingers through his blond hair.

O'Brien turned to look at him, a deep frown on his face. "What did you just say, Case?"

"They said it wouldn't be more than a few...*what?*" Gibson blinked at the looks slicing him. "What's wrong with you guys?"

"Shaw and Dr. Young's orders were that only he, I, or Dr. Weller could touch the boss." O'Brien exchanged looks with Chavez, then swore. "Shit! Bear, yell for the others!"

A gunshot down the hall finished the discussion even as Bear reached for his radio and the three SEALs took off running, weapons drawn.

"I am such an idiot!" Gibson cursed himself.

"Yeah, but we'll kill you later," Chavez shot back, kicking open the door and going in with his gun steady.

The woman Gibson thought was a nurse lay on the floor with a syringe stuck in her neck. Her accomplice leaned against the closet door, holding a hand over his stomach, blood seeping through his fingers.

"This is bad," O'Brien pronounced from the door.

Their injured co-commanding officer, now awake but nowhere near coherent, held a loaded weapon. "Where'd she get a gun?"

A guilty expression smeared itself on Gibson's face and his hand slapped his empty holster for confirmation. "Uh...that's my fault, too. I took it out and laid it on the nightstand so I could get to it quickly."

"What's done is done, I guess." O'Brien shook his head at Gibson's screw-ups.

"Cassidy, it's..." Gibson took a step, but froze when the gun rose. "Okay, we need a new plan."

Hearing the others in the squad coming, Chavez swore. "Keep them back. She doesn't know them and she *will* shoot."

O'Brien went out to head his squad mates off while Chavez considered their options. *No choice*, he decided and holstered his weapon.

"What the hell are you doing, Rafe?" Gibson demanded, seeing his friend take a deep breath.

"I'm going to try to talk to her. Failing that, tell my wife that I love her."

Before Gibson could argue, Chavez stepped forward, worried about the glassy look in her eyes and the way she shook.

"Cass? It's Rafael. Can we talk?" he asked, careful to keep his voice low and calm despite the thudding of his heart. "Honey, it may not seem like it, but you *are* safe."

The woman's eyes snapped up to meet his, but she showed no signs of recognition or of lowering the weapon.

"Get...away." Her voice was whisper soft, the accent heavier. "Won't...let you...Get away!" she screamed.

Chavez had taken a step forward, but backed away at her cry, raising his hands. "Easy, boss, no one here will hurt you. Hell, my wife would scalp me if I let anything happen to you."

"Chavez, what in the hell are you doing?" Brookes demanded from the door.

"Duck, LT!" Gibson yelled, throwing himself backwards and knocking the man to the floor just as the bullet flew past where he'd been standing.

"No, won't trick me," Cassidy whispered, her eyes closed tightly.

While her eyes were shut, Chavez closed the distance between them, placing a hand over the gun and his other one holding her free hand.

"No, no tricks," he whispered, seeing her eyes open and reading the fear in them. "Remember the first time you came to the platoon, Cass? You told Lieutenant Grayson that we wouldn't last our first time out and he needed you to whip our butts into shape.

"Can you remember how much we resented it when Commander Tremayne came on board? How ticked you were because you had to bail Tex out of a Virginia Beach jail two days before? The rest of us were ...having a ...party when he came to the barracks."



Chavez kept his tone even and soft as she stared at him. “Keith was passed out on his bunk; the barracks was a wreck. We didn’t make a great first impression, did we? You yelled at us, and then went to smooth it over with him. Can you remember that?” He eased the gun from her fingers.

Cassidy kept watching this man with a gentle touch. His dark eyes locked on hers with concern and his voice...

She looked over his shoulder at the blond man still kneeling on the floor. Her thoughts drifted until one settled in her mind.

“Drums?” she asked, her head tilted.

Chavez frowned in confusion, then heard Gibson snicker. He let out a breath and hope filled his eyes. “No, my daughter does *not* need drums.”

“Does so...Rafael.”

He felt weak in the legs but didn’t let go of her. “I’ll talk with you about that later, boss,” he promised, seeing her eyes clear for a brief second, but her legs buckled and she fell.

“...No.” Her words stopped when Chavez put her on the bed. A wave of pain sent her curling up on her side, clinging to his hand. “Ethan?”

“The Commander will be here soon, boss.” Chavez promised, hoping he was right. “Lie still.”

O’Brien came in, eyeing the bodies. “Let’s get them outta here and stitch that guy up for interrogation.”

Chief Channing motioned to a few SEALs to handle that duty. “Is she alright?”

“Won’t know until she’s calm. I just hope she doesn’t withdraw totally.” O’Brien watched as she curled up tighter. “If she does, we may never get her to come back out.”

Jesse Tallbear blew out a breath. “That was Shaw. Your C.O. is on his way up.”

Brookes touched the bullet mark on the door. “Someone remind me not to make her mad at me.”

“You’re the first one of us she’s ever actually taken a shot at.” Gibson grinned. “She threatened to shoot me and Tex after a tiny incident with a truck full of skunks, but she never did.”

Both SEAL officers looked at him. “Do I want to ask what you were doing with a truck full of skunks?” Channing demanded.

Before the young SEAL could think of a reply, the elevator chimed and Ethan Tremayne stepped out, oblivious to the SEALs pointing guns at him.

“She okay?” was his first question and then, “What the hell happened?”

“Couple people got in disguised as staff and tried to kill her,” Brookes explained. “She woke up and took them out. Stabbed the nurse with her own poison syringe.”

“The man was shot in the gut but the doctor thinks he’ll make it,” Channing put in. “She’s asking for you.”

Tremayne nodded, pausing in the doorway to scan the room. His eyes stopped when he saw how small she looked curled on the bed.

“She’s slipping back into shock,” O’Brien announced. “Didn’t pull any stitches, so we caught a break there, but we need to keep her from withdrawing into herself.”

Tremayne sat on the bed’s edge, nodding at Chavez, who left and shut the door behind him.

“This hospital is too big a target,” Brookes decided in the hallway. “We need to move her.”

Shaw nearly choked. “Even I have my limits. No way will the quacks release her.”

Channing raised an eye at Michaelson, who shook his head.

“Guys, I’m a Marine Colonel in a Navy hospital. Total wrong branch of the military.” He shrugged. “Richardson or Ethan’s dad could pull strings, but it would take a few days.”

Gibson rolled his eyes. “Days she doesn’t have. The boss needs to be someplace she feels safe.”

“And someplace we stand a chance of defending,” Carver put in.

“We need somebody who can pull strings in a hurry,” Adams agreed.

It took several seconds before the SEALs turned to eye Bear, who stared at them.

“Oh come on,” he groaned. “I’m not a miracle worker.”

“But your boss is.” Brookes grinned.

Bear frowned, looked at the men surrounding him, and then reached for his phone.

“Lee, it’s Bear. Put West on the phone.” He blinked, frowning. “Tell him to shoot the Nazi and get on the line. The SEALs need him to pull strings ASAP.” While he waited, he asked the men standing nearby, “Even if my boss can do this, where can you hide her?”

Brookes and Channing exchanged looks. “That’s the Commander’s choice,” they decided.

## Chapter 16

Unaware of his men’s plans, Ethan Tremayne sat still on the edge of Cassidy Marshall’s bed, watching her and wondering if he could do this. Could he handle what she would need of him now?

He wiped away all doubts and laid his hand on her shoulder, feeling her tense and shudder.

“Hey, babe,” he murmured, swallowing his fear. With a light touch, he ran his hand through her hair and down her back. He could feel the bandages and fought down his flash of anger.

“Shaw and the guys ambushed me. Made me get some sleep, otherwise I would’ve been here when you woke up.” He continued to caress her. “Cassidy...I’m sorry. I should have listened to you on the ship. I should have stayed with you and none of this should have happened.”

He let his hand drop and stared at it, still seeing Shamus Flynn and hearing him. “I can never make up to you all that you suffered but I’ll be by your side to get you through this, if you’ll let me. The platoon needs you.” He hesitated before whispering. “I need you, Cass.”

When she remained unresponsive, Ethan sighed. Deciding it was best to give her time, he touched her face with his knuckles and started to stand.

“Don’t go.”

The softly whispered request froze him in place and he noticed Cassidy’s blue eyes watching him.

They were still swollen and not fully clear, but they were open and alert. That lifted some of the weight from his heart.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he promised, sitting back down and laying a hand on her cheek.

The woman didn't reply. Instead, she held his gaze and placed a hand over the one he had on her face. "Eth..."

"Sshh." He put a finger against her lips. "Don't talk. Just lie still and sleep. I'll be here when you wake up."

Ethan saw her bite her lower lip and knew she only did that in times of stress.

"Cassidy," he paused, not wanting to do this but figuring they may as well get it over. "Baby, I want you to listen to me. I know how badly hurt you are and I know what they did."

Blue eyes went still and wary, but she still shook her head. "No," she whispered, tears swimming now at the rush of painful memories and waves of humiliation. She needed Ethan to understand so he could walk away.

"Ethan...I love you but...you don't know what he...what he did." The halting words choked her. Unable to face him, she looked at her fingers as he held her hands. "You don't know what they did or...how he enjoyed what he did when he..."

"When Flynn raped you." Tremayne finished for her, seeing her eyes jolt at that. He placed a hand on her face to hold it still. "I know what he did, Cass. Flynn bragged about it."

Cassidy closed her eyes, fresh shame washing over her. She knew Flynn told Ethan everything. She planned to tell him enough to explain why she'd understand when he pulled away.

Ethan cupped her face between his hands. "Look at me." He waited until she had opened her eyes again. "I love you so much that sometimes it scares me to think of how easy it is to lose you. On that trawler before you arrived, I would think that 'she has no idea what's happening or how I love her.' That I'd never hold you again or have the chance to make love to you. When I woke up on the Liberty and Brookes told me what you'd done, I didn't know what I'd do if you were alive. Hug you or kill you."

He held her gaze so he could make his point. "This time, I hated myself for leaving you. For letting this happen. The thought of losing you hurt so badly, I did my damndest to beat Flynn to death."

"Ethan." she began but caught her breath as he brushed his mouth over hers.

"You're expecting me to say I can't handle this and things would be better if we ended our relationship, right?" he went on before she

could recover. “Well, Commander Marshall, you’re with the SEALs again, so I can use your title. Newsflash. I’m going to be with you through whatever comes, nightmares, therapy, or ...anything. You’re stuck with us.”

Cassidy stared at him, not sure she heard right. “Ethan, you don’t...”

“Now you’re being selfless. Deciding what’s best for me because you know what a rotten patient you are and how cranky you can get when you’re hurt.” Ethan smiled. His stomach settled and his confidence grew when he saw those blue eyes slit. “You don’t want to be a bother on me or the platoon, right? Well, I figure if I let him, Gibs will hang around you 24/7, and have you seen how much a Navy wife can hover? I have it on good authority we have several SEAL wives ready, willing and able to mother hen you.”

He touched her cheek with his knuckles. “Doubt if anyone will get that chance though, because I don’t plan on letting go of you anytime soon.

She had to fight to breathe; not because of panic. The idea that he wanted to deal with this scared her.

“I’m *not* cranky,” she objected, seeing his smile grow.

“Babe, you are so cranky when you’re sick or hurt, it isn’t funny,” he returned, careful of where he touched. “You just don’t realize it.”

He saw her frown and then fear returned to her eyes when he let his hand rest on her side.

“I know you’ll be scared, but you need to trust me, Cass. Can you do that? Can you trust me?”

Cassidy pushed back the nauseating fear that ate at her. She had trusted before and always got hurt because of it. However, this wasn’t a man with other motives; his eyes never hid his thoughts and his hands weren’t rough. She knew these hands would never hurt her no matter where they may touch and he would stop if she ever asked him to.

“I’ve always trusted you, Ethan.” She missed the relieved look in his eyes. “I just...I don’t want you to...”

“Stop right now,” he cut her off, eyes sharpening. “I know what I want and what I want right now...is you.”

Silence filled the hospital room as Ethan watched her reach for him.

As gently as possible, he brought her into his arms, feeling her shake. Her arms slid around him and he felt the first shudder.

“Sshh,” he whispered, hearing the sob she tried to muffle against his shoulder. He slid his hand up to caress her back. “Go ahead and cry.

“SEALs don’t cry.” Her voice choked as she fought the burning tears.

He chuckled, turning his face into her hair. “Sure we do,” he corrected. “Just never in front of our co-commanding officer.”

He felt her smile, then the tears came, hot and burning.

Ethan smoothed her hair down, whispering against her it as she cried in his arms.

“Oh, Ethan...they...hurt me!” She wept deep, wrenching sobs, clinging to his shoulders. “They...kept...hurting me.”

“I know, baby. It’s all right now. I’ve got you and you’re safe.” With a slow rocking motion, he kept her tight against his chest, glad she couldn’t see him fighting his own tears.

They stayed like that for some time until a knock on the door had her tensing. “Easy,” he frowned, then spoke toward the door. “It’s death if this isn’t important.”

Brookes slowly opened the door, and peeked in. “It’s important. We need to talk about moving her someplace else.”

Ethan knew he should have already considered that. He eased her back, touching her cheek. “I need to talk to the guys. Will you...?”

“I can hang out, sir,” Gibson offered, wanting to make up for his earlier mistake.

Tremayne started to reply when he noticed Cassidy move so she could see the other man, her eyes narrowing.

“Hey, what’s this about another cheap floozy picking you up?” she asked, tired but curious.

Gibson rolled his eyes, groaning. “Of all the damned things I told her over the past few days, she picks *that* to remember.”

“You told her about Lola?” Summers asked from the hallway, laughing. “Hell, man, she was trying to pick up any SEAL that night.”

“None of my SEALs had better be getting picked up by cheap tarts,” Cassidy declared, eyeing Gibson. “Did you come out of this one fully clothed and with your wallet?”

“Aw jeez, boss.” The man turned scarlet as his teammates laughed.

Ethan smiled, leaning down to kiss her forehead. “Be good and I’ll be back,” he whispered, pausing to look at Gibson. “Thanks.”

Gibson let out a ‘no problem,’ then settled himself, shoulders slumped, to be lectured. Silently, he was thrilled.

“So what’s up?” Tremayne asked in the hallway, noticing his two officers and Shaw seemed to be the ones to talk to.

“Balboa is too large for even a full platoon to guard, so we decided it was time to move her to a place where she’d be more comfortable,” Channing explained.

Ethan could see the reason behind it. “Any idea who those two were today?”

“We’re checking the woman’s ID, but so far nothing,” Shaw replied, disgusted by that. “The man is in surgery and will be under guard by Michaelson’s people when he comes out. I’m hoping he’ll talk.”

Tremayne doubted that, but remained silent, choosing to speak of the one major flaw. “I don’t imagine the doctors here will be too eager to release Cassidy.” He saw the looks exchanged. “Okay, what’d you guys do?”

“I’ve decided that those guys with the attitudes and a love for stealing aircraft do come in handy.” Brookes spoke casually. “Bear got his boss to pull some strings so Cassidy is to be released to our medic and her own.”

Before he could question how they pulled that miracle off, loud voices came from farther down the corridor.

“I firmly object to this,” Dr. Young complained. “That woman has been brutally abused and needs...”

“I am well aware of her injuries and what care she needs, Doctor, as I specialize in both emotional and physical trauma,” Dr. Ira Weller broke in, his black eyes shining behind his wire-rimmed glasses.

“Your hospital has been a center for one attack. More will come, and I don’t think you want this place turned into a war zone.” He added with a hint of danger, “Besides, you have your orders. Do you really want to buck them?”

Dr. Young considered this tall skinny man in front of him. He had come in with written orders from the President of the United States

and Young's own boss had backed him, so refusing him would not be a wise career choice.

"I hope you're prepared to deal with her injuries." He scrawled his name on the release papers and stalked off.

"I've been doing that for years, Doc," Weller muttered under his breath, turning to see the SEALs. "West said to tell you guys he's about used up this month's worth of magic words, so be careful what else you may need."

Shaw snorted. "Get real. West loves to show off how much power he has."

Weller refused to comment on that, tapping the paperwork. "We're cleared if you guys have chosen a place to keep her."

"Well, we were going to let the Commander do that." Chaning coughed. "He's good at that sort of thing."

"Gee, thanks, Chief." Tremayne retorted, knowing they needed some place the platoon could control and also some place Cassidy would feel comfortable.

"We could try a hotel," Shaw suggested, nixing that as he said it. "Nah, those are way too big. Who has the next idea?"

Brookes suggested the base itself. "If we can't protect our own barracks, then why are we even SEALs?"

"That's good for defense, sir, but lousy in ways of privacy or comfort," Sloan O'Brien spoke up. "She'll need both and the barracks won't supply either. Even the officer's quarters are a little iffy."

"Plus, we don't really know who we can trust," Klein agreed with a shake of his head. "Pretty damn bad when we can't trust our own people."

Weller laughed. "It's clear you guys haven't played with the Mavericks much. West doesn't trust anyone."

While his men bounced ideas back and forth, Tremayne looked in on Cassidy to see that she had fallen asleep, her hand curled loosely in Gibson's.

"There's really only one real option." He turned to them, accepting it as soon as his men had broached the subject of a move.

"Uh, where's that, sir?" Chavez asked.

Tremayne smiled. "Simple. We take her to my place."



## Chapter 17

### **Ethan Tramayne's Condo, later that day:**

"I still think this is a mistake." Grady Shaw stared at Tremayne as if he had grown a second head. "If these guys are serious, this will bring them right down on you."

"What better way to stop them if we have home field advantage? You can't get more home field than this," Ethan countered the NSA man

After his announcement at the hospital, the plan went quickly into action.

Shaw and Steven Michaelson made it look like the SEALs had moved Cassidy Marshall away from the city. The platoon actually moved her into Tremayne's condominium.

"Do you have any idea of when or if this inquest will happen?" Tremayne asked, wincing as he heard something drop and a voice cursing.

"Olsen and my office are checking into it but, if it happens, you better be prepared for things to heat up," Shaw replied.

Tremayne had no doubt about that, but right then Cassidy's entrance caught his attention.

She hadn't been happy with the idea of moving into his place, but had been outvoted.

Of course, he also knew that she didn't care for being hovered over by a bunch of overprotective SEALs, either.

"Okay, that's enough boys. I can walk on my own," he heard her arguing with the squad.

"No, I don't think so, ma'am," O'Brien returned shortly. "That leg isn't strong enough and they both need therapy until they will be."

Knowing how dangerous she could be when even a little testy, Rafael Chavez risked helping her into the condo, careful to keep his touch light but close to support her.

"Are you going to be around much, O'Brien?" She winced as Chavez put her on the sofa.

“When Dr. Weller isn’t around, yeah,” the big man replied, ducking as she threw a cane at him.

The just mentioned medic stepped in and caught the cane. “Well, this is a fine start. Throwing things means your temper is back.”

Prepared to offer an opinion on that, she glanced up in time to see Ethan’s grin and scowled. “I don’t want to be bloody coddled.”

“Fine, then do what you’re told and you’ll get better faster.” Weller sat across from her. “Listen to me, Cass. These injuries are serious and could still develop complications. You have to stop acting like a child.”

Shaw saw the SEALs exchanging looks and he knew he needed to get the mercenary medic out of there.

“I think it’s time for you to report in, Weller.” He grabbed the young man by the arm. “Tremayne, I’ll call tonight or, if you need me sooner, call.” He dragged a protesting Weller out the door.

Gibson shook his head. “That’s one of the things I hate about them. They’re too damn lippy at times,” he muttered, hefting a black bag. “Last of her stuff, Skipper. Where do you want it?”

“Just leave it there for now,” Tremayne replied, keeping an eye on his friend. “You guys staying?”

“Alpha’s got day watch,” Channing replied. “Regular routine starts tomorrow because we have to set up the security systems first, but we’ll be outside if you need anything.”

The Chief got the feeling their boss wanted to be alone with their co-commanding officer so he ushered the others out.

“There’s a list of do’s and don’ts on the counter, sir,” O’Brien called over his shoulder.

“Get out, O’Brien!” Cassidy yelled, muttering what he could do with his lists. Ethan reached down and lifted her into his arms. “Hey! What’s going on?” she asked, her arms automatically going around his neck as he headed down the hall.

“I’m putting you in bed before I start supper.” Stepping into his room, he pushed the door shut with his foot.

Cassidy blinked, taking in her surroundings. She had never been this far in his condo before and his bedroom surprised her. It wasn’t as masculine as she had expected.

The large room's sliding door led to a balcony. Art, scattered here and there for contrast, hung on dark green walls. The dark, rich walnut furniture matched Ethan perfectly. In the end, though, the bed caught her eye.

The queen size bed, with a heavy walnut headboard, hid beneath a deep green plush comforter with plenty of pillows.

Seeing her distraction, he smiled. "Expecting animal hides or what?"

"What?" she started, not realizing her mind had gone blank until he stepped closer to the bed. "Ethan, I can sleep on the couch."

He laid her in the center of the bed, easing pillows behind her before letting go.

"You're my guest, so you get the bedroom," he replied, adding with a grin, "Besides, your medic and O'Brien would skin me if you slept on the couch."

Cassidy tried to come up with a reasonable excuse when Ethan asked, "Does it scare you to be in my bed? You know I won't hurt you."

"I know that," she whispered, meeting his eyes. "It's just that I've never been in someone else's care and...I don't know what will happen."

Ethan sighed, knowing he had to keep his emotions calm. "Even if there weren't fourteen men outside my condo right now, I don't plan on seducing you."

"Yeah, I know that too." She looked away, then gasped as he lifted her face, his eyes sharp.

"Maybe I phrased that wrong." He had seen her eyes and could almost read the thoughts when she turned away. "What I meant to say was that I didn't plan on seducing you *tonight* because of your injuries and the fourteen SEALs outside *but...*" he paused to be sure he had her full attention, "That doesn't mean I don't plan on seducing you in the future, because I do."

She found it hard to swallow as his eyes looked at her mouth, and his thumb traced her bottom lip.

"I want to kiss you," he whispered, feeling her shiver and knowing he had to step back. "I promised us both that I wouldn't until you had a chance to recover."

He pulled back and smoothed her hair from her face. “Get some rest now,” he urged watching her burrow into the covers. “My water bill is going to take a beating this month,” he grouched, adding a few choice words about cold showers. He headed toward the kitchen, surprised to see Brookes there.

“Michaelson called and I didn’t want to disturb you if you were trying to get her to sleep,” Brookes explained.

Tremayne almost said he should have disturbed them, but bit that off, not liking his second in command’s expression. “What’s the trouble?”

“The word came from Washington that an official naval investigation is being launched into the trawler incident, as well as Cassidy’s involvement. The high brass is involved.”

“Damn.” Tremayne glanced toward the bedroom. “She can’t even walk by herself. An official inquest, with evidence stacked against her and the enemy right there...” His sentence trailed off while fresh worry bombarded his mind.

“Michaelson said Keller’s office wants First platoon banned from the inquest, but St. Clair said he’d fight that one. He won’t send her in alone.” Brookes tilted his head to add, “Kind of odd, since we were involved, that we’d be banned.”

To Tremayne, it made perfect sense. “With the Mavericks out of the country, whoever’s behind this wants her cut off from us.” His expression darkened. “And that sure as hell won’t happen, even if I have to call my father for a favor.”

“It won’t happen,” Brookes assured him. “She won’t face this alone. I mean, I made the choice to allow the Platoon to get involved...since I had no clue who she was at the damn time.”

Tremayne nodded his thanks, then leaned against the counter. “God, I swore I could handle my feelings for her and not rush her.”

“Yeah, I hear that Chavez’s wife suggested a chaperon for you.” Brookes grinned, pleased to see his friend and officer thrown off balance. “If you need us, buzz. Any one of us can be in here within seconds.”

As Brookes went out to check on the men, Ethan wondered what else could go wrong.

**Later that night:**

“Hey, Chavez, think your wife would consider becoming a mess hall cook?” Mark Robson asked as he inhaled a piece of fried chicken.

While the platoon had been setting up outside Ethan Tremayne’s condo on the beach, Rafael Chavez had gotten permission to settle a few things at home. When he returned, he brought with him what any SEAL or military personnel in the field dreamed of: home cooked food.

In this case, Sofia Chavez sent cartons of freshly made fried chicken. She also sent mashed potatoes, coleslaw, biscuits, and other side dishes along with single wrapped servings of homemade apple pie.

“She says cooking for me when I’m home *is* like a mess hall.” Rafael grinned, glancing toward the condo. “Think they’re alright?”

“Worried about the Skipper or Cassidy?” Darius Ford asked with a laugh, not seeing the other man tense.

Gibson laid a quick hand on Chavez’s arm. “She’s fine. You know Tremayne won’t hurt her and she needs the quiet more than she needs a bunch of rowdy SEALs right now.”

The Hispanic SEAL knew and accepted that, but it wasn’t easy. He still worried about her since he wasn’t certain if Cassidy had told Tremayne everything from her past yet.

Both squads had decided to stay around that night, and so far, their night had been quiet.

Finished with their late dinner, and settling into a boring night, they all jumped when a scream broke the silent air.

“Damn, I knew this was too good to be true,” Gibson fumed, grabbing his gun.

Before their officers could give orders, the men were off and running.

## Chapter 18

Ethan Tremayne hadn't had the heart to wake Cassidy for dinner so he let her sleep. After a few hours of staring at paperwork, he decided to give sleep a try himself. On the alert, he discarded his shirt, shoes and shoulder holster, but kept the 9mm Beretta close. He stretched out on his sofa, tossing and turning in the new revelation that it had not been made to sleep on.

"Damn." He closed his eyes. The images from Virginia ran through his head, keeping him from sleep. Just as he was about to call it quits, he heard a scream from his bedroom.

"Cassidy?" Ethan ran in. "Sweetheart, what's wrong?" He found her kneeling at the bottom of the bed, gasping for air and sobbing, her body shaking. Wanting to offer comfort, he sat next to her. "Cass, are you..."

When he touched her, she screamed, lashing out in blind panic and bolting into the master bathroom.

It was a hastily thrown blow and for that, Ethan knew he should be thankful. It still caught him on the jaw and sent him down. Scrambling to his feet, he heard boots pounding on his floor.

"Uh, sir, we heard her scream." Joe Carver burst through the door. "What happened?"

"She had a nightmare." Tremayne rubbed his jaw.

Chavez scratched under his chin, his tongue in his cheek. "Yeah, I thought we told you before, if Cass had a nightmare, touching her was a huge mistake."

"You did. I forgot." Ethan returned, hearing sounds from the bathroom. "All of you split. This was nothing." After Chaning yelled at the men to get moving, Tremayne waited for them to clear out before shutting and locking his bedroom door and knocking on the bathroom door.

"Cassidy, you all right?" He heard her still coughing. Ethan hesitated before opening the door, leaning in. "Baby, you okay?"

Slumped next to the toilet, long auburn hair hanging down, she tried to get breath back into her still straining lungs. He wet a cloth, knelt next to her, pushed back her hair, before wiping the cloth over her face.

"It's me, Cass. It's Ethan." He spoke gently when she grabbed his wrist. "You had a nightmare, that's all."

Gasping sobs answered him. "I'm sorry," she finally whispered.

"They were bound to happen," Ethan replied, rubbing her back. "No harm done."

Her shaking hand reached up to touch his mouth where she had struck. "You're bleeding."

He wiped the blood away, shrugging. "My fault for being that close. Tex and MacCray both told me not to be close if you ever had a nightmare."

Cassidy leaned against his chest, more for comfort than support. "I always hoped I'd never have to deal with these things again."

"We all deal with nightmares at one time or another." He shrugged, wondering if she knew how tightly she held on.

"When I was younger and this happened, I wanted to die." Her words sounded despondent. "I still do, Eth."

Tremayne pulled her back so he could see her face. "You don't want to die. We'll get over this." He touched the sweatshirt she still wore from earlier that day. "Why don't you change into something more comfortable and I'll fix the bed for you."

He thought she'd refuse but, when she nodded, he handed her the bag she indicated. "You can take a bath. It won't hurt the stitches, or so O'Brien said after a fight with your medic." Deciding it best to leave her alone, he closed the bathroom door, checked the balcony door lock and shut the blinds. He sat on the foot of the bed, elbows on knees, head down, staring at his guilt.

He shouldn't have left her alone, not the first night in a strange place. Then the mess with the Naval Investigation gutted him with worry. It seemed like hours before he heard the bathroom door open.

"If you're hungry, I can heat some soup."

"No, thanks, I'm not hungry." She hesitated. "I'm sorry I woke you."

Tremayne waved the apology away. "I wasn't sleeping," he admitted, turning to look at her and felt his body freeze.

She had taken a bath. He could tell by the way her hair hung in damp strands around her face, and she had changed from the old battered sweatshirt and pants to a soft blue nightgown. Never seeing the young woman in anything like that before startled him, but he hid that reaction before she could see it.

“Ethan?” Leaning on her cane, she watched him arrange the pillows on the bed. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Cass.” He tapped the covers with his fingertips. “You get some sleep. You’re well protected. Those guys will attack anything that moves.”

She bit her lip, reading his body language but not understanding. “You can sleep in here and I’ll take the...”

“No!” He cut off when he saw her recoil at the tone. “Sorry. I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“I told you this would be too much on you.” She reached for the matching robe when his hand closed over hers. “Ethan?”

The shadows in her eyes made him want to hurt those who’d put them there. He didn’t want to tell her his news yet, but she had to know.

“Navy Intelligence has launched an investigation into your part of that mess on the trawler. Odds are good that whoever is doing this plans on using it to get at you.”

Cassidy considered that, humming low in her throat. “Either jail me or kill me, huh?” She forced a grin but couldn’t hide the fear in her eyes.

“Nothing’s going to happen because we’ll be with you. Between Shaw, Michaelson, and Olsen, there are a lot of powerful people who don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“And an equal number of powerful people who want just the opposite,” she countered, turning away. “This is too much to involve the platoon in.”

“You got into this because of us. We’re seeing this through.” He breathed in the scent of her hair. It surprised him that someone who could run his SEALs to ground in training, and could handle her own with terrorists, could also smell of strawberries and roses. Tremayne walked behind her and slid his arms around her, feeling her tense.

“Ethan?” Panic laced her voice.



He heard her tone, felt her go tense as her body prepared to fight or flee and he couldn't hide the anger. "You're *scared* of me."

"...No." She hated herself for the hesitation.

"Bullshit!" he snapped, letting go. "You're terrified. Do you think I'd hurt you?"

Cassidy blinked at his anger. "I know you wouldn't intentionally, but..." she paused, searching for words. "I can't see any way around being hurt eventually."

He stared at her, his anger and hurt at her mistrust blinding him until something she said clicked. "Sweet Jesus, Cass." He leaned against his dresser, suddenly weak. "You have no idea, do you?"

Those blue eyes that he loved so much went from wary to frosty in a second. "If you mean about sex, I'm perfectly aware of it." She gritted her teeth, refusing to see or feel any more shame. "If I hadn't been before, this fixed it and I...don't like it."

She looked over her shoulder, needing to make him understand. "I mean, I...I liked it when we would kiss but...I don't think...I'll like it when we make..." Again she bit her lip, hating to feel this unsure. "Though, with you it'll probably be...a little better than...Ethan?" Cassidy stared up when he grabbed her arms, whirling her around to face him. She misread the fury she saw. She couldn't even scream as his mouth captured hers. Expecting pain and force, she tensed and squeezed her eyes shut.

Despite his anger, his mouth brushed over her lips. His hands slid from her arms to draw her against him, one hand pressed to the small of her back while the other cupped the back of her head. Somewhere in that moment, she dropped the cane.

Startled, she slowly became aware of the strength surrounding and protecting her, the gentle way he held her, and her fear dissolved. Reaching for him, she returned the kiss.

With a groan, he broke away, pleased to see the trust in her eyes.

"I didn't mean to scare you by grabbing you." He rubbed her upper arms where he had grabbed. "But if I had let you keep talking, I would have gotten angrier."

"Mad at me?" she whispered, starting to lower her eyes when he lifted her chin.

“No, with those bastards you worked with in Virginia all those years ago. No one bothered to explain to a naïve, innocent girl that being raped isn’t like making love.” Tremayne corrected, knowing he needed to handle this carefully.

“From what you told me, you were twenty-one the first time you were assaulted while with Grant’s team. Before that night, you’d never made love, so one of those morons should have explained things differently.” Watching confusion grow in her eyes, he set her in a chair and knelt in front of her, her hands linked with his.

“Cass, I thought you knew or I wouldn’t have pushed you.” Ethan sighed, wishing for Sofia Chavez right that minute. Taking a deep breath, he plunged on. “Rape is a violent act where the woman has no choice and...

“I *know* what rape is, Eth.”

“...what Flynn did to you...no.” He held her still when she tried to turn away. “What he did to you, all those goddamn things, had nothing to do with making love.”

“It’s the same bloody thing.” She shuddered, recalling how Flynn had forced himself in her. “Still...it still involves...” she broke off.

Ethan eased her into his arms, feeling her shaking. “When it’s between two people who love each other, it doesn’t hurt. There’s no shame involved. Cass, I would never hurt you and I’m not asking you to give anything you aren’t willing to.”

“What is there to give?” she demanded, tears shining in her eyes. “He didn’t ask, Ethan. He just took. Forced himself in me and laughed when I screamed. He laughed when he forced himself in from behind, put his finger...”

“Stop!” He held her, needing to stop this for both their sakes. “When I kissed you just now, was it like he did?”

She shook her head, clinging to him. “No, God no, Ethan, but it wasn’t like how you always kissed me either.”

“I know but I needed to show you there’s a difference.”

She considered that and for the first time noticed he didn’t have a shirt on. “Stay tonight and hold me?” she asked, preparing for rejection when she heard his breath catch. “I’m sorry, that was wrong. I shouldn’t have asked you that.”

He tightened his hold to keep her against him when she tried to pull away.

“Ethan?” she whispered, seeing his eyes change, still soft, but with deeper emotion. “I didn’t...”

“Sssh.” He held her gaze as he lowered his head to find her mouth with his.

Cassidy sensed his kisses change and welcomed his tender attention. She ran her hand across his chest and behind his neck, fingers sliding in his thick black hair. “Stay.”

“I plan on that, love.” He bent to pick her up and carry her to the bed, where he stretched out next to her. “You’re so beautiful,” he whispered, propping himself up on an elbow to brush her hair back.

Under his gaze, she felt self-conscious. “No one ever looked at me the way you are. You know that I love you, so I wonder why you...haven’t...”

“Why I haven’t taken you to bed yet? When we make love, I want it to be because you want to, not because you think it’s something you have to do.”

As she thought on this, she ran a finger down a scar on his chest. “How much can we do?”

“As much as you feel comfortable with.” He curled a lock of her hair around his finger. “Some things you may not be ready for yet. You tell me and we stop anytime, okay?”

Cassidy let her fingers touch his face, trail across his jaw and down his neck, stopping when she felt his pulse under her fingers. “Your pulse is beating fast.”

“Yeah, but then so is yours,” Ethan countered, brushing his fingers over her shoulder, then down to curve just below her breast.

Instead of fear and nausea, she felt nothing but heat when he cupped her breast through the silk, his fingers moving across the still bruised skin. “You’re not hurting me.”

“I’m glad,” he whispered. “You are so soft.” Ethan slid his mouth over her throat and, when he heard a soft moan, he nuzzled below her ear.

Pulling back, she pushed the nightgown strap off her shoulder when he caught her hand.

“Wait a minute, sweetheart. I want you *so* much right now, but I’m not a complete fool. You need to heal and rest. Weller and O’Brien would actually agree with each other long enough to nail my nether parts to the wall if I take this too far tonight.”

She giggled at the mental image.

He kissed her again, drawing on her bottom lip and teasing her with his tongue, hearing her whimper against his mouth. As he broke the kiss, he brought her into his arms with her head nestled in the curve of his shoulder. “Get some sleep.”

“G’night,” she whispered, snuggling closer to him.

He smiled as he tucked the comforter around her, then slipped one arm over her. “Goodnight, baby.” He listened to her breath even off in sleep. Only then did he allow himself to drift off.

## Chapter 19

### **The next morning:**

“They aren’t up and he ain’t on the couch,” Chief Channing mused, staring at the empty sofa, then looking at Brookes. “Good or bad?”

First Platoon’s second in command considered that. “Good if they both slept and really bad if that merc gets here before Tremayne wakes up.”

Channing ordered the men outside to let him know when Ira Weller arrived, and to keep him outside. “Should we wake Tremayne up?” the Chief asked.

Before Brookes could reply, they heard their commanding officer’s voice.

“Not a good idea if either of you want to live.” Tremayne walked in, still blinking sleep from his eyes, and headed for the coffeepot. “What time is it?”

“It’s just after 0900, sir,” Channing informed him. “We weren’t sure how you wanted to handle the daily routine, so we let you sleep in.”

“Run them through the usual routine and I’ll be over as soon as she wakes up.”

“The men came up with a way for them to train and let Cassidy get in some light PT,” Brookes replied, then explained the plan to his commander.

“Not bad, but she’s going to fight that.” Ethan knew how much Cassidy hated physical therapy of any kind, especially if she suspected a trick.

Chaning shrugged. “Chavez said he had a way around that, which worries me.”

As the men talked, an irritated voice could be heard from outside. “What do you mean, I can’t go up?”

Not a morning person, Ira Weller became both mad and suspicious when they told him he couldn’t go into the condo. “There a reason, Mr. Gibson?”

Casey coughed, hiding his grin. “Nope, just orders.”

“Yeah, well my orders are different,” Weller returned, eyeing Tremayne when he opened the door. “Your men are assholes.”

“I know. Most people usually call them something worse.” Tremayne motioned to his cup. “Coffee?”

“I digested a gallon of that stuff this morning just to get here, so no,” Weller refused, looking around. “Is she still asleep?”

Tremayne stepped in front of him, blocking entry. “Yeah and you’re going to leave her that way. She had a rough night.”

“The nightmares must have hit,” Weller guessed, muttering in a mixture of Russian/Yiddish. “Those always were bad. She calm down?”

“Yeah, she calmed down,” Tremayne coughed into his cup and heard his officers snicker. “When she wakes up, we’ll be at the base.”

That caused the Israeli medic to do a double take and stare. “What the hell for? She can’t work out with the men.”

“No, she can’t, but she can do some light PT, and yelling at the men will make her feel better,” Brookes replied, shrugging.

Weller cursed; wishing his leader was back. West could argue so much better than he could. “She’ll never agree to this,” he replied, outvoted and in the company of men who could twist him into a pretzel if he argued too much.

“That’s my problem, Weller,” Tremayne told him, ears alert for sounds from the bedroom. “She’ll be fine.”

“I know I’m going to regret this.” Weller waved his hands in defeat. “Okay, okay. I’ll be by tonight with Shaw. He’ll probably see you at the base later.”

As he left, still muttering about stupid SEALs in general and the First Platoon in particular, Tremayne shook his head. "Now I just have to pull it off." He jerked around when he heard a thud. "Get the men gathered up," he ordered, heading to his room.

"I hate these bleedin' things." Cassidy sent him a growl when he walked in. Already dressed for the day, she seemed pale as she sat on the side of the bed to reach for one of the canes.

"It might be better if you used the wheelchair today." He expected the look she gave him for that suggestion. "Be easier to get around on base."

That comment made her arch an eyebrow. "I'm going on base?"

"You think I'm leaving you here alone?" He grinned, kneeling down to kiss her. "The guys are impatient to start training. You know how they get."

Cassidy watched him warily, not certain she trusted this idea. "Are there any ulterior motives in that brain of your, Commander Tremayne?"

"No more, no less than you usually have." He helped her up, feeling her shake as her legs fought to stand. "Easy."

"I hate being weak," she fussed, not sure she wanted to be seen like this by the squads.

He heard the worry in her tone. "A little impatient, are we? We'll have you back in shape in no time." He tilted her face up. "I forgot. Good morning."

Ethan knew he had to ease her into being comfortable again, not only with herself but also with him so, he deepened his kiss only after she returned it.

"Sir, the men are ready to...oh." Channing stopped in mid-sentence, coughing. "Sorry."

Cassidy scowled at the man. "You always had rotten timing, Chief."

Ethan laughed at his disgruntled chief, lifting Cassidy up despite her protests.

### **Naval Base, home to S.E.A.L. Team Omega**

Once on base, it didn't take the SEALs long to change into gear better suited for the heat of the day. They had a full rotation of

training to go through: a maze, the climbing wall, then on to swimming and weapons testing.

Cassidy sat in a wheelchair that had a motor, radio, a place for charts and weapons. She wondered who designed it and which one of her men “borrowed” it.

Tremayne interrupted her thoughts. “Today you get to keep time on the men’s run and write them down.” He handed her a stopwatch and eyed Casey Gibson. “And since this one already made his run, he’ll be with you.”

Right then she knew they had concocted some scheme. “Why?”

“Figured while you’re keeping time, we could start working on strengthening your legs,” Gibson replied. “Just work on getting the kinks out right now and go from there.”

Cassidy eyed both men who looked at her so innocently that she didn’t have the heart to kill them, at least right then. “Fine, but when I get outta this damn thing, I’ll make you regret this moment, Gibson,” she warned, hearing him laugh.

“Be good, Commander,” Ethan whispered, brushing a kiss over her hair.

She hit the stopwatch when Carver started his run-through, looking down as Gibson touched her left leg.

“What else do you guys have planned, Kendall?” She used his given name to make her point.

Careful not to rub the wounded muscles too hard, Gibson lifted his eyes to hers and grinned. “Don’t know what you’re talking about, ma’am.”

That was how it went. Gibson worked the muscles in her legs by rubbing them and easing them up and out until he saw her wince. During this, she tried to get him to tell what else he knew. Seeing that plan fail, she turned her attention to the platoon. She consulted the chart in her lap and smiled.

“Robson’s got the fastest time so far at four minutes and thirty-eight seconds,” she called out. “Any one of you slow pokes who can’t do this in less than three minutes thirty seconds does the course again until you can, officers included.”

“I knew she’d get back at me,” Tremayne groused, already sweating.

Brookes looked at his co-leader to see her grinning at them. “How much meaner can she get?”

“Oh, she can be a lot worse,” Rafael Chavez answered, passing him to take his turn on the course. “She’s got a wicked temper and an extremely devious mind.”

Pleased that his squad completed the course in under the time stated, Gibson laughed when one of the three who had to repeat it was Tremayne.

“Gee, Eth, you look tired.” Cassidy observed when he dropped next to the chair, gasping for breath. “You really cut this last run close. I think you could have done it faster.”

His eyes glinted while he considered if hitting her would be worth his punishment.

“Can’t hit me, mate,” she told him, grinning. “What would that do for morale, not to mention...?”

He warred with himself for all of three seconds before surging up to catch her face in his hands and kissing her. Not the first time the platoon saw this, they realized a difference in the emotions this time.

“I got a really bad feeling those mercs won’t care for this.” O’Brien grinned at his teammates.

“Want me to run it again, Commander?” Tremayne asked when he eased back, his voice a whisper against her ear.

“Maybe later you can,” she replied, trying to refocus, then eyeing the men. “You never saw that.”

Several voices echoed, “Saw what, ma’am?”

“We weren’t even here.”

Tremayne smiled, placing his hand on her shoulder. “Chief, what’s next on the schedule?”

“Swimming.” Channing eyed his list while wondering how his leader would convince the woman to do this.

“Ah, well this chair isn’t made for sand, so park me someplace.” Seeing the looks exchanged, she frowned. “What?”

“Who said you’re gonna be parked?” Brookes decided to take some of the heat off Tremayne and winced when her blue eyes zeroed in on him.

“Oh, *really*?” she challenged. “What does that mean?”

Walking away from the obstacle course, Brookes pushed her wheelchair toward their vehicles and leaned over. “We’re Navy, darlin’.



We've got boats...which we row toward floating docks...which you hang onto and work those legs of yours."

She twisted to look up at Tremayne. "Is this your bloody idea?"

He replied honestly. "No."

Fuming all the way to the shore, when they got her out to the van, she barked, "If you guys think for one bleedin' minute you're getting me in that ocean, you can forget it." she cried out. "Ethan."

He knelt down. "Easy, baby, we just want you to hang onto the ladder and work your legs. The water is easier PT to help get them stronger."

Cassidy still eyed the water, then the men. "I don't like this."

Tremayne started again when he saw Rafael Chavez take a slip of paper from his pocket, unfold it and kneel next to Cassidy, waving it. Her eyes landed on the paper, then she looked at her friend with a question.

"This is Pilar's birthday wish list," he explained, holding the paper out of her reach. "I am fully against giving you this because I know how you get when it comes to my daughter, *but...*" he paused to sigh. "I'll give you this and free reign to buy whatever you want, except drums, if you get in this boat and let us take you to the dock. It's right there, not fifty yards out."

The SEALs exchanged looks. "Oh, he's good," Mason Palmer said.

"That's blackmail and you know it, Chavez," she argued, but kept her eyes on the dangling list. "Oh, damn it, alright." She blew out a breath. "I hate you."

"No you don't." Chavez laughed, slipping the paper into her jacket pocket. "You adore me and always will."

She muttered under her breath but let Tremayne help her from the chair, pausing at the edge of the boat. "I get in this thing, you'll owe me."

"You can have whatever you want, Cass," he promised, feeling her hesitation as Gibson and O'Brien helped her in and rowed to the floating dock. "Just hold onto the ladder. I'll be right here."

Cassidy bit her lip, never caring for the water, but she held on to the dock's ladder while her legs floated.

"Just move them a little, but don't leave the side," O'Brien instructed, swimming off to join the others.

Seeing her relaxing, Tremayne smiled down. “If this helps, I’ll put you in the whirlpool tonight.”

“Yeah, that happens only if you get in with me.” Cassidy closed her eyes while the water moved around her.

“Doubt if we’d get much therapy accomplished that way,” he murmured, leaning down to kiss her.

“Isn’t there some sort of law against that in the Navy?” Shaw called from the shore.

Tremayne let his forehead rest on the top of her head while muttering curses that made her giggle.

“You want something, Shaw, or did you just decide to bug me?” he demanded.

The NSA man didn’t mention that he had been there for some time. Instead, he got to business. “We need to talk. It’s serious.”

Tremayne swore but squeezed her shoulder. “I’ll be over there if you need me.” He dove in to make the short swim.

She nodded, then looked at the SEALs. “Hey! No one drowns Gibson!” she yelled when she noticed their training had turned into a “dunk Gibson” contest.

Yelled affirmatives came back and she relaxed again, noticing the water lessened the pain in her legs. Deciding to take a chance, she eased away from the ladder until just her fingertips touched it. Pleased with this small accomplishment, she considered seeing how far she could go when she felt something touch her ankle.

“Yeah, real bloody funny, Gibson. You think about it and I’ll let the lads drown you,” she threatened, amused, but shifted her foot away when the touch came again. “Damn it, Gibson, not funny.”

“What’d I do?” Gibson blinked water from his eyes when he heard his name. “Cassidy, what are you doing?”

Hearing Gibson, she counted twelve SEALs in the water, and Brookes and Channing with Ethan and Shaw on shore.

“What the bloody hell?” She started to grab the ladder-when she found herself yanked under without a chance to scream or draw breath.

“Commander!” Jake Summers shouted upon seeing her go under.

## Chapter 20

“So what’s up?” Ethan Tremayne grimaced at Shaw’s interruption.

“Behave. Cassidy has friends who will rip you to pieces if they think you’re getting too close.”

“That’s another problem I’ll have to handle.” Ethan changed the subject. “You said something was serious?”

“Yeah, I did.” Shaw looked up as Channing and Brookes joined them. “I got word that the inquest will start tomorrow.”

The Chief whistled. “Someone’s pushing. These things usually take months to get off the ground.”

“Not this time,” Shaw replied, eyeing Tremayne. “I have a partial witness list one being Admiral Horton of the Constellation. He’d like nothing better than to see Cass burned at the stake.”

“For what, taking a chance and risking the odds?” Tremayne scoffed. “That won’t hold up. Her clearances are too high.”

“Try disobeying orders, assault with deadly weapons, property damage and the big one, theft of two United States Naval aircraft.” Shaw ticked each item off on his fingers. “And those are just the start.”

Tremayne frowned, eyeing Brookes. “Just how the hell much *didn’t* you tell me?”

“I told you everything.”

“Who’s on the panel?” Tremayne asked.

“We have some unofficial guests, including your father, since he sits on the panel for Military Affairs. Of course, Olsen and I will be there. As for officials, there’s high brass, like Rear Admiral Sanford and some others.” Shaw rubbed his forehead. “What’s giving me a migraine is someone in that room will be an assassin.”

Brookes looked away from the water. “You get us cleared to be there?”

“Yeah, major fights over that, but your men are cleared.” Shaw also eyed the water and saw Cassidy straying from the ladder.

“The Pentagon wanted a JAG official to represent Cass since this is a Navy inquest, but West nixed that idea. Chan will be here.” Shaw could just see that and fought off a shudder.

Ethan opened his mouth to speak when a shout interrupted him.

“Commander!”

Whirling at his teammates’ cry, Gibson turned in time to see Cassidy go under. “Damn!” he hissed, swimming hard and fast for the spot where he’d last seen her, Gibson took a deep breath before diving. He thought she’d gotten a cramp until he caught a flash of a wetsuit disappearing through the murky water.

He found Cassidy a few yards away on the ocean floor, water turning bloody from her head wound. Even worse, her attacker trapped her in a heavy net, which made swimming impossible.

Gibson felt his lungs burn, but he swam for the bottom and lifted his unconscious friend up. He fought his way to the surface, the net threatening to tangle his legs, his chest burning and head dizzy. He felt a hand on his arm and saw Chavez motioning him to hand their friend over. Grateful, Gibson did that and they both surfaced to find the other SEALs ready to assist.

“Move it!” Rafael Chavez snapped, ignoring the knot in his stomach as he started to lift Cassidy into the boat. From the side, O’Brien reached down to help.

“What the hell happened?” Tremayne demanded when the boat got to shore, kneeling down and freezing at what he saw. “Get a knife!”

All the SEALs gathered around her, anxious to help. Joe Carver grabbed a knife from his gear and went to work cutting the net while Tremayne lifted her hand, feeling for a pulse.

The net came loose after several knife cuts as Tremayne swore. “She’s not breathing.”

O’Brien physically moved his superior out of the way. “Lieutenant, CPR. I’ll do the chest compressions,” the medic snapped while Shaw used his cell phone to call for the base medic and an ambulance.

“Someone else was down there. Last I saw, he was headed north.” Gibson, still breathing hard, scanned the area. At that and without an order, two SEALs hit the water.

Brookes tipped her head back to blow air into her lungs, waiting while the big Scottish/American placed his hands over her chest and began pushing.

Ethan's heart pounded against his ribs. "Breathe, Cass, breathe," he whispered, willing the act to happen.

It seemed like an eternity before Brookes pulled back. She drew in a ragged breath and then began to cough up water.

"Easy, little skipper, take it easy," O'Brien urged, rolling her on her side and rubbing her back as more water came up.

Ethan touched her face. "Cassidy, can you hear me?"

Not knowing where she was and still coughing, she tried to jerk free, still feeling the net's constriction.

"...no...don't..." Her words cut off with another coughing spell.

"Damn, she can't breathe," O'Brien muttered. "She needs to calm down until we get that ambulance here."

Tremayne didn't wait another second; he reached down to pull her into his arms and held her against his chest, despite her weak protests. "Sshh, quiet, baby." He rocked while holding her. "You're safe, Cass."

Slowly the girl's struggles became less until she finally slumped against his chest, not moving but still gasping.

"Summers, get that damn ambulance! We need it as of yesterday," Channing snapped as Adams and Klein surfaced. "Well?"

Jace Adams shook his head. "Sorry. No sign of them."

"He's in scuba gear and will be long gone before we get ours," Klein explained, looking down with a frown. "It was a risky move with all of us here."

"Risky, but it damn near worked." Brookes knelt and spoke to Tremayne. "The ambulance is coming."

"Lay still, Cass. We'll get you to the hospital," Ethan promised her, smoothing her hair back and seeing the blood on his fingers. "Damn."

A Navy ambulance screeched to a halt and two white-coated medics hurried over. Cassidy froze when one of them reached for her, but Ethan squeezed her hand. "I'll be with you," he soothed as the medic yelled for an oxygen tank, sending his partner scrambling back out.

He slipped the mask over her face and nose, more than annoyed when O'Brien insisted on checking to be sure that it was oxygen.

"Sorry, Doc, but too many people are trying to kill this kid." The big man shrugged.

After a quick exam, the man decided a trip to the base hospital would be best to check her lungs and stitch up the gash on her forehead.

“No.” Cassidy tried to refuse through the mask. “I...”

Ethan laid her on the stretcher, keeping a hold of her hand. “I’ll be with you, Cass.”

The doctor tried to refuse, but Shaw cut him off. “He goes with her or you have all of us to deal with.”

“Very well, the Commander may come,” the medic grunted, hating to deal with SEALs.

As Tremayne climbed in the back of the ambulance with her, he looked at Brookes. “Find Colonel Michaelson.”

His second in command nodded as the vehicle drove off. “Alright, I’m going to get a team down here to check out this area. The rest of you go back and change.” Shaw looked tense as the men went off. “They’re getting desperate.”

“Yeah, you think so?” Brookes scowled at him. “Well, so are we.”

## Chapter 21

### **An Hour Later, the barracks of S.E.A.L. Team Omega:**

“I assure you, Colonel, nothing like this has ever happened on this base before.” Commander James St. Clair tried to reason with a furious marine colonel.

“Well, that’s just dandy,” Steven Michaelson growled back, wincing, as the earphone he wore seemed to vibrate. “No, Aiden, I will not repeat that phrase to him.”

It didn’t take long for Shaw to locate Michaelson since he had been at St. Clair’s office. The news he was given however did not make him happy.

“Nobody noticed a guy in a wetsuit?”

The Navy Commander seemed distressed. “No, they were focused on training,” he admitted, resentful that he had to answer to a Marine officer on his base.

At that moment, they were in Ethan Tremayne’s office in the barracks. Tremayne had returned from the base hospital sixty minutes earlier and left Cassidy resting on one of the bunks just outside the door. Despite having twelve armed SEALs hovering over her, he still felt anxious.

“Doctors said she’ll be fine with some rest but to stay out of the ocean for awhile,” he told them. “She has a slight concussion so we’ll need to watch her breathing.”

“She needs her head examined for getting involved in any of this,” Aiden West yelled through the radio.

Michaelson rolled his eyes. “Shut up. They can hear you.” He shut off the well-chosen response to that and pocketed his earphone. “I’ll let him yell tonight.”

Shaw relayed the results from talking to Washington. “I can’t get that damn inquest postponed.” Disgust reshaped his features. “You’ll be working it tight, Tremayne.”

Ethan knew that meant they would be walking into the lion’s den with no idea who their enemy was. The possibility that Cassidy would know presented a long shot. “I won’t let her go into this alone,” he declared. “SEALs stick together.”

His commander considered this. “You could be putting First Platoon in a bad spot, Tremayne.”

Both Michaelson and Shaw looked between the men, not liking the tension or the defiance in Ethan’s eyes.

“Yes, technically, due to the deal with Washington, Marshall is a part of the outfit, but if she goes down it could bring the SEALs down with her,” St. Clair argued.

Tremayne closed his eyes, fighting his temper and heard Brookes warning him to be cool. “Cassidy’s actions were on behalf on my Platoon, sir,” he finally spoke, hoping to keep his tone level. “Granted some of her actions were beyond protocol, but the commander doesn’t rely on protocol. She relies on actions and results.

“She got results. She pulled the platoon out of trouble and, with a salvage job, the Navy was able to reclaim all the stolen uranium.” Tremayne looked at his own C.O.. “If you’re worried about images, then relieve me of command.”

Shaw groaned as Brookes hissed, “*Ethan.*”

As the Commander raised his eyebrows, Tremayne went on. “I won’t abandon Cassidy after she risked her life for our people. I’ll stand by her side and, if that means losing my command, then... so be it.”

Steven Michaelson leaned against a wall, considering how much pull he had with the Navy to keep this from escalating.

“Commander St. Clair, sir?” Senior Chief Michael Chaning entered the office, his mouth in a tight line.

“Yes, Chief, what is it?” St. Clair waved an impatient hand.

Chaning took a deep breath. “Well sir, I’m here to speak for the rest of the men in the platoon. If you relieve Commander Tremayne, then you’ll have to relieve the rest of the platoon as well.”

As St. Clair nearly choked, Shaw wasn’t sure if he should laugh, cry, or bang his head in frustration.

“First Platoon is a unit, sir,” Logan Brookes spoke up, voice firm. “I could have made the choice to keep my unit out of that raid on the trawler, but I didn’t because I knew it was right.

“She was willing to risk it all for us. I saw no reason to do less and that was before I knew who she was.” Brookes sighed. “If you remove Commander Tremayne for choosing to stand up for her, then you have to remove all of First Platoon.”



Michaelson busted out laughing; he couldn't help it when St. Clair's face turned red. "This is going to mean one hell of a lot of paperwork and explanations to Captain Jackson and Admiral Sanford. I don't think I've ever heard of an entire platoon of SEALs resigning at once." He wagged a finger at the older officer, turning serious. "That is not going to look good to the officers up top, and it sure as hell isn't going to look good on your file."

St. Clair flung a scowl around the room. "If you have to shoot anybody tomorrow, just make sure you shoot the right person," he snapped, grabbing his hat and stomping out.

As soon as the door slammed shut, the Colonel slumped against the wall. "Man, I have worked with Lightning Team and the guys out of Eagle's Rock my whole career and *never* has Grant given me enough excuse for a stroke like now." He eyed Tremayne. "What would you have done if he'd called your bluff?"

Ethan turned to face him. "I wasn't bluffing." He spoke to his officers. "You didn't have to do that."

Channing shrugged, looking out the door. "They made their choices."

Brookes brought them back to their newest problem. "Think they'll hit tonight?"

"If I was them, yeah, I would," Tremayne answered. "We'll have to see."

He went into the barracks and found the men ready to move. Chavez sat on the floor with his back against the bunk Cassidy lay in.

"No, no, no," he laughed. "You are not buying Pilar drums, guitars, keyboards or *anything* musical until I'm either dead or too deaf to hear."

Cassidy lay on her side, eyes half closed as she argued with Rafael.

"Hey, chief, here's a great gift for the kid," Jake Summers called, sitting on his bunk and flipping through a motorcycle magazine.

He turned the magazine around to show a fully detailed Harley Davidson motorcycle, but smaller. "Looks a motorcycle, but it's actually a bicycle," he grinned.

As Cassidy lifted her head to get a better look, Chavez shoved her head down, keeping his fingers over her face.

“Do you *mind*?” He gave a mock glare to his teammate. “Don’t go giving her anymore ideas. Sofia would kill me if Pilar got something like that.”

Gibson had showered and changed after his deal in the ocean and now lay on a bunk. “Well if she did, then I could date her and she could cook for the platoon all the time.”

Laughs and hoots were heard as Chavez threw a pillow at the young SEAL. “You’d be dead before you could try.”

Cassidy yawned, listening to the good-natured bickering. Her headache was just a low throb now, but her chest and body still hurt. She wanted to go home, crawl into bed, and not move for a week.

As if sensing her thoughts, Tremayne called to his men. “Alright, guys, since we don’t know what to expect tonight, you have three hours of free time before reporting to Lt. Brookes.”

“We talked it over, sir, and decided it would be best if we stuck together today,” Ford stated.

Tremayne was going to argue when Shaw nudged his arm. “That might be a good idea. These assholes are getting too forward and desperate. The Platoon should be around.”

“Hey, Shaw actually made sense,” Gibson joked, grinning at the dry look he got.

Shaw eyed the man. “The next assignment I get for you is going to be someplace cold, I swear.”

“Hi.” Cassidy looked up when Ethan came over to the bunk, sitting next to her. “Guess what? I decided to get Pilar a motorcycle.”

As Chavez groaned and threw threats at Summers, Ethan laughed. “Oh, you did? I think she needs to be older for that.”

“Nah, it’s a bicycle but Chavez doesn’t need to know that.” She grinned, blinking rapidly.

He could tell by her voice that she was tired and fighting the effects of the shock and painkillers the medics had given her.

“It’s time to get you home and into bed,” he decided, lifting her into his arms.

“Want a driver today, sir?” Mark Robson asked, tossing a duffel bag at Carver.

Tremayne looked down to see Cassidy asleep and he shook his head. “No, that’s okay.”

“We’ll follow close,” Channing told him, pausing by the door of Tremayne’s jeep.

“I don’t really think anyone would be stupid enough to attack me on the way home, Chief.” He buckled Cassidy in next to him, then headed off base with two vehicles of SEALs behind him.

Ethan looked next to him with a warm smile; she seemed to be at peace as she slept. He just wished he could get rid of the tension crawling up his spine.

“Don’t get too close, Gibson,” Brookes instructed, tapping his fingers on the dashboard. “If anyone does follow him, we don’t want to spook them.”

“We’re in identical looking military SUVs. Don’t you think we’ll be spotted?” Casey snorted, but his eyes remained sharp. “Do you think these yo-yos will try another attack this soon?”

Brookes considered how he would react. “If whoever is doing this was at that place in Virginia and Cass *did* see him, then the odds of her recognizing him are high. He wouldn’t want that, so he needs her dead before the inquest tomorrow.”

“Our problem is that we have no idea how they may attack or who to suspect,” Chavez replied from the back seat. “We have home field advantage, but they have surprise going for them.”

As his teammates talked, Carver kept watching behind them and frowned at a small motorcycle weaving in and out of traffic.

Two people rode it and the driver seemed to be professional, having no trouble dodging in the heavy traffic.

“Yo, Case,” Carver called. “We got something coming up.”

Gibson glanced into the rearview mirror and, seeing the bike, felt his muscles tense. Both riders wore all black; their helmets had solid black shields, which made seeing their faces impossible.

He was just about to say something to his Lieutenant when the bike darted across two lanes of traffic. It zipped past them with a burst of speed and caught up to the Commander’s jeep.

“Damn!” Gibson snarled, getting stuck in a wave of confused traffic. “Trouble up front, sirs!”

Brookes saw the second rider pull something off his back. “Shit!” He yelled into the radio, “Channing! Ethan’s in trouble and we’re blocked. Can you get through?”

A long pause, then a muttered oath came back. “No, all the weaving that bike did caused a wreck back here.” The Chief’s anger grew. “Adams, get out and move that piece of shit!” Unaware of the danger coming from his rear, the radio’s silence made Tremayne curious. He reached down to flick it, but frowned at the loose wires.

“Oh, crap,” he whispered, hearing squealing behind him. He turned to look out the back window at the exact moment a bullet missed where his head had just been.

## Chapter 22

“Damn!” Tremayne swore, jerking to see the motorcycle next to him and the gun-carrying passenger. He sped up and heard the rear window shatter.

“Ethan?” The first blast woke Cassidy, but the drugs kept her hazy. “What’s...?”

He pushed her down while trying to keep ahead of the bike. “Stay down!” Glancing at the approaching overpass, his stomach twisted at the ambush site it offered.

He looked back to see the bike had dropped behind and he wondered why. A blast came from the overpass and took out the front of the jeep.

“Lieutenant, they have a damn sniper!” Casey saw the rocket launch from the bridge, then his commander’s jeep flip into traffic and roll down an embankment.

Brookes froze. He knew with that bike close, if Ethan and Cassidy had survived, they wouldn’t for long. “Stop this thing,” he snapped, shoving his door open. “On foot!” he ordered the SEALs. “Get to them and take out that damn bike!”

Summers stopped the second vehicle and SEALs ran on foot with weapons drawn. Ford stopped long enough to aim his PSG-1 sniper’s rifle at the motorcycle. His bullet hit the passenger who fell and rolled into oncoming traffic.

With squealing brakes and angry horns surrounding them, SEALs reached the scene just as the rocket launcher took aim.

Ford raised the aim on his PSG-1 and found their rocket man. “LT! You want him alive or dead?”

“He’s shooting rockets at us! Kill the son of a bitch!”

That was all the black SEAL needed to hear. He aimed and fired, killing their ambusher.

“Summers, Palmer! Get up there and secure that body!” Channing ordered. SEALs slid down the small hill where the remains of Tremayne’s jeep rested on its top. “O’Brien, get down here!”

The platoon medic slid down the hill to find Gibson and Chavez already there. Dropping to his stomach, Gibson looked in a broken window, swallowing hard. “Cassidy, you okay?”

The dazed woman, still hooked in the seatbelt, strained to reach Tremayne pinned behind the steering wheel, bleeding.

“I...can’t get him loose,” she told him, tears and blood blinding her. “Kendall!”

“We need help down here!” he shouted behind him, then slid into the jeep, and reached for the latch to her seat belt. “Easy, Cassidy, we’ll get the Skipper out.”

As Chavez and Lani tried to free their leader, Gibson cursed the makers of seat belts. It took his boot knife to cut her free. He pulled the woman out when Brookes reached for her.

“No.” She shook her head, straining. “Ethan...he’s...”

The second in command restrained her. “We’ll get Ethan out, Cass. But you need to get away from here.”

Trying to free their trapped commander, the SEALs moved to the music of approaching sirens.

“Oh, shit. There’s a gas leak,” Klein announced, panic soaked in each word. “Get him out! This thing is going to be a huge gas can soon!”

Already in the passenger’s side, Adams cut Tremayne’s seat belt, and checked to be sure he hadn’t been impaled with anything. “He’s free. Pull!”

It took three men to wrestle their unconscious leader from the jeep. Adams picked him up in a wounded man’s carry and struggled up the hill.

“Up before this thing blows!” Brookes yelled, passing Cassidy off to Chavez.

They had just reached the top of the embankment when the jeep’s gas tank blew, knocking them off their feet.

It was several moments before any of them could hear and then they were quiet.

“Man, that was too close,” Gibson fussed, watching police cars, ambulances and fire trucks arrive. “Uh, Lieutenant, does anyone have Shaw’s number?”

### **Highway, site of attack, ten minutes later:**

Grady Shaw arrived ten minutes after getting the call, along with several Navy officers and an upset mercenary medic. Now Shaw stood on the top of the hill and looked at the Jeep Cherokee’s remains.

“They almost got her,” he told himself, glancing back at the SEALs hovering by the ambulance to give statements to the police.

Ira Weller took control from the medics and, between the clearances he carried and the gun he pulled, none of them argued.

Cassidy Marshall sat on the hood of a police car with Gibson next to her while Ira examined Ethan Tremayne in the back of an ambulance.

“You’re lucky you only have a couple broken ribs, a bump, and some glass scratches.” Ira arched an eyebrow at the SEAL. “The hospital will think you’re a walking miracle.”

In spite of the headache and overall pains, Ethan crossed his arms and declared, “I’m not going to the hospital.”

Ira’s dark eyes flashed. “Look, Commander, maybe being big and tough works in SEAL world, but someone very nearly turned you and my employer into crispy critters. Even if you aren’t seriously hurt, you need...”

“What I *need* is to take her home.” Ethan countered, stepping out of the ambulance to look for his men. Brookes and Channing appeared as soon as he stepped out, looking concerned.

“Don’t either of you start,” he growled, watching Cassidy stare at her hands. Thankful she hadn’t sustained further injury, he worried about her emotional health. He knew she would pull back, not wanting any of them hurt, especially because of her.

Ira swore, glaring at the man. “I hate them.” He grabbed his radio. “Bear, get me Belcher in L.A. If the SEALs are determined to stick this out, then I want a full security team I can trust backing them.”

Channing reported to Tremayne, “There’s no ID on the guy with the rockets. We’ll run his prints though CID.”

“What about the driver of the bike?” Tremayne demanded. He could already hear St. Clair’s take on this.

“He’s long gone.” Brookes sighed, looking over to a burned body. “Ford shot the gunner, but the guy got run over, then burned before we could get to him.”

The 2IC watched his commander for a couple moments before speaking. “They’re getting desperate. It may be best if you both spent the night on base.”

“No, I just want to take her home.” Ethan met Grady Shaw’s eyes, both knowing the imminence of another attack.

“Fine, I’ll keep *both* squads around your place instead of just Alpha,” Brookes told him.

Ethan nodded absently, rubbing his neck as he approached the cop car. “Gibson, you and Jake go back and get the trucks.”

Gibson jogged off to follow orders while Ethan sat next to Cassidy. Neither spoke while police hovered, getting reports and asking questions.

“We need to go,” he finally said, holding out a hand to her, but she didn’t take it.

“I know.” Looking over her shoulder, she called out, “Chavez, can you get my wheelchair? Or is it toast?”

“I’ll get it,” Tremayne offered.

“No. You’re too busted up.” She refused to look him in the eye and that left him with a feeling of how the rest of the night would go.

## Chapter 23

### **Ethan Tremayne's condo, that night:**

After getting back to his condo, Tremayne dealt with his squad determined not to let either of them alone. He assured his men that, if they were needed, he would buzz for them. Then his father had called after hearing about the incident. It took some time to convince the elder Tremayne that he was fine. Cassidy closed herself off from him even further and by the time he got free from the phone, he found her asleep.

He decided to take a shower first. Secure in the knowledge that his men stood guard outside, he was only too glad to wash away the smell of smoke, gas and some of his aches and pains. His mind filled with questions while hot water cascaded down his skin. Why was this happening? Who was behind this? Why was Cassidy such a huge threat? Would they strike again before the inquest tomorrow? If so, how? He didn't hear the bathroom door open.

"Ethan?" Her voice, so soft, startled him back into the present.

Making sure his voice was even, he coughed. "Uh, I'm not exactly decent here, babe."

"I'm sorry, Ethan." He didn't like her tone, especially when she added, "It was a mistake."

"What's a mistake?" he asked, peeking around the shower door.

Cassidy sat with her back to him; shoulders hunched and arms crossed.

"All of this." She paused for a moment. "Not what I did to save the platoon. I'll go to my grave knowing that wasn't one, but everything else...that was a mistake."

"Cass, I'm not exactly dressed for this conversation. Can it wait until I'm out of here?" he asked. "Then you can take a bath and, after we eat, we can talk."

She hesitated and he could hear the tears in her voice. "There's nothing to talk about now. I know what I have to do and I won't put you or the men in anymore danger."



Tremayne cursed, knowing what that meant. He shut the water off and grabbed his jeans, not bothering to dry off. He followed her to the bedroom and saw she had packed to leave. She finished shoving things in a small bag at the foot of the bed when he entered.

“You could have been killed today and I won’t live with that.” She spoke without looking at him, fighting to do this without crying or falling. “You’ve done too much already for me and...what?”

Cassidy cried out as Ethan caught her by surprise and landed them both on the bed.

“Stay still,” he snapped, anger flashing in his voice as he trapped her hands under his. His chest, still wet from the shower, pressed against her back. “Damn it, Cassidy. Stop fighting.”

Still startled, she forced herself to lay still under him and ignore the gut wrenching fear she felt.

“I’ve done too much already?” he repeated, his voice rougher than he intended. “What did I do *exactly*?”

She tried to answer but no words could get past her fear and sadness.

In a swift move, he flipped her onto her back but kept her pinned. His fingers interlocked with hers and he levered himself above her.

“What the hell did I do that you feel is too much?” he demanded. “What?”

“This...hearing, it’s...too much trouble,” she whispered, closing her eyes against his piercing stare. “I...don’t want you or them in trouble and...I don’t want you dead. I...I thought you were...d...dead today.” Her words, whispered and halting as she fought to breath, made him close his eyes and struggle for control.

“I know.” He lowered his head to hers and felt her trembling. Ethan rolled away, sitting on the edge of the bed. “I’ll make some dinner. You take that bath.” Before she could reply, he escaped the bedroom, wondering who he was mad at, her or himself?

In the middle of making soup and sandwiches, Brookes spoke from the front door, “Tremayne, could you come down here a second?”

He glanced toward the bedroom door, deciding he needed some air, especially since she’d be in the bath for a while. “What’s up?” he asked seeing the squad gathered around a monitor screen.

“It seems we had a visitor while we were gone today.” Casey Gibson pointed to the screen. “Knew which condo is yours and even what balcony.”

Ethan didn’t care for that, frowning. “Did he do anything?” he asked, watching the blurry image.

“Alarms would have sounded if they had tried to get in. Whoever it was seemed interested in the balcony.” Lani pointed, then looked back at the darkened condo. “Robson went to do a walk around.”

Channing looked at his watch. “And he’s late reporting. Robson, where are you?”

When no response came, the SEALs exchanged looks.

“Mark, you awake?” Casey tried his radio, frowning. “No good.”

“Go!” Tremayne whirled, running back to the condo while the SEALs split up. Half followed their leader and the other squad split again to better cover the area.

In the bathroom, Cassidy started the tub water, then hobbled to the window, raising the blinds, her gaze resting on the moon. Snapping off the light for a moment, she saw golden/silver moonlight filling the room.

*That’s exactly what I need,* she thought, *something beautifully peaceful.* Leaving the light off, she limped back to the tub, disrobed and sat on the edge, lifting first one leg, then the other into the warm water. With a sigh deep from her diaphragm, she lowered herself up to her shoulders and laid her head back against the rim to stare out the window.

In spite of the relaxing environment, her mind kept whirling over the day’s events. Men, SEALs, and emotions didn’t go well together. What did she know about handling any of them? Try to protect them and they get angrier than Scott had when she blew up his car.

“Men are bloody morons,” she pronounced, then heard a noise from the balcony. Thinking it was Ethan, she stood and reached for her robe. Her legs nearly buckled, forcing her to grab for the sink. Glancing up, she caught a reflection in the mirror...two armed masked men jimmying the lock on the balcony door.

## Chapter 24

Upon seeing the masked men and the silenced 9mm Berettas they wielded, Cassidy wondered in a brief flash how they'd gotten past security. In the next second, her training and instincts kicked in. Her glance snapped around the room, looking for *anything* she could use as a weapon. Seeing her pistol lying on the dresser in the bedroom, she swore at her sloppiness.

The lock on the balcony popped. The door swung open in a slow arc...

She only had seconds before they reached her. *Now, Cass! Now!* Reaching for her cane, she made it to the walk-in shower and stepped in.

Soft footsteps padded across the carpet...

Grabbing the shampoo, she twisted off the top and squirted its contents across the slick tile floor.

Someone stumbled into the bed and muffled a curse...

Taking a second to check their progress, she saw a metallic gleam from one of their guns.

She pulled the extendable showerhead loose, pressing it to the wall for sound control, then slapped the hot water on full. *Some bloody great security we have*, she thought, gritting her teeth at pain shooting through her legs.

"She's not in here. Try the bathroom," one masked man instructed his partner.

"We either kill her quick here or the boss said to bring her out for future use," the other replied. Pushing the halfway closed bathroom door open, he took two steps in, hit the shampoo-slick floor and went down in a sudden heap, his ankle twisting beneath him.

"What the hell...?" The first man tripped over him and took several awkward steps trying to keep his equilibrium. He caught himself next to the shower and ripped the door open. Scalding spray burned his eyes and blistered his skin, sending him backwards, screaming.

“Last time I looked, I didn’t need the SEALs to protect me,” Cassidy snapped.

The second man, larger than the first, regained his feet by keeping one hand on the wall in fear of his slick shoes, and shuffling toward the shower. The pistol swung up, searching for its target, when the cane came down on his hand, striking a nerve and raising a welt.

“Bitch!” he snarled, grabbed the cane and yanked. Losing her balance, Cassidy screamed when the killer lunged for her.

The bedroom door burst open. “Cass, get down!” Ethan’s voice snapped.

Going on years of instinct and trust, she dropped flat on the floor just as his handgun went off. The attacker fell, pinning her beneath him. Cassidy’s struggles against the corpse proved futile, and she immediately regretted opening her eyes. What a minute ago had draped the room in fairy light now made everything macabre. Even in death, his face twisted in hatred. Sightless eyes stared less than an inch from hers. His snarling mouth drooled on her cheek and she could feel his warm blood oozing from his chest and covering her in its sticky sweetness.

Squeezing her eyes shut, nausea and panic overwhelmed her. She needed him off of her *NOW*. Faces kaleidoscoped in her mind. The first looming out of the ocean’s murkiness, surprising her then depriving her of air before knocking her unconscious. The second pointed to her from his vantage point on the overpass. Even from that distance, she read her death in his face. And now this...this *monster* in her own place of safety. She wanted to be left alone...needed this pressure to go, and grew frantic to find a safe haven somewhere... anywhere.

The attacker’s weight decreased until it disappeared.

“Cass?” Someone reached for her and she screamed, scooting to the wall and delivering punch after punch.

The stranger shook her shoulders, then pressed her against him. “Cass? It’s me. Ethan.”

Struggling against him didn’t help. It only tightened his hold.

“Cass! Stop it!”

The barking voice cut through her panic long enough for her to recognize her new captor.

“Ethan?” She drew her head back, eyes wide, then glanced over his shoulder at the body. “Oh!” Wrapping her arms around his neck, she let him gather her into his arms.

Gibson had come up the stairs right behind Ethan. He saw the second attacker dive for the balcony and followed him.

Seeing the chase, Channing keyed his radio. “Summers! We want the bastard alive.”

“That was my plan, Chief,” Jake Summers returned, hardly out of breath as he ran.

“Yeah, well Gibson may have other ideas,” Channing told him, ordering the other men to secure the building and to call the officials.

Confident his men had things under control, Ethan concentrated on Cassidy. Reaching behind him for the robe, he wrapped it around her. “Stay still. We’ll have Weller here soon,” he whispered, noticing her glassy look. “Just stay quiet.” Wanting to get her away from the scene, he carried her into the living room.

Brookes frowned from the doorway and yelled for Carver to bring something from the gear. “Is she...?” he asked at the blood tainting the robe.

Ethan shrugged and put her on the sofa. “Lay here. Did they hurt you?” At the shake of her head, he started to move but her fingers clutched his arm. “Cass?” Her eyes met his and, when he sat down, Carver handed his officer a bottle.

Brookes went to the kitchen and poured a small amount of amber liquid into a cup, then brought it out. “Have her sip this.”

Ethan considered it, then eased the cup into her hands. “Drink,” he instructed, turning toward the door when he heard car doors slam.

Ira Weller beat Grady Shaw into the condo by a half step, his dark eyes storming. He started to lash out, but Channing stepped in. “Cool it, kid.”

“She’s my employer,” Ira snapped but, seeing how pale Tremayne looked, some of his anger died. “Hell, he looks worse than she does.”

“She’s in shock,” O’Brien spoke. “She says they didn’t hurt her, but the Skipper already pulled one guy’s plug. Summer’s after the other one.”

Cassidy sipped the whiskey without so much as a hiss, listening to the men and her dark circled eyes watching them move in slow motion.

Weller started to reply when Gibson's agitated voice came from outside. "I wasn't going to *kill* him. Just break a few bones."

"Afterwards," Summers said in consolation, adding, "If the bosses say it's cool, then you can break whatever you want."

Chavez stepped into the living room, eyeing Cassidy. "Summers caught the runner," he announced.

Ethan's expression went hard. Leaving Cassidy to sip the drink, he went outside where Adams held their prisoner.

Yanking off his mask, they saw a white man in his middle thirties with dirty blond hair and a scar on his face. "Who is he?" Tremayne asked, voice muted.

Klein shook his head while handing an ice bag to Mark Robson. "No ID and the idea that he wants a lawyer."

"I know my rights," the man sneered, but faltered as he sized up Tremayne. "You can't do anything to me."

Ethan towered over the man. "Who hired you?"

The man blinked, then laughed. "Man, I tell you that, I'm dead."

"You *don't* tell me, you're dead."

Shaw put a hand on his arm. "Let me handle this."

"No, he's ours," Weller declared, coming down the steps and motioning to shadows in the darkness.

Several men emerged and escorted the prisoner away, still demanding a lawyer.

One of the shadows laughed in delight. "Dude, you are so far into the Twilight Zone that lawyers don't exist. Devils and demons do and you're about to meet some."

"I'm pretty sure that I don't want to know," Brookes muttered, turning toward the house.

"No, you don't," Weller agreed. "We'll have what he knows by morning — sooner if Chris hasn't lost his touch. Stay close to her."

Shaw shook his head. "I hate it when they do that."

Tremayne shrugged him off to go back inside, shutting the door, confident that Brookes would handle the rest. Not seeing Cassidy on the couch, he swore and bolted for his room.

He found her kneeling in the bathroom, tongue caught between her teeth in concentration, wiping at the blood on the floor. "Cass..."

“I put a towel over the shampoo so you won’t slip, but we need to get this up before it stains,” she explained. “No sense in letting that happen. Rinse this for me?”

Ethan knelt behind her, taking the rag and laying it aside. “I have to know. Why is there shampoo on the floor? And I found the showerhead off...”

She leaned back on her heels and wiped a stray hair away from her face. “It’s all I could think of. One of them slipped on the slick floor. I scalded the other one with the hot water.”

“Oh.” Admiration filled his eyes at the mental picture.

“I need that to get this up.” She reached for it when his fingers closed over her wrist. “Let go, Ethan.”

“I’ll clean this up later. You need to rest.”

She shook her head. “No, I can do this.” Cassidy went to get the rag but frowned when he tightened his hold, stood and brought her up with him. Studying her face, Ethan touched a bruise on her chin.

“I need to clean this mess up before...” Her words dried off as she looked at the blood and remembered the body, the man and... “Oh, God.”

Her words choked off with a sob. He stepped into the shower, holding onto her with one arm and turning on the water with the other.

“Ethan?!” She blinked when the cool water hit her, robe and all. She noted that he didn’t seem concerned he still wore his jeans and shoes. “What are...?”

Touching her hair, he felt her wince but his hands continued to caress her face and shoulders. When his hands went down her arms, she went rigid.

“I’ll leave you alone, but you need to wash him away,” he told her.

Cassidy watched his eyes and the pain in them. “Stay close?” she whispered.

“I’ll get your nightgown and then I’ll clean up the floor. I’ll be right here with you,” he promised, pressing his lips against her temple.

Ethan checked in with Brookes and, satisfied the men were secure outside, he got the nightgown and went back into the bathroom.

“Brookes wants to know who those kids were that Weller had with him.” Ethan kept his voice casual, hearing her tears from behind the shower door.

A long silence answered him. “They were boys from the L.A. office, probably,” she replied, taking the towel he offered, then the gown before opening the door. “Ethan...”

“We don’t have to talk about anything,” he assured her, wanting to know but refusing to ask.

She looked down to see he had cleaned up the blood, but her mind’s eye could still see it. “Damn.”

“Cass.” He placed a hand over her clenched ones. “It’s over.”

“I tried, I really tried to defend myself. They got me anyway. And then I knew that no matter what he did to me, you’d come. You’d save me.”

Her words made his throat close but he didn’t interrupt. Instead, he stood by her, letting her talk.

“I wanted you so much, Ethan but I was scared if you came they would ki...” she stopped as his hands brushed her face and she seen the emotion in his eyes.

“I shouldn’t have left you tonight.” he replied, hating himself for that mistake.

“If you’d stayed, they would’ve hurt you and the others wouldn’t have known there was trouble.”

Ethan frowned, starting to say something when she put a hand on his mouth.

“It’s me they want. I won’t do this to you again. I just can’t.” She pulled away before she could lose herself in the comfort he offered, and grabbed her cane. “Your spare room has a twin bed. I’ll sleep there tonight and, after the hearing starts tomorrow, I’ll go my local house.” Without a sound, she left the bathroom and he heard the bedroom door close with a click.

“Goddamn!” Ethan whirled and slammed his fist into the wall, rage, and fury warring in him. He needed control before he went to her. He needed to have control before he could touch her. His mind replayed her words. With his anger and guilt still simmering, Ethan Tremayne sat down on his bathroom floor, pressed a towel to his face, and screamed.



## Chapter 25

### **The condo, later that night:**

Cassidy sat on the edge of the twin bed in the box-cluttered spare room, her fingers twisting the threadbare cover.

When the door opened, her head jerked up and she slashed at her tears. “Something wrong?” she asked, cursing the sound of her voice.

Ethan watched her from the doorway, remaining silent for a few minutes before going toward her.

“What’s wrong?” she demanded, and frowned when he knelt by the bed to take her hands in his.

“I need you near me, baby. Not down the hall and *certainly* not in another place.”

“But...”

“Screw the danger.” His eyes narrowed. “I want you back in our bed, sleeping next to me. Today’s been god-awful, yet we both survived. You need to heal and rest even more than I do, and I’m rattled to the bone. I don’t know *how* you’re coping.” Rubbing the length of her arm, he leaned in and whispered, “May I put you back to bed now?”

“I want to, but...”

He didn’t wait for her argument. Scooping her up, he carried her into his room and placed her on the bed. After pulling the covers over her, he kissed her forehead and turned off the light. “I’ll be up in a minute. Just gotta check on a few things first.”

“You’re leaving me?”

“Just for a minute. There are two guards outside the balcony, so don’t worry. Okay?”

“Alright.” She burrowed one shoulder into her pillow. “Hurry back.”

Downstairs, Ethan poured himself a shot of whiskey, then stepped out his front door to check on patrol. Gibson appeared from nowhere and stopped in front of him. “How is she?”

“Hey, Gibs.” Tremayne waved his glass in a salute, then took a swig. “She’s asleep.”

Gibson nodded, his hands on his hips. "I'm glad you got there when you did. They almost had her."

Tremayne threw his head back and felt a rare chuckle form in his throat.

"What's so funny?"

"I don't think she really needed us."

Gibson's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"You wanna know what she did? She glopped shampoo all over the damn floor. The first guy in nearly broke his neck trying to get to her." A full laugh accompanied his words. Gibson joined in, first as a chuckle.

"The...the second guy..." Tremayne stopped to breathe.

"The second guy what?" A full belly laugh engulfed Gibson.

"The second guy got a face full of scalding shower water. He popped that door open and she let him have it!"

"Oh...oh...oh man!" Bent over, hands on knees, Gibson roared. "I wish I could've seen it."

"Me, too, but she did it all in the dark!"

Both men howled, not so much for comedy as for relief.

"Then...then she went kung fu on his ass with her c...c...cane." Tremayne swiped tears from his eyes, while Gibson held his aching side.

Chaning walked up, scowling at them. "What the hell? I can hear you a mile away!"

"I need to get back to her," Tremayne said, then drained his shot glass. "You fill him in."

He left them with Gibson's arm across Chaning's shoulders. "Let me tell you about Miss Thang in there. You ain't ever gonna believe it!"

### **Elsewhere in Coronado that night:**

"You think he told the truth?" Lee Chan asked.

Chan had arrived at a private estate in Coronado a few hours before. Now he studied the papers for the inquest and listened to his comrades discuss the SEAL's prisoner.

"If he wasn't, then he's either very brave or very stupid." Weller turned from the long window. "I watched the interrogation and, frankly, it scared the hell out of me."

“That’s the idea.” A young man with wavy blond hair spoke from a sofa where he stretched out. “I get paid the big bucks to scare the hell outta people.”

Chris Belcher, an employee of Marshall Enterprises, worked out of Los Angeles. While he specialized in weapons, he had a way with people that made him a natural for interrogation.

“Opinion on what he said?” Chan asked, looking up. “Was it the bleedin’ truth?”

“He had no reason to lie.” Belcher shrugged, then frowned. “Of course, what all this means is another thing.”

The half-British mercenary/lawyer snorted. “It means we’re screwed.”

“Do we tell the SEALs?” Weller wanted to know. “They’re the ones who’ll walk into this blind.”

Chan knew that, but they had no other hard evidence except what a scared punk told them.

“Not yet,” he decided, explaining, “We’ll be close if the game goes wrong, but Tremayne will have to decide on his own.”

“This could blow up in our faces,” Weller warned. “Those guys are good. Lord knows they’re all stubborn as hell and mean, but they’re used to fighting normal terrorists, Chan, not this.”

His senior in charge leaned back in the chair with an odd look in his dark eyes, a look that Weller recognized. “You know something I don’t?” he demanded.

“Yep, I do,” Chan grinned. “I know who’s coming in with Olsen.”

At a brief flash of intuition Weller groaned, knowing the already volatile situation didn’t need them in the mix.

“Great, Coronado won’t stand a damn chance with them in town.”

### **The next morning at Tremayne’s condo:**

A ray of morning sun coming in the balcony door made Cassidy groan and bury her head in her arms. Cussing mornings, she blindly felt the spot next to her, but found it cold. She sat up with the blanket around her but didn’t see Tremayne in the room.

“Ethan?” she called even as the door opened.

“Good morning.” Ethan entered with a tray of food and a single pink rose. “I thought I’d get back in before you woke up.”

She looked at him, then at the tray. “What’s this?”

“Breakfast in bed for the most beautiful woman I know.” He set the tray in front of her while sitting on the bedside.

“Alright, is the flattery genuine or are you giving me my last meal before execution?”

Ethan watched her, seeing her doubts and he smiled. “The flattery is always genuine.” he paused to lift her chin. “And you aren’t going anywhere.”

“You sound awfully sure of yourself. You got a crystal ball or something?”

“Ummm, more confidence than anything.” He smirked, trying to ignore the tension headache squeezing his temples.

Cassidy’s eyes narrowed, then she laughed. “Ego is what you have, Tremayne.” She squealed when he leaned in to kiss her mouth.

“My ego’s always been my best trait,” he teased her.

“No, you have much better traits. Trust me.”

That rocked him and had his blood burning. “God, I wish we had more time,” he groaned, fighting his basic urges. “You need to eat and, if we don’t look presentable, it won’t take those guys outside long to figure out what we’ve been up to. I really doubt being their commanding officer will keep Chavez or O’Brien from killing me.”

She giggled at that, picking up a fork to touch the eggs. “Rafe’s a cuddly kitty cat. Of course, if Tex were still here, that would be different.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, hon.”

“Of course Dylan did say that Sully said to tell you that you’d still better watch it.”

Ethan rolled his eyes. “Yeah, sure Dylan would say...” He stopped. “Dylan? Dylan who?”

“Fuller, who else?” she countered, eyeing the eggs warily. “Ethan, are these real eggs or did you get them out of a pack and add water?”

He ignored her question to focus on what made his blood go cold. “Dylan Fuller? *Our* Dylan Fuller, the Dylan Fuller who died a year ago?”

Cassidy nodded, deciding to chance the egg looking substance. “A bloke dies and you forget him that fast? Yes, that Dylan.”

“When did he say that?”

Not seeing how pale Tremayne turned, she checked out the rest of breakfast. “After the trawler blew up, I was in that raft waiting to die and Dylan showed up to butt into my afterlife plans,” she snorted, wincing at the bacon. “Said it wasn’t my time yet and that Sully told him to tell you that you’d better watch your step because, even if he was dead, he could still smack you.” She seemed pleased with the idea of their big ex-chief chasing Ethan from the afterlife.

“You...talked with Dylan?” Ethan felt chilled at how close she’d been to death. “Dylan’s dead, Cass.”

“Well, duh. Of course he’s dead.” She rolled her eyes, then noticed how pale he seemed. “Hey, are you alright?”

He thought about that for a moment, then set the tray on the floor and pulled her hard against him, not moving. “I love you so much,” he whispered into her hair.

Cassidy slid her arms around him, feeling that he needed this connection. “I wouldn’t have told you if I knew it’d upset you this much, Eth.”

“I’m fine,” he assured her, easing back to see doubts in her eyes. “Just scared me to think how close I was to losing you.”

She laid her head against his shoulder, content for that moment.

“Well, you didn’t.” Kissing his cheek, she smiled when he shifted his head to meet her mouth. Pressing his lips to hers, he deepened the kiss and what started out gentle became hungry.

“We need to go slow or we’ll never get out of bed,” he told her, brushing a stray strand of hair away from her eyes.

“That a bad plan?” she laughed, trying to hide the sudden attack of nerves.

He heard the change, warmly touching her. “Everything is going to be fine today,” He raised an eyebrow. “I’m going to take a shower. Want to join me?”

She blinked at the suggestion but, as he started to apologize, shook her head. “Not this time. I’m going to get dressed and check on the troops.” He leaned down and kissed her neck until she pushed on his shoulder with a warning. “Ethan.”

“I’m going,” he muttered, forcing himself into the bathroom and deciding there wasn’t enough cold water in the city to get these images out of his head.

Cassidy waited until she heard the water running before getting dressed. As she decided on what outfit to wear to a lynching, she looked at herself in the mirror and saw a scared face staring back.

“Damn this all. Buck up!” She turned her attention to getting ready. The shoulder holster fit under a leather jacket. The 9mm Browning Hi-Power still felt right in her hand despite not having picked it up since Coronado. Once it slid into the holster, she picked up a small bag and considered the contents. The Cold Steel Tanto knife slid into a sheath stitched into the inside of her right boot while several throwing stars slipped into an inside jacket pocket. A backup pistol traveled in a holster at the small of her back. They were tools of the trade, a trade she learned long ago could turn deadly on a dime. Pushing aside the certainty of her impending death, the safety of her men worried her the most.

Since her time with the First Platoon, she’d lost count of the men, the friends, she had seen die in the field. However, this wasn’t their type of mission. It wasn’t their enemy. It was hers and she would see them safely through.

Hearing the shower stop and Ethan swearing when he couldn’t find his razor, she decided it was time to check on the men in spite of her weak legs and overall soreness. Reaching for the doorknob to open it, she stepped out to an equally surprised Lieutenant Brookes and shrieked.

“Bloody hell, Logan!” she snapped, punching him in the chest. “Scare a body to death why don’t you?”

“Cassidy?” Ethan jerked open the bathroom door, half dressed but with his pistol drawn.

Before she could calm him down, they heard the front door banging open and seven SEALs fighting to get in at once.

“You see what you caused?” she chided Brookes, then went into the living room to calm them down before weapons were fired. “The neighbors will be so glad when you lot aren’t hanging around, I’m sure. You just barge into someone’s home?” Cassidy lectured the SEALs while she looked through the kitchen for something with sugar in it.

“Sometimes we do, yeah.” O’Brien slumped in a chair. “You’re pushing too hard.”

She eyed the men, smiling. "I appreciate everything you guys have done recently."

"Shucks, ma'am. We're just doing our job," Ford offered with a mock bow.

Chavez watched the woman closely. She seemed calm, too calm considering the events of yesterday. "Sofia said she expects you for dinner when this is all over." He spoke casually, seeing her pause in her hunt for something sweet.

"Yeah, alright, Rafe." She shot him a smile that was too bright and he cursed under his breath.

"What devious little thoughts are whirling in that head of yours, Cassidy?" Chavez demanded.

"You've been drinking too much coffee again," she chided, hating it when one of them saw through her. "Nothing's going on."

"Yeah, right, try that one again," Gibson snorted. "I've heard that one before, boss."

Cassidy glared at both men, not needing Ethan to think anything was wrong. "Everything's fine. Drop it."

The tone of her voice warned the others to back off but Chavez knew her too well. "You're up and dressed before Tremayne. You're hyped up and looking for sugar." He stepped behind her and felt her tense. "Five bucks says you're also armed better than we are. What are you expecting to happen today?"

"Besides a quick hanging?" she returned, seeing a bag of M&Ms and snagging them. "I'm just nervous."

He squeezed her elbow. "It'll be fine," he assured her, eyeing Gibson. "Nothing's going to happen to you."

Tremayne noticed the tension as he stepped into his living room. "Problems?"

"No." Cassidy shot a quick elbow at Chavez, who sidestepped it with a laugh. "I'm just taking notes to make these jerks very sorry they're so annoying."

"And I'll make a note to point out to Tex or Chief Doug why you're so cranky today." Chavez smiled at her, seeing her eyes flash.

Cassidy started to snarl when Chief Channing came in, frustrated. "We going?" he demanded, tapping his watch. "We'll be cutting it damn close as it is getting to base."

“Not a problem, Chief,” Cassidy replied, eyes lighting up. “Let me drive.”

Before Channing could reply, several SEALs including Tremayne cut in.

“Uh-huh, forget that,” O’Brien refused, thinking more of his survival than of her injuries.

“You drive, boss, and I walk,” Gibson put in, seeing her pout.

Tremayne smiled as he brushed a hand over her hair. “No offense, Cass, but when you drive, it scares the living hell out of the rest of us.”

“Where exactly *did* you learn to drive?” Chavez asked. “And how did you get a license?”

Cassidy snickered. “I grew up with a cousin who test drove cars. Been around race car drivers since I was sixteen. My main employees are mercenaries who drive high-tech motorcycles.” She eyed the men with a grin. “Where do you think I learned to drive... and who the bloody hell said I even had a license?”

SEALs exchanged looks. “We really need words with those boys,” Brookes decided

## Chapter 26

Each SEAL stayed caught up in his own thoughts during the quiet ride from Tremayne’s condo to the Navy base.

Ethan saw Cassidy’s fingers twitching and he recognized the signs of nervous energy. “Don’t be scared, honey,” he whispered, folding her hand in his as Gibson drove. “We’ll be with you. Not everyone there will be the enemy.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I guess it depends on the definition of enemy.” She forced herself to take a deep breath and leaned against his shoulder.

“It’ll be okay, Cassidy,” he promised, slipping his arm around her and feeling her shaking. “I love you.”

Cassidy closed her eyes, giving in to the comfort he offered, wanting to feel that for as long as possible. “I know.”

When the two SUVs arrived at the base, they drove directly to the empty building on the other side of the compound for the hush-hush inquest.



“We have company.” Gibson spoke calmly but his eyes glinted when he saw four men lounging outside the gray metal building.

Ethan felt Cassidy go rigid in his arms and her next few words had even the wildest SEALs coughing.

“Where the hell you learn that?” Carver demanded.

“I can deal with this mock trial. I can deal with an unknown enemy trying to kill me and I can even deal with defending myself for an act I know is right. But I don’t want to deal with *those* four morons,” she barked, glaring.

Brookes paused before getting out of the lead SUV to glance back. “That’s four of the guys who chased you and West all over the ocean, right?” he asked, recognizing the big black-haired man in the leather jacket.

“Yeah,” she sighed, trying to lighten the situation. “Go figure. You hold them at paintball gunpoint and hijack a couple Blackhawk choppers and your partners have the *audacity* to get ticked.”

Ethan looked between her and his senior officer, frowning. “Uh, Cass, exactly what did you and West do?”

“You didn’t tell him?” She gave Brookes a look that promised a painful death, then turned her best smile on Tremayne. “It’s nothing, Eth. We really didn’t do a thing.”

Groaning and vowing he wasn’t ever leaving her on her own again, Ethan stepped into the hot sun to eye the men he vaguely recalled seeing on the Liberty.

Three of them seemed calm, but the big guy with black hair blowing in the wind looked anything but calm.

Grant’s cool blue eyes went to slits when they landed on his foster sister.

“Ahh, we have bad vibes here,” Carver observed, approaching Lightning Team.

“Don’t you even start that shit, Carver,” Gibson snapped, though even he could feel it.

As the SEALs gathered around, Cassidy placed herself between Lightning Team and the First Platoon of S.E.A.L. Team Omega.

“What are *you* doing here?” she demanded.

While Grant glowered, Garret cleared his throat and went to work as the team diplomat. “We were bugging the staff back home, so

Olsen decided we could come with him. If we're good, he'll let us go up to San Francisco to see my folks."

"We decided to see how this travesty of justice played out." The ex-Delta Force officer finally spoke, anger clear in his voice. "Is this how you planned on it ending, Cassidy?"

The woman's chin shot up. "*That's* why you're here," she hissed, matching his glare. "You've been waiting years for me to do something that I couldn't talk my way out of. You just had to be here to see me burned."

"It's time to chill out, Grant," Ramon Lopez urged, seeing the SEALs' expressions harden.

Garret stepped closer so he could talk in a harsh whisper. "Damn it, Grant. Fifteen SEALs against the four of us. Bad odds."

Grant lifted his gaze from his foster sister's heated blue ones to meet the steely men behind her. "Odds always favor us." His fingers flexed in his desire to pick a fight, but something in her eyes stopped him. She had been a member of Lightning Team since she was eighteen years old, and he knew she normally had a reason for doing even stupid things.

Looking at the men behind her again, he began to see the reason. "Just answer me one thing, Cass." Holding the gaze of Ethan Tremayne, the cause of her mutiny, Grant asked the question he needed to know. "Was it worth it?"

While she didn't expect that question, Cassidy answered it honestly and without hesitation. "Yes, it was."

Before the argument could escalate, a shiny, high tech motorcycle pulled up to the SUVs.

"Hey, Chan, are you playing lawyer or mercenary today?" Schultz sounded relieved for the Maverick's distraction.

Lee Chan's eyes told that he had seen the near altercation. "That depends." He leveled a look at Grant. "You don't want this, mate." He shifted to adjust his briefcase, then added in a tone only Grant could hear, "Lads fire at my order. Leave this be."

Grant scanned the area, certain several armed Mavericks had him in their crosshairs, then grinned. "It's cool, Chan," he assured him.

He took Cassidy by the arm and led her a few steps away, looking up when Tremayne joined them. Grant leaned in close to her. "Just

because I'm mad as hell at you doesn't mean I'm gonna let anyone else kick your ass. I'm looking forward to doing that myself."

"Gee, thanks." She leaned on her cane and sneered.

His expression softened by a quarter-inch. "I'm here because my team back East has pulled some intel about this inquest, about who's behind it. Cass, it's a trap.

"I know," she sighed, feeling Ethan's hand on her back, then rejoined the SEALs. "Everyone chill out. As much as West would like them to be, these four aren't the enemy."

"Hah, sometimes Grant thinks West is the enemy." Schultz rolled his eyes when a door opened and Grady Shaw stepped out. "Uh-oh, he's pissed."

Shaw's stormy countenance changed and he eyed Logan Brookes with a wry smile. "Sneaky, Lieutenant. I'll admit even I didn't consider the rabbit you pulled out of you hat," he acknowledged before heading back in.

The SEALs looked at the second in command of the Bravo team. "What was that about?" Tremayne asked.

Brookes coughed, knowing he should have consulted with Tremayne before making the move. He thought it would be better for all if it stayed a secret until this moment. "I...uh, I got a hold of Dad because I wanted someone we could trust on the Panel. I mean, what good's having a father who's an Admiral if his only son can't call in some favors?"

Tremayne eyed him for a moment, then slapped him on the shoulder. "No good at all, I'd say. Thanks." Before going in, he barked orders. "Bravo Squad stays outside. Alpha comes in with us." He made the last minute change as a feeling in his gut kicked in. The change surprised the men but, like any well-trained unit, they adjusted and went about their orders.

As they split up, Brookes caught his officer's arm. "Be careful, Tremayne. This whole thing reeks."

"I know. Just watch our backs," Tremayne urged, feeling Cassidy reach for his hand. "I love you, Commander," he whispered in her ear, using her rank because he knew it would make her smile. Joe Carver opened the door so they could enter.

"Into the Valley of Shadow and all that crap," Jace Adams muttered, following the rest of Alpha team inside.

## Chapter 27

Inside the warehouse, a long table held the Panel officials, while rows of chairs seated witnesses and unofficial observers. Besides Shaw, those observers included Adam Olsen and Congressman James Tremayne. Master Chief Douglas MacCray, the former chief of First platoon also attended.

People unknown to the SEALs filled the sweltering metal building. Both Admirals Horton and Lawrence, along with staff, sat ramrod straight in their dress uniforms.

Tremayne eyed the room, wondering about their enemy. He glanced at Cassidy to see if she had a reaction to anyone, but she stared straight ahead, motionless.

At the Panel's table sat Commander James St. Clair, along with Captain Montel Jackson, the C.O. of the SEALs based in Coronado, Rear Admiral Anthony Sanford, Commander of all SEAL units, Admiral William Keller of Navy Intelligence and Admiral Scott Brookes.

"We're screwed," Jake Summers predicted, looking at the brass facing them.

"Stuff it with the negativity, Summers," Gibson snapped, wincing. "God, I sound like Keith. Someone shoot me." Cassidy smiled at that, a brief burst of relief filling her.

Admiral Sanford rapped on the table, getting everyone's attention before speaking. "This inquest is being held due to a request from Admiral Keller's office. It charges that an illegal operation was undertaken in the name of the United States Navy and the SEALs." The older man eyed the Intelligence officer with disdain, then examined the new arrivals and continued.

"I have read the reports from his office and also complaints from Admiral Horton of the U.S.S. Constellation. Before any judgment can be found, this council would like to hear from the defendant or her representative. I was told no person from the Judge Advocate General's office is being used."

Chan closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. “No, Admiral. My employer is a private citizen and not in the employ of the U.S. Navy or any official government agency.” His voice took on the smooth British lilt of the upper society where he’d been raised.

Sanford looked at a paper and cleared his throat. “Mr. Baker, please tell the panel the chain of events leading to today.” Sanford used the name Chan gave when dealing with legal matters.

Not bothering with his notes, Chan laid out the entire story.

After Chan’s version of events, Sanford redirected his gaze. “Miss Marshall, how do you account for your actions?”

Cassidy frowned, glancing at Ethan’s nod of reassurance, then stood to face the table. “Like Mr...Baker said, we were on the Constellation, waiting until our chopper came. Admiral Lawrence radioed to request aid in searching for the First Platoon. They’d had lost contact with them during a storm the night before.”

Her glance slid to Admiral Horton who glared at her. “Admiral Horton stated he’d received orders from Navy Intel not to aid in searching for Ethan...for Commander Tremayne’s unit even though the carrier was only thirty minutes from their last reported coordinates.”

Admiral Brookes spoke next. “Why did Navy Intelligence order Tremayne’s men abandoned?” He saw a badly hurt woman fighting to keep up a front. “Did Admiral Horton explain?”

“No, he just said they were to be left.” She couldn’t keep the bitterness from showing despite Chan’s coughing.

Brookes’ gaze held hers. “What did you do then?”

Cassidy smiled fully for the first time that afternoon. “Went to get them.”

“Alone?” Captain Jackson raised his eyes.

“Aiden and I knew if the Navy wouldn’t save its own, then we would.” She shrugged. “Not the first time I’ve been left out to hang, but I was damned if I’d see Ethan and the lads go down because they pissed someone off back home.”

“What about the reports of your men taking the Black Hawks by force and holding the Admiral and his men at gunpoint?” Admiral Keller spoke for the first time. His tone made it clear that he thought very little about this woman or her people.

Cassidy grinned and even Chan laughed as he reached into his bag to remove a gun.

“This one of the guns we used?” he asked Horton, holding the gun by the sling.

Horton turned red, shaking a finger. “Yes! Those thugs threatened my crew with those guns. They could have killed us all!”

“Yeah, right. That would’ve happened.” Chan shifted the weapon, aimed it at a far wall, and fired.

“Get down!” Horton shouted, ducking.

Instead of the loud rattle of auto-fire hitting the metal warehouse a few soft put-puts sounded when blue paint splattered on the wall.

Cassidy motioned to the gun Lee dangled. “My Browning was the only live weapon fired on the Constellation and that was only to shoot the radio. The men were only armed with the paint guns they’d used earlier in the day.”

From behind her, Cass heard a low sound from Grant and Schultz’s stage whisper, “We were heisted by mercs using paintballs. I *love* it.”

Admiral Sanford disguised his laugh as a cough. “What about the choppers? You *did* steal them.”

“*Borrow*.” Cassidy held onto that. “We only borrowed them and he got ‘em back.” Before another question could be fired, she added, “Let’s shorten this, shall we?” Her look strayed to a thin, young Navy officer. “You say I disobeyed orders. I say I didn’t because I didn’t have an order forbidding a rescue op. You say we threatened an entire carrier of sailors. I say we didn’t threaten anyone because how can you threaten someone with a paint gun? You say we stole two Black Hawks. I say we borrowed the choppers and the Navy got them returned in one piece.”

She eyed the now quiet table of officers, weeks of turmoil taking effect and straining her patience. “Someone wanted to write off the First Platoon either to draw me out or to get even with the lads for some reason. It’s obvious that Keller’s office has it in for me. Can you tell me why people have been trying to kill me ever since this mess started? *Can you?*”

Chan grabbed her hand to urge restraint.

Admiral Sanford cleared his throat. “Commander Tremayne, since your unit is involved, do you have anything to say?”

As Ethan stood, Cassidy's eyes snapped up. "No! Leave him out of this!" The tone of her voice made several heads turn.

Not used to being contradicted, Sanford sounded clipped. "His team had been left on that mission and *I* would like his observation!"

"*T'm* the one who made the choice to go after them, so any decision afterwards was mine. He has nothing to do with this," Cassidy declared, panic fringing her voice.

Ethan stared at her in confusion, then noticed Chan looking around the room, searching for something.

"Excuse me," Admiral Keller rose, taking his hat. "My aide has informed me of an urgent call. He'll remain here to take notes for me."

As the man hurried out, Admiral Brookes frowned at the interruption before continuing. "Commander Tremayne may have information that will help." He spoke to the woman, but a warning tingled in his gut.

"None of this has anything to do with Ethan or the SEALs," she returned, her voice now sounding dejected. "The choice of my future was decided before any of you arrived today."

Gibson sat up straighter. "Don't like this, sir."

"Explain that, Marshall," James St. Clair ordered, her statement filling him with an uneasy feeling.

The woman closed her eyes, refusing to look at the SEALs. "This whole mess...it was set up to draw me out because it's too dangerous to have me working with the SEALs. Isn't that right, *Yuri*?" Her eyes locked on Admiral Keller's aide.

The man set the notebook next to the briefcase on the floor. "I wasn't sure if you recognized me after all this time, Cassidy." A Slavic accent tinged the aide's otherwise flawless English. "How many years has it been since Bulgaria?"

The woman's eyes went cold as she stepped away from the table, her stare staying locked onto him. She heard Olsen swear. "Damn, we're in trouble. Yuri Nicovitch, ex-KGB assassin and lieutenant to..."

"...Gregor Romanov," Shaw finished, a cold chill filling him at how it all fell into place.

"I didn't right away," she admitted, disgust in her voice. "Heard you in Virginia with Flynn, but you got sloppy, mate. Your boss let me see him when he raped me."

Ethan's eyes shot to her as Chan swore and Yuri laughed.

"A small mistake but, since we planned on killing you, it didn't matter. What does matter is getting what we want before you die." He reached into his pocket. "To do that, any witnesses must be removed first."

Before Tremayne could issue an order, his radio buzzed.

"We've got party crashers!" Brookes reported as a burst of gunfire sounded from outside.

"Ah, my friends are on time. And that's my signal." Yuri nodded and walked away.

Gibson leapt to his feet, revelation on his face, and pointed to Keller's briefcase on the floor. "Shit! There's a bomb!"

SEALs and Lightning Team reacted the same way, bolting for cover when the briefcase exploded.

### **Outside the building:**

"Things don't sound too good inside, sir," Zak Lani reported.

"Tremayne figured that would be the case." Brookes' binoculars settled on a nearby roof and he scowled. "I hate those kids."

Chavez knew he meant Chan had brought the Mavericks.

"If Admiral Keller's the big-shot in charge of this witch hunt, why is he taking off so fast?" Mark Robson asked when he saw the Admiral running for a special car.

"Better question. Why does a guy from Navy Intel have an armored car?" Mason Palmer asked.

Brookes switched his attention to the car, noting its tinted windows with holes for weapons. His sixth sense started buzzing even as several military vehicles pulled up. "Did we get word to expect company?" he asked, reaching for his weapon.

Lani shifted to look, his eyes growing huge. "Those guys aren't military!"

That became clear with the first grenade round fired.

"Here we go again!" O'Brien ducked behind the SUV while masked men poured from the other jeeps. "LT, what are our orders?"

"Keep them from the building!" Brookes snapped. He had just warned Tremayne of the impending trouble when the blast from inside rocked them.



“What the hell was that?” Chavez demanded, jerking to see smoke billowing from the warehouse.

Perry Klein swore. “Someone set off a bomb!”

Torn between the men in front of them and helping the squad in the building, Brookes hesitated when a voice replied over his earphone.

“Help inside. These boys are ours,” Weller ordered.

## Chapter 28

The briefcase bomb had been more concussive than explosive, meant to stun and distract rather than kill.

The men outside would do the killing if anyone stumbled into the crossfire between Bravo Squad and the attackers.

Inside the warehouse, Jace Adams picked himself up off Admiral Sanford and ducked a lethal kick from one of Admiral Keller’s men. “Is it illegal to punch out a Navy officer if he tries to kill you?”

Admiral Sanford coughed from the smoke and from having a 240-pound, SEAL land on him. “I doubt these boys are on our side.” He caught Adams’ attacker with a short jab to the stomach that doubled him over.

“Sure. Omega Force gets Nazis. We get KGB killers,” Schultz fussed, whirling to find Yuri in the smoke. “Where’s Cass?”

Tremayne had taken a blow to his already sore head but, when he heard Schultz, he focused harder, remembering her fall under the force of the explosion. “Cassidy!”

Stunned by the blast, she heard Ethan’s yell despite the smoke and confusion. The woman struggled to stand and locate Ethan when she caught a flash from the corner of her eye. Before she could avoid or strike back, a blow to a nerve in her neck paralyzed her.

“Can’t have our guest of honor going anywhere, can we?” Yuri teased, restraining her and holding a gun in his free hand.

“Drop her!” Tremayne snapped, emerging through the smoke with his pistol steady.

The former Russian assassin twisted so he held Cassidy in front of him. “Not a wise choice, Commander.” The gun barrel touched the woman’s neck as she stirred. “Lower your weapon and she won’t have to die.”

Tremayne hesitated, knowing the slim odds of Cassidy’s survival even if he complied. “Damn it!” He lowered his pistol. “Let her go.”

“A foolish thought, American.” The gun moved from Cassidy’s neck as the Russian fired three rounds into Tremayne’s chest.

Despite being stunned, she saw him recoil at the impact and fall to the floor, unmoving.

Yuri pulled his captive out the door where his employer waited.

Gibson whirled at the gunfire. “Skipper!” he yelled, shooting the man he’d been fighting and diving to Tremayne. “Goddamn! Chief, the Skipper’s been shot!”

Chaning rushed over, radioing for O’Brien, but the fight outside was still too heavy for the Bravo medic to break away.

Lopez knelt down by the SEAL leader as the senior Tremayne hurried to the group. “That’s my son!” he ranted, paling at his motionless son.

Lightning Team’s medic had just started to remove Ethan’s shirt when he heard the first groan and then frowned. “There’s no blood,” he reported. He started to turn Tremayne over when he was blocked.

“Where...is he?” Tremayne’s shaky voice asked.

Chaning laughed, realizing what had happened. “I always tell you fellas don’t leave home without your bullet proof vest. The Skipper’s the only one who listened.”

Tremayne fought to get to his feet, his chest a mass of pain, but his mind centered on one thing. “Where’s Cass?”

“The Admiral’s aide grabbed her and was gone before we could stop him,” Gibson replied.

“Finish this!” Tremayne ordered, grabbing Chan. “Give me the keys, now.”

Chan groaned, knowing what he wanted. “Ah, bloody hell. That bike is new.” He’d never seen eyes so cold and handed the motorcycle keys to the SEAL. “Watch the weapons system. It hasn’t been tested yet and I don’t know what else Young did to it.”

“Ethan, wait,” his father yelled, but was ignored as Shaw ran after Tremayne.

“You can’t go after them yourself,” Shaw argued, wincing as a bullet struck near him. “Wait for the others.”

Tremayne started the motorcycle and glared at the NSA man. “By then, they could be out of our reach or she could be dead. Have the others follow when they can.”

“The guy with Cassidy took off in the Admiral’s car,” Brookes informed Tremayne and watched him tear away. “What the hell is going on?”

Shaw’s teeth clenched. “Keller’s a Russian deep cover agent better known as Gregor Romanov. He has your co-leader. Round up your men and get after Tremayne. Olsen’s men can clean this up.” He watched Brookes jog away, then focused on Tallbear.

“Bear, get on the phone and give the Shore Patrol and the police a description of that car with orders to slow it down but not to stop it,” Shaw ordered the Maverick, then turned a baleful eye on Olsen. “If I even get a *hint* you suspected this, I’ll ruin you before West gets a chance.”

“We had rumors Gregor was in the States in deep cover but he’s had surgery and only a few people, including Cass, knew how to ID him.” Olsen heard sirens and more motorcycles nearing. “We thought he might try for her, but I had no idea all of this could be connected.”

Evan Garret passed him on his way to join the ongoing fight. “You used the kids as *bait*?” he whistled. “Man, if West doesn’t blow a gasket, I can name a few others who will. And Jared Taylor is at the top of that list.”

“You bloody well better hope Taylor gets you first.” Chan shrugged Weller away. “Leave me be and make sure that SEAL doesn’t wreck my bike.”

Olsen began to reply when a voice reached his ears that made him cringe.

“Old man, you are so damned dead.” Aiden West’s eyes spewed lava. He approached Olsen, ignoring the Navy brass and reached for his gun. “How do you want to die? And be warned, any way you choose won’t be quick.”

Senior Chief Channing tapped Shaw’s arm. “Think we should stop this?”

“Hell, no!” came the short reply.

## Chapter 29

Having a diplomatic car with lights and sirens had always come in handy for Romanov, both as a high-ranking Russian KGB agent and now as an officer in the U.S. Navy. Shedding his skin as Admiral Keller of Navy Intelligence, Gregor Romanov eyed his young Lieutenant and clucked his tongue. “Too many witnesses were left behind, Yuri,” he chided. “We’ll have to change identities again.”

Yuri Nicolovich shrugged. “So? These were becoming tedious.” The Russian shifted in the large backseat where he had plenty of room to restrain his helpless prisoner. Once he had gotten into the car, he had wasted no time in binding her hands and ankles, then, connecting those ropes together, he joined another rope to the assortment that he slipped over her neck.

“Fight or struggle too much and you’ll kill yourself before we can.” He placed a hard rubber stick in her mouth, making sure to wedge it between her teeth.

Romanov glanced back as he drove toward the airport. “We want her alive until she tells us a few things,” he reminded him, knowing the sadist’s penchant for rough sex often ended up in dead bodies.

“I understand,” Yuri nodded, leering at the woman now more stunning than when he’d seen her in Bulgaria.

Romanov chuckled when something made him look to the side. “We have company.”

With a violent oath, the younger KGB assassin jerked around to look out the rear window, swearing in Russian. “I *killed* that bastard! I shot him three times in the chest.” At Cassidy’s gasp of relief knowing Ethan still lived, he raised a hand and slapped her.

““Bullet proof vests.” Romanov sighed as the motorcycle began to gain on them. “I will *not* lose the girl. Kill him and do it right this time or I’ll take your new toy for myself.”

Yuri took a rifle from the floor and opened the roof window.

Ethan Tremayne handled the motorcycle easily since he had test driven several on the way to purchase one, though not this high tech.

He swore at himself for letting things go this far. He should have seen by Cassidy's own actions this morning that she'd been scared. Vowing that when he got her back, after he finished holding her, he'd kill her for not telling him about Yuri.

He saw the black car ahead of him and throttled the bike. When Yuri popped up from the sunroof with a rifle, he swerved and the bullet missed. His fingers searched for the buttons that controlled the weapons system. Pushing one, he blinked when a small burst of machine gun fire shot from one of the two mini cannons on the sides of the bike.

"Damn." the bullets struck the car without effect. Not wanting to endanger Cassidy, he flicked another switch. Flames shot out that caused Yuri to drop back in the car. The car swerved and so did Tremayne, finger hitting a red button next to the throttle. The small laser guided missile launched just as Yuri rose up and struck Tremayne on the shoulder with a high impact shell.

Losing control of the motorcycle, Tremayne skid feeling layers of skin peeled away by the payment. The small missile hit the car and sent it spinning into a ninety-degree turn before flipping over.

"God, no," he groaned, pulling himself to his feet and drawing his handgun. He approached the car as Former Admiral Keller pulled himself from the front seat.

"Freeze, comrade, don't move!" Tremayne snapped.

Romanov eyed the bloody SEAL and the gun he carried. "You won't shoot a Navy Admiral, Commander. Think how that would look on your record."

"You're a damn Russian spy and if you don't surrender, I'll fill you so full of holes, you'll look like a sieve!"

"I must give you credit, Commander. You're being very serious out here while your precious girlfriend is possibly dead inside the car." When Tremayne's eyes flickered toward the car, Romanov lunged.

Seeing the movement from the corner of his eye, Tremayne brought the gun up and fired. The bullet from his 9mm caliber H&K P-7 hit the former master KGB agent in the throat.

Watching a second to be sure he was dead, Tremayne dropped to the pavement by the front window and peered into the backseat. The missile strike caught Yuri Nicolovich who now lay limp with his skull

split open from connecting with the pavement. One arm was in shreds and his eyes stared in horror.

Tremayne forced that aside to concentrate on his woman. At first, he feared the worst, but then caught sight of material the color of the blouse Cassidy had worn that day.

“Cassidy!” he yelled, smelling fuel and sliding into the car to reach her. He couldn’t tell how badly she was hurt or how much blood on her was her own or Yuri’s. Tremayne went cold as he eased her close to him, seeing her tied and unconscious. Blanking that out, he ignored the agony of his own body to slide out, pulling her with him.

Once clear, he smelled the fuel stronger and knew they needed to get further away. Picking her up, Ethan made it sixty feet from the car when it exploded, sending them to the ground as metal and shrapnel sliced the air.

Shielding Cassidy, he felt burning debris land on him, but he shrugged it off and turned her in his arms.

“Baby?” He wiped a hand over her face, feeling the tears on her cheeks. Fighting his own pain, shock, and exhaustion, Ethan took his boot knife out to begin the careful process of cutting the ropes off her throat, hands, and ankles.

Once he freed her, he eased her into his arms and pressed her to his chest. His tears dropped against her hair while he rocked her. “It’s over, Cass,” he whispered. “It’s finally over.”

The SEALs found them that way a few moments later. Gibson brought the SUV to a screaming halt and fourteen hyped up fighters poured out.

“Summers, Ford, and Adams, check out that wreck!” Brookes snapped, taking stock of the scene. “Gibson, contact Shaw. We need medical help ASAP. The rest of you spread out and stay on guard.”

He and O’Brien approached their commanding officer. When O’Brien knelt down to touch them, he ducked as a fist shot for his head.

“Whoa, Skipper!” he called. “It’s us.”

“Don’t touch her!” Tremayne lifted a feral stare, death his unspoken promise.

Mike Channing picked up the radio a heartbeat later, shaking his head at Brookes. “Shaw says help’s coming, but it’s your show until then.”

Brookes grimaced and approached to find O'Brien still talking to him. "Ethan, it's Logan."

Tremayne didn't look at them, his eyes stayed unfocused as he rocked the unconscious young woman.

"Leave us alone!" He gritted his teeth at the pain burning from his new wounds.

O'Brien shook his head. "This is bad. He looks like raw meat and she's covered in blood. If he won't let us touch them, this could get dicey."

As Brookes considered the situation, he heard cars coming and hoped Shaw had a plan. Two Mavericks, West and Fletcher piled out of the car along with two retired SEALs, "Tex" Harte and Keith Sutherland, a one-time medic. Shaw got out last.

"West, I honestly can't believe you let all this happen," a man's sharp voice was snorting as he got out of the car.

West closed his eyes, swearing he wouldn't kill a SEAL, even a former one.

"Y'know, Tex. It is things like this that make me regret calling you," he snapped, looking at the demolished motorcycle and wincing. "Uh, Reese, you had better have Ira knock Lee out before we tell him this."

Raymond 'Tex' Harte had been an original member of First Platoon out of Texas before an injury on a mission knocked him out of active duty.

However, a long-standing feeling in the SEALs is once a SEAL always a SEAL and in Tex's case, that was certainly true.

"Hey, Tex!" Gibson grinned. "How come they let you out of the old SEAL home?"

Harte shifted a look at Casey and shot him an evil grin. "Keith and I decided to come save your butts, again." he nodded back to a young man who was muttering under his breath.

Keith Sutherland had also been a founding member and platoon medic until an injury sidelined him.

Now, like Tex, he came when called by the leader of the Mavericks and as he took in the scene, he was glad he had.

Brookes looked at Shaw. "He won't let us touch her."

Sutherland joined O'Brien on the ground, eyeing his two former commanders before speaking.

“Hey, Skipper, as much as the strong silent type suits you, you have to let us get you and the kid to the hospital.” He spoke casually but, as he moved to touch Cassidy’s wrist, Tremayne’s hand knocked it away.

“Don’t touch her again,” he hissed. “Nobody’s going to touch her again or I’ll kill them.”

“He’s out of it,” Chavez announced. “But he can still do what he says too.”

Tex took in the situation, stepping over to Chaning. “As the former Chief of this madhouse to the current Chief, do you mind if I try it?” Chaning shook his head, not knowing what else they could try except to knock the man out

Tex was an old time SEAL who believed God had to be a SEAL, so he spoke to Chief to Chief.

“Well, Sir, we have another situation here that I need to pull the kids out of. They’re good kids, Sir, if a little too stubborn at times. We need to get them some help so, if you could make sure I don’t lose either of them, I’d appreciate it.”

After a deep breath, he approached Tremayne to find him snarling at an equally stressed out Sutherland.

“Hey, sir,” the Texan spoke cheerfully, eyeing Cassidy with a critical eye. “It’s Tex, sir, and quite frankly I have to say, sir, that if you don’t calm down and back the hell off, I’m going to have Gibson knock you out.”

Getting no response, Tex shot him a warning look. “Commander! Cass needs a doctor and so do you.”

“I won’t let them hurt her.” Tremayne’s voice slurred as the shock deepened. His arms tightened when Cassidy whimpered in her sleep. “Don’t take her.”

“Nobody’s going to hurt the kid, sir,” Tex promised. “Sutherland and Chavez will stay with her around the clock until you can be with her.” He put a hand on his former officers’ shoulder. “Let her go, sir.”

Ethan lifted his head to stare at his former chief, not sure what to do until she whimpered again. “Stay with her?” he asked Sutherland.

Sutherland nodded, motioning to Chavez to take the woman. “We’ll be there 24/7, sir,” he replied, slapping O’Brien on the shoulder. “Follow us in the other rig.”



Once Tex knew Chavez and Sutherland had Cassidy secure in the ambulance, he extended a hand to Tremayne. “C’mon, sir, let’s get you to the hospital too.”

Tremayne tried to resist but the pain hit in a sudden rush and he fell over. He would have broken his face on the pavement if Tex hadn’t caught him.

“Well, Tex did it again,” Gibson chortled, ducking in case his former Chief threw anything at him.

“Let’s get out of here.” Brookes decided. “The Feds can clean this up. It’s their mess after all.” He eyed Shaw and let the silent warning hang in the air. “I don’t want to see that damn Fed anywhere *near* them.”

Shaw was already well ahead of him in that decision.

## Chapter 30

### **Balboa Naval Hospital, 48 hours later:**

“Breath sounds are good, previous injuries look okay, though I do want to talk about a few of these.” Keith Sutherland talked half to himself and half to Rafael Chavez.

“No, you don’t,” Chavez returned.

The two men kept their promise and stayed by Cassidy Marshall around the clock since arriving at Balboa. She lay unconscious for forty-eight hours and while worried, Sutherland wouldn’t show it.

“So, is Gibbs still a brat?” He laid the chart aside when he saw her stir.

Chavez caught the movement as well. “As bad as ever.” He moved toward the bed, watching her eyes flicker.

“C’mon, boss. Out all the way,” Sutherland urged from her other side. “If I have to break up one more fight between your mercs, I’ll throw myself off the damned roof.” He figured that lie might bring her around.

Cassidy’s eyes finally opened, looking around in fear until Chavez held her hand.

“Easy, boss,” he soothed. “You’re in the base hospital and we’re all here.”

“Some are here more than others in Gibson’s case,” Sutherland teased.

Blue eyes shifted to see the new voice, not sure. “You real?” Her whispery voice made him laugh.

Easing a glass of water to her lips so she could sip, Sutherland ruffled her hair like he used to. “Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be?”

She gave a small shrug, then winced. “Dylan wasn’t.”

Both men exchanged looks. “Dylan’s dead, honey,” Chavez reminded her.

“Of course he is, but at times of near death, the veil between the worlds lifts.” Jesse Tallbear spoke from the door.

The young Indian had been close these past few days. Now though, his dark eyes seemed different. His voice sounded deeper.

“Bear, you cool?” Chavez asked, eyeing Sutherland, who shrugged.

Cassidy looked at him and closed her eyes. “Kirk, leave Bear alone,” she ordered with a yawn.

“Why? He’s my brother, so I can bug him when I need to.” ‘Bear’ replied with a laugh, looked at the men and laughed harder. “I see West failed to mention something when he left Bear with you.”

Chavez looked wary but Cassidy didn’t seem concerned. “What did he fail to mention?” he asked.

“That Bear is especially open to spirit visitors,” the young Indian replied, his voice not his own.

“So, there’s a spirit in the kid’s body,” Sutherland mused, knowing he was pushing his metaphysical beliefs.

Cassidy rolled her eyes. “Kirk Tallbear, Bear’s older brother, died and likes to drop in unannounced,” she muttered. “What, Kirk?”

‘Bear’ eyed his employer with concern. “Since I’m his brother, it’s easier for me to come, but their teammates were worried.”

“Alright, I haven’t had a drink in days and I’m not seeing this.” the former platoon medic decided.

“Is...Ethan all right, Kirk?” she asked.

‘Kirk’ looked at the SEALs. “Ask them,” he suggested, grinning at her look but, before he could add any thing, a hand grabbed his neck.

“Goddamn it, I told McDowell you were floating around.” Light haired, green-eyed Bryden Young glared into the eyes of his deceased

best friend. “Damn it, Kirk! West told you that you weren’t allowed to spirit snatch Bear when we’re with people who don’t know us well.”

The Indian’s eyes remained calm as they locked on his friend’s; a moment of brief silence passed between them until finally, the boy sagged, and Young swore.

“Weller! Come grab Bear.”

“What the hell happened to him?” Weller demanded, taking the young man.

Young sighed, disgusted. “Kirk was here.”

The medic uttered an oath in Yiddish, then both mercs left the confused SEALs with their commander.

“What’s he mean?” she asked. “What about Ethan?”

Sutherland coughed as Chavez considered how to answer. “The skipper is down the hall.”

“He shot him.” Cassidy argued, tears shining. “I saw him, Rafael. He shot Ethan.”

“The boss was wearing a vest,” Sutherland explained, seeing her eyes shift between them. “But he’s...hurt.”

That caught her attention and her hand shot out faster than either man expected, grabbing her ex-medic by the shirt. “Define hurt?”

“A bullet passed through his shoulder, but it didn’t do any damage. He wrecked that bike and slid on the pavement, which took off chunks of skin.” Sutherland repeated the injuries, wincing. “There’re some burns and other minor injuries, so if Chan doesn’t kill him for wrecking his bike, he’ll be fine.”

“You were lucky too, kid.” Chavez told her. “Considering that car crash, you only managed some scrapes and bruises.”

She didn’t want to think about the car even as she saw Keith Sutherland chewing the top of his pen when he wanted to say something but didn’t know how.

“I know,” she whispered, and focused on Ethan. “Is he awake?”

The medic sighed. “He’s been in and out. The Skipper’s mood hasn’t been too good this time, Cass.”

Struggling to recall events, the woman turned away to close her eyes. She silently understood that this finally might have become too much for Tremayne to handle.

“Get some sleep,” Sutherland urged, motioning Chavez out of the room. “Fill me in on everything that’s happened.”

Seeing Brookes and Chaning down the hall and hearing the grim undertone in his ex-teammates' voice told Chavez that while both of their officers had lived, the platoon still might lose in the end.

### **Balboa Hospital, Commander Tremayne's Room:**

"There's no evidence of course, so all of this will simply be...put behind us." Grady Shaw coughed when he said it.

He and the Navy Brass had cleared up all of the official questions and if anyone wanted to press, the Mavericks persuaded them not to.

Now Shaw stood at the foot of the bed while Ethan's father looked on from across the room.

"Put behind us," Ethan repeated.

He'd been in and out of consciousness for the past two days. Only recently had he been coherent enough to talk to.

He wore a sling around his shoulder, his ribs sported taped where one of the bullets had cracked one. His skin would heal but, all and all, he felt like hell. Listening to Shaw was not making him feel better.

"That a political way of saying she should forget everything and go on living like she hadn't been tortured, raped and nearly killed *how* many times?" he demanded, not looking at the man.

"Ethan, I know it's not right, but it's the best even I or West can do right now." Shaw saw a nurse glare at him. "Look, I'll talk to you later." He paused in the hall to see Brookes. "Will he be okay?"

"Physically, he'll be back on duty in a month or so." Brookes shrugged, eyes turning harder. "Mentally is another matter. I don't know how he'll be emotionally or how he'll react to her." The SEALs dreaded this because they knew if Tremayne turned on her, she'd be lost.

"Son, do you want to talk?" James Tremayne had been with his son since he had been admitted.

Ethan lay with his eyes closed. "Did everything and for *what*? So the suits in Wonderland could say it never happened? That's the world we live in now? Cause if so, it ain't the world I signed on to protect."

"Then you're a fool," Aiden West spoke from the door, ignoring the glare the older man gave him. "I have five minutes to give my peace, so here it is.

“You joined the Navy SEALs to prove you weren’t under your family’s thumb, that you were your own man who didn’t need Daddy’s money or influence.

“Then you decided you liked the idea of saving the world. That’s great. SEALs go out, save people, kill some terrorists, protect the world. But then you stumble into another world —my world.”

West saw he had the SEAL’s attention but ignored the hate leaping out at him. “You and your boys fell into the world that my people and my employer have lived in our whole lives. That world isn’t your clean-cut military one, Tremayne. Rules don’t apply. You just wait for the knife to fall and, unfortunately, it fell on your team.

“Now you have the choice of living through this mess and getting on with things or sulking about how wrong it is. Whatever your choice, make damn sure you make the right one concerning my leader. I think she allowed herself to get too close this time and, if you’re walking on her, then you do it quick,” West warned, closing the door.

The senior Tremayne cleared his throat. “Well, that boy certainly knows how to make a point.”

“Yeah, but just how right is he?” Ethan muttered, thinking about Cassidy.

“Do you love her?” his father asked.

His son’s eyes close without answering.

### **Hours later:**

Slipping out of bed with the halls full of overly hyperactive SEALs wasn’t an easy thing to do.

Peeking out the door, Cassidy Marshall scowled at Gibson and Carver patrolling this end of the hall while Adams and Summers took the other.

“Damn them,” she fumed, then felt a light presence behind her. “Make yourself useful. Distract them.”

A low laugh warmed her and she caught a familiar scent of aftershave. “You’ll owe me,” Dylan Fuller warned then caused something to crash at the opposite end of the hall that sent all four SEALs running to investigate.

“You’re dead, mate. What do you want?” she challenged, easing down the hall and into Ethan’s room.

The room was dark but for a low light above the bed and a table light by the chair where Congressman Tremayne sat reading.

The older man looked up, careful to hide his surprise, and he closed his book. "Should you be up and around yet, young lady?"

Ethan's father always intimidated her, even though she could handle people more powerful. Blinking, she shook her head. "No, not really but..." Her eyes glanced at the bed. "I...just wanted to see him for a second."

Ethan seemed to be sleeping. He looked worn out and she could see where he had skidded.

Cassidy knew she should leave, knew she didn't belong with him. This job just proved it to her.

He lived in a world different from her own and she knew... just knew no matter how patient, he'd reach a point where he couldn't ignore what had happened. "Can I see him for a second, sir?"

James Tremayne had seen this young woman get into screaming matches with leaders of state, yet now as he looked at her, he saw a small girl asking his permission. Nodding, he sat down.

She approached the bed and, hesitating touched his hand with her fingertips.

"I told your daddy that I just wanted to see you for a second. I know you're sleeping and won't remember me being here, which is probably for the best, but..." she bit her lower lip as she considered her next words.

"When I first saw you in Little Creek, I told myself you were an Annapolis graduate used to certain protocol and that S.E.A.L. Team Omega and First Platoon sure as hell wasn't it. I told myself I stayed with the Platoon to help you get used to them and to make sure they didn't kill you. You have no idea how close you came to having an accident those first few weeks."

She remembered those days with a fond smile that faded slowly. "I lied, Eth. I lied to you, to myself. I stayed because I...had fallen in love with you that first day and I will always love you but...it's time to grow up and admit you need more than me.

"You're the most patient, loving man I have ever known and God knows you've put up with enough, but I can't ask you to put up with anymore. The nightmares and feelings are one thing. I can't ask you to put up with anything else, so I'll do this and you won't have to."

Cassidy stared at her hands, swearing she wouldn't cry, especially not with his father in the room. "I wouldn't be able to stand hearing the words from you, Ethan. Hard enough from me, but losing you..." she coughed, blinking at her stinging eyes. "I love you and I'll stay with the platoon until they release you onto active duty. After that, Brookes will help you."

Her voice broke and she swallowed, knowing it was time to get out. She turned to look at the elder Tremayne. "You have a very wonderful son, sir," she whispered, trying to smile at him. "You should be very proud of him."

"His mother and I are proud of Ethan." James had to swallow. Her words hit him hard. He had no clue how in hell his son was handling this since he knew the boy was awake. "My son loves you, Cassidy."

He saw her eyes swim with tears. "I know and I love him too but..." she shook her head. "I put him through too much this time."

"The one thing I've learned about my son since I've seen him at work is there is no such thing as too much trouble for a SEAL." James laughed.

"The only easy day was yesterday," she laughed softly, sadly. "Too much has happened for him to forget, sir. He's seen...too much and..." Cassidy cut off, blinking as she touched his hand again, wishing the outcome could have been different. "I love you, Ethan," she whispered, leaning over to brush a soft kiss over his forehead before easing back. "Tell him I'm sorry."

As James sputtered, the girl walked from the room, then he turned a stern glare on the bed. "Would you care to tell me just *why* you let that happen?"

With a deep, slow sigh, Ethan's blue eyes opened, the pain in them not just from his wounds.

"You have to understand Cassidy, Dad. If I had said anything just then, I would have said the wrong things. I need to be able to think clearly before I talk to her because she has the worst habit of making me angry faster than anyone I've ever known." He looked at his hand where she had touched, still hearing her words. "I need to give her time. I need to give us both the time." Ethan looked at his father and added, "Then we'll see just who is leaving."

## Chapter 31

### **A month and a half later: Navy Base**

“You’ve been pushing the men kind of hard.” Lieutenant Brookes spoke in the barracks office on the other side of the desk, watching Cassidy figure rosters and training schedules.

“Are they complaining?” she asked without looking up.

“Yeah, actually they are.” Brookes coughed, not sure how serious the men were, considering they’d already put up with it for the past several weeks.

Finally, Cassidy looked up, setting the sheets aside. “Good. They wouldn’t be SEALs if they weren’t whining about a few midnight swims in the ocean with full gear and a couple twelve-minute mile runs. I had wanted to get them up to Niland for a few days of training with the new gear Shaw sent out but... Tremayne’s coming back the day after tomorrow, so you and he will have to do that.”

He noticed the catch in her voice at Tremayne’s name, not to mention her use of his surname, and leaned forward. “The Chief and I are going over to Chief Doug’s place tonight for a barbecue. Do you want to come?” he asked, knowing she hadn’t been out much lately.

She considered it before shaking her head. “Not much in the mood for casual socializing, but thanks.” She looked into the barracks. “Besides, I figured I might take the lads over to Nick’s to make it up to them for this past week.”

Brookes didn’t like the sound of that, but couldn’t think of any reason to stop her. He could only hope his men kept their heads on straight and kept an eye on her. Her current black mood could go bad fast.

### **Nick’s Bar, Coronado, Ca, that night:**

Most of the military men in the area visited Nick’s bar and, on certain nights, sane people avoided the rowdy SEALs who filled the place.

This night, the owner, Nicholas Stansi, noticed his usual visitors were quiet so far, but he just shrugged that off to the young woman at the bar.



“Think I’m cramping their style, Nick?” Cassidy asked, swirling ice in the drink she held and glancing back to see the First Platoon and other SEALs playing pool or darts. An arm wrestling contest had started and, while the usual amount of women gathered around, things seemed subdued even to her.

Stansi eyed the men, then the Brit. “I think they’re taking it easy for a change.” He wiped the bar closest to her. “Troubles, kid?”

In the years since First Platoon had moved to Coronado and he had known Cassidy Marshall, he’d never seen her drink anything but soda — until tonight.

“Yeah, life learning lesson, Nick. When you’re an anti-terrorist used to fighting in the black pits of the world, never fall in love with a by-the-book Navy man.” She sighed and shifted in her chair.. “Sorry. I told myself I wouldn’t mope and...Tex, don’t even think about that.”

Without even looking, she called the warning as if sensing the former SEAL’s next move while Gibson’s back was turned.

“Damn girl still has eyes in the back of her head.” Tex Harte tipped his beer bottle back, then looked toward the bar. “She’s down.”

Chavez nodded. “She’s hurting and can’t cut loose. We need to get her to expend that energy before she sees the Commander.”

“She sure seems to be expending it on us lately,” Adams grouched, muscles still sore.

Gibson reached for another beer, disagreeing. “Nah, that’s because she’s tense. Cass is hurt, scared, and angry. If she takes all that out on the Skipper, we’ll *never* get them together.”

“Please! Images I don’t need,” Sutherland growled, shuddering at that. “I like to think of Cassidy as the cute little brat who took over our lives. Even thinking of her and the Skipper...” another shudder.

Unaware of her men’s topic of discussion, Cassidy tried to decide between getting another drink or going back to the little apartment she’d rented.

The door opened, and ten men walked in wearing street clothes, but the swagger, the haircuts and the attitude screamed military.

“Bloody hell, they’re Marines.” She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and silently asked what else her life needed.

It had never been a secret that Marines and SEALs didn’t like each other. She had cleaned up more than one brawl between the two groups.

“What a dump!” a large barrel-chested Marine stated. “It’s infested with SEALs.”

Cassidy closed her eyes, counting in her head how much cash she had on her, then pulled a credit card from her jacket pocket, handing it to the owner.

“What’s this for?” he asked.

She knew the platoon had seen the Marines, and scenes of Virginia Beach and other places filled her thoughts. “The damages.”

“There aren’t any,” Nick argued then saw the Marines glaring at the SEALs.

“There will be,” Cassidy promised, shifting on the stool when a tall, lean Marine caught sight of her.

A lady-killer in his mind, he sauntered over to lean against the bar next to her. “This may not be so bad after all,” he decided, eyes sliding over her with a clear suggestion in them. “Hey, baby. Why don’t we ditch this dump? I’ll show you why the Marines will always be better than a crummy SEAL?”

The come-on lacked originality, something she could shrug off easily enough, but when his hand rested on her leg, she decided she wasn’t in the mood to be polite.

“Hands off what doesn’t belong to you, soldier.” She pushed his hand away, seeing the platoon getting to their feet as the Marines spread out in the bar.

“Let’s be nice, sweets,” the Marine smiled, leaning closer to brush a hand over her arm. “I can be real good to you if...”

He broke off with a gasp when Cassidy twisted his wrist backward in a hard move.

“Better to ask yourself how much you want this hand, mate,” she hissed, temper sizzling on the surface. “Cause you touch me again, I’ll break the damn thing off and feed it to you.”

Sliding off the stool, she started to look for her SEALs when the man jerked her around by the shoulder, his face red with rage.

“Bitch!” he snarled. “Nobody does that to me.” His arm drew back.

“Cass!” Gibson surged to his feet but Tex put a hand on his arm, restraining him.

As the Marine's fist flew forward, Cassidy shifted at the last second, catching the wrist, and used the man's own momentum to shove him into the bar. His breath whooshed out as he hit. She jerked the arm behind him, then slammed his head into the bar top, letting him slump to the floor.

Seeing the other Marines start to move, the woman eyed the odds, then broke into an insane smile. "Hey, Nick, this bloke swung first, right?"

"Uh, yeah," Nick sighed, wishing he hadn't fixed the jukebox from the last brawl.

"Then as a duly employed representative of the United States Justice Department, and co-commanding officer of First platoon, with diplomatic immunity and Presidential clearance, I would be within my legal right to defend myself, right?" she asked too calmly, shifting from the bar to get more room.

Nick groaned in anticipation of his immediate future. "Yeah, I suppose so, but could you do it without killing anyone this time?"

"Maybe, maybe not. That'll depend on these blokes." Cassidy smiled at the Marines, then eyed the SEALs. "You gonna let me do this alone or do you want to jump in?"

Chavez flexed his fingers, meeting her eyes. "We've just been waiting for you to ask, boss."

As the first Marine started to lunge at the British woman, Adams caught him in the stomach and they landed on a table that crashed to the floor.

Then all hell broke loose as SEALs and Marines began brawling. The rest of the customers, who'd seen these before, scattered.

"Doug won't like this," Nick predicted, ducking behind the bar as a chair crashed over his head. Keeping low, his hand patted along the counter until he felt the phone.

## Chapter 32

“Damn it, Tremayne,” Craig Stern complained, turning from the view of the ocean. “If things were this bad, you should’ve called me. We’re still on the same goddamn base.”

Stern, like Tex Harte and Keith Sutherland, was an original member of the Platoon. He had been the second in command until he’d transferred to another platoon that saw less action. Like the other two, he had lost none of his commitment to the squad or to his friends.

His current platoon had just returned from a training assignment and so he and his wife, Abby, had joined the barbecue/fish fry at Master Chief Doug MacCray’s house.

“I didn’t want to involve anymore people than I already had.” Tremayne sipped his beer. “West called Sutherland and Tex in, I guess.”

Stern had heard from MacCray and Brookes some of the recent events and looked hard at his former leader. He noticed Tremayne’s tension and caught the shadows under his eyes.

“Doing okay?” Stern asked, hearing Grady Shaw and Chief Channing arguing over who had caught the most fish recently.

“Physically, I’m doing fine.” Tremayne saw the man’s look. “Why all of a sudden do you people think you know so damn much?”

Stern grinned. “Cause it’s so damn obvious how miserable you are, and Brookes says Cass has been killing the men.” He laid a friendly hand on the other man’s shoulder. “Why don’t you just talk to her? You’ve had plenty of time to cool off.”

Ethan nodded. “Guess a part of me is afraid that she meant what she said.”

“She’s loved you for as long as I can recall.” Stern scoffed, turning as Doug started bellowing over the phone by the backdoor.

“No! You tell the damn Shore Patrol not to touch any of them. You keep all of them right there!” he snapped, eyes flashing. “I’ll be right down.”

Brookes' intuition kicked in, knowing only one thing could make the Master Chief that angry. "What'd they do?"

"Shore Patrol got called down to a brawl at Nick's," MacCray replied. "Guess it must be bad because the cops are talking about assault charges."

Tremayne frowned, looking at his second in command. "I thought you said that Cassidy was going with the squad tonight?"

"She did," MacCray snapped, reaching for his keys. "Who the hell d'ya think started the damn brawl, Sir?"

SEALs exchanged looks, then decided it was safer to go with the Master Chief. It didn't take long to get from MacCray's house to the bar. It also didn't take long to see Shore Patrol vehicles, police units, and ambulances surrounding it.

"I'll skin them," Channing growled, eyeing a freckle faced Shore Patrol officer who led a dazed Marine out in handcuffs. "Were there any deaths, son?"

The young man grinned. "Not this time, sir."

As the senior officers stepped inside, Ethan could hear West's accountant having fits. While a usual SEAL fight could be counted on to have some damage, this was the first time he could recall seeing most of the furniture broken, and the mirror behind the bar now thousands of glass shards sparkling on the floor. A fan hung down from the ceiling with a Marine still attached to it and...

He stopped counting after that, afraid of what else he would find, and decided to see how many of his men were down for the count or in chains.

A red-faced Shore Patrol officer bellowed about assault charges, property damages and other various, serious charges. Much to Tremayne's surprise, all of his men still stood under their own power or at least seemed conscious, since he didn't think Gibson looked very sober.

"I could haul in the whole damn lot of you for this!" the officer raged, getting madder at the soft voice.

"Not a good idea." Cassidy Marshall sat on remnants of the pool table, legs dangling as she let the man rant, aware they might have done a bit more damage than she wanted, she still felt pleased that the boys had handled themselves well, without many injuries.

She looked the roughest from the altercation. The torn jacket and bruises were going to take some explaining to West. Now, sitting on the leaning game table with her SEALs gathered around, she chose to stop the bellowing elk of a Shore cop.

“They’re with me. You arrest me and I can promise within the hour, you’ll see your badge floating.” She motioned to Nick Stansi. “He’s been paid for the damages and the Marines started the fight. I’ll swear a complaint if needed.”

“What about the fact that one of them still has a pool ball stuck in his mouth?” the cop demanded.

Gibson snorted. “He should be grateful it wasn’t the pool stick.”

As the SEALs snickered, Cassidy motioned them to shut up even though she couldn’t hide her own grin.

Seeing this could take hours, Brookes and MacCray decided to break in. “Captain Lewis.” MacCray knew the man and hoped he could get him calm.

Seeing their senior officers, the SEALs settled down.

“We are *soooo* busted,” Sutherland whispered in Cassidy’s ear.

She eyed Brookes with a tipsy grin. “Hi, your party over?” She, slid off the table, nearly falling.

Brookes snatched her by the waist, glaring over her head. “You let her get drunk?”

O’Brien shook his head. “No way, LT. She only had two drinks. It’s the leftover adrenaline from the fight.”

“I don’t want to be with West when the kid hears about this.” Craig Stern stepped over a still downed Marine to look at Cass. “Hey, kid.”

“Craig!” she squealed, trying to reach him, but Brooke’s arm still held tight. “Let go or I’ll deck you. I’ve done it plenty of times tonight.”

Chavez groaned knowing, since her emotions were high, Cassidy had a mouth that wouldn’t quit.

“Not our fault either,” Cassidy tried to tell an amused Stern as she squirmed free of Brookes. “These Marine bullies came in and started it.”

“Yeah, that’s a familiar story.” Stern noticed a sharp bruise on her face and the torn jacket sleeve. “Looks like you came out of this one worse than the boys did.”

She rolled her eyes, touching a place near her mouth starting to swell. “That’s because the damn Marines all picked on me. On *me*, Craig and I didn’t do anything to cause it.”

Choking laughter and coughs from the men behind her had the diminutive woman turning to glare. “Shut up. I always covered for you lot. The least you could do is *agree* with me.”

“Right, boss,” Ford grinned.

Mark Robson nodded. “They did start it, sirs.”

“Bright eyed slug on the floor made a play for her and then tried to hit her.” Gibson had to fight to get the words out straight. “She slugged him, though, and all hell broke loose.”

“Marines were all over the bleedin’ place.” Cassidy’s arms flailed as Channing swore. “Punches being tossed, bodies flying all over the place. Not sure who threw the bloke into the mirror though...I was busy fighting two of the nasty...”

Tremayne had heard enough to get a clear picture and, the longer he thought about it, the more he simmered.

Cassidy was trying to finish her explanation of the night’s event and telling Gibson to shut up when Tremayne grabbed her arm.

Eyes shooting up in surprise, she managed a “Hi” while her stomach dropped at the sight of him. “Guess this doesn’t look too good, huh?”

Not bothering to answer, he looked for his officers. “Make sure they all get back in one piece.” Eyeing Gibson, he added, “Put a guard on him or he’ll walk through the streets singing again or howling at the damn moon.”

Brookes suggested, “Want me to take her home?”

“I am perfectly capable of taking her...I mean me home,” Cassidy countered, rolling her eyes in indignation. She blinked when his fingers tightened on her wrist.

“Don’t think so.” Tremayne pulled her out of the bar with him, ignoring her sputtering protests.

Cassidy objected when Ethan physically pulled her from the bar, toward his rented Jeep. “That was a totally humiliating and unnecessary scene,” she told him, struggling to keep up with his long strides. “Ethan.”

He stopped at the passenger side door and put her in before she could fire another objection. Bracing himself on the door, he glared. “Shut up.”

The cold fury in his voice made her fall silent as he got in, and started the jeep. “Where’s this apartment Brookes said you rented?” he demanded after backing onto the street.

Wary about speaking, and embarrassed that she couldn’t recall the address off hand, she held out a slip of paper.

Fighting not to jerk the paper out of her hand, he glanced at the address and scowled. “Low cost neighborhood, drugs, and gangs. Why there?”

“Close to the beach. I wanted that and figured I could handle the rest,” she replied, squeezing against the door to give more space between her and his radiating anger.

“Like with those Marines tonight?” He gripped his fingers tighter on the steering wheel.

She scowled at his profile, seeing that vein in his forehead pounding. “Is that what you’re mad about? Cause I let the lads get into that fight?” she scoffed, crossing her arms across her chest. “It was a stupid mistake. I should have known better, but it would have happened anyway.”

“So you just got involved anyway?” he countered, pulling the jeep up in front of a small house. “That was a real smart plan.”

She bit her lip. “I wasn’t thinking, I guess.” She slipped out of the jeep and hesitated. “You can come up if you want.”

Not thinking he really would, she went ahead to unlock the door and turn on the first set of lights.

Tremayne locked the jeep and stepped in behind her as she closed the door, locking it twice with trembling fingers.

“I...don’t have much here, but I think there may be some...” She started to turn into the room, but Ethan caught her up in his arms and shoved her against the door.

“Ethan...?” Her startled gasp cut off when his mouth crushed down on hers, his tongue wicked and punishing in its assault on her mouth.

Her fingers gripped his shoulders but didn’t have the strength to break free.



Pulling her jacket off, he gave one tug on the front of her blouse, ripping it open to reveal smooth skin and a navy blue silk bra.

His anger and emotions still simmering, he held her hands still with one of his, as his tongue plunged into her mouth again, his teeth holding her bottom lip while his other hand moved to cup her breast.

Cassidy groaned against his mouth, her eyes glazed by his force. He lifted her, still keeping her locked to him and, with her legs wrapped around him, he stumbled through the strange, cluttered apartment to fall on a mattress.

“You don’t think I would want you still?” his voice rough, eyes dangerous as he broke the kiss long enough to look at her. “I’m too patient and gentle?”

Ethan caught her mouth again, this time crushing it with a force that made her cry out. He reached between them to undo her slacks and pull them down long smooth legs. “I am not a patient man, Cassidy,” he gritted out, forcing her to look at him. “I won’t always be gentle but...” he held her chin in one hand while disposing of his own clothes. “I will never force you to do anything.”

“I want you now and I won’t be gentle,” he warned, his palm rough as it teased her breast. He slid it over the swell, then ran it down her hip. “I can’t be, not tonight and I’ll probably end up hurting you. But if you don’t want me tonight, tell me to stop.” His fingers gripped her face. “For God’s sake, tell me to stop.”

She knew he would. If she said those words, he would stop, no matter how it hurt him. Reaching up to touch his face, she shook her head. Unable to speak, she slid her fingers behind his neck and pulled his head down. Her lips opened under his and welcomed his tongue.

Ethan groaned as emotions soared. He lost himself and surged into her, body tightening and clenching. Gripping her hands, he held them to the mattress as his hips thrust against her, into her.

“Eth....” She bit her lip, refusing to cry out. His strength hurt but the pain came from the passion her body fought to adjust to. On instinct, she learned to move with his thrusts, amazed that when she lifted her legs, he groaned and caught her harder. Rolling on his back, he moved his hips, and her sudden cry surprised them both.

“Sit...up,” he gasped, shocking her when his hands cupped her breasts to help raise her. “Now...move.”

Not sure what to do to please him, she eased up and heard his breath catch. Sliding back down made her smile because she felt his response.

After a while, Ethan's hands slid over to curve her buttocks and held her close and tight, his fingers molding her flesh.

Cassidy's small moan had him tightening. Sitting up with her locked against him, he began to rock and soon had her gasping. When he was sure he had her, he slipped her under him and surged up again. Her cry came and his mouth found hers, hot and burning as he crushed her lips.

Forcing it open to take his tongue, with her legs wrapped around him, he thrust against her. When she took all of him, he felt her swell and groaned, unable to hold on any longer. Releasing himself, he swallowed her gasp when her body met his climax.

### **Sometime later:**

Unaware of time or even place, Ethan's body reminded him. He looked down at the young woman cradled in his arms, as much for warmth as anything.

"Cass?" He groped behind him for his shirt to lay over her since they were lying on top of the blanket. A soft murmur responded but, as he caressed her back and neck, she stirred enough to open her eyes.

"Still mad at me?" she asked, touching a red mark on his chest. He still showed the evidence of skidding on pavement. Glad he didn't need the bandages on them now, he watched her press a kiss to the patch nearest to her.

"No, I'm not mad," he sighed, pushing her hair away from her face. "Are you?"

Cassidy considered that, not understanding the question. "What would I be mad at you for?"

"For what I just did," Ethan returned, watching her eyes, then looking at her body. "I was too rough with you."

"You warned me," she yawned. "Ethan, not that I'm complaining, but why did you do this?"

He sighed, rolling onto his back with one arm under his head and the other wrapped around her. "To be honest, I hadn't planned on it," he admitted, closing his eyes. "When I saw you at Nick's tonight and realized that, on top of everything else you had happen, you were in a

brawl with some Marines, I got scared and angry. When we got here, my emotions were so raw that I reacted.” He let his fingers sift through her hair. “A part of me wanted you to stop me and another part prayed you didn’t.”

Cassidy laid her head on his chest, tracing the curves and muscles. “You scared me,” she admitted, feeling him tense.

“I know,” he whispered, swearing at himself. “That’s the bad thing, baby. I told you that, while I’m patient to a point, I have limits and I won’t always be gentle. You need gentle. You need softness and patience and I...I can’t always promise those things.”

Realizing some of what he meant, her fingers went still. “Ethan, how much of what I said in the hospital did you hear?”

Smiling, he let his hand curve on her hip. “All of it. I pissed my father off too.”

“You were awake,” she whispered, raising her head to stare into his eyes. “You were awake that *whole* time and let me babble like a fool.”

“No.” His eyes softened and he brushed a thumb over her cheek. “You could never be a fool. Just a frightened girl trying to do what she thought was best.”

Cassidy lowered her eyes, biting her lip. “And?”

“And, while I really do appreciate your concern for my feelings and future, I think I’ll keep things the way they are.” Ethan felt her shiver and drew her closer.

“What way?” she asked, not looking at him.

He grinned, reading her so clearly. “Oh, with you bossing the squad around, and me keeping St. Clair happy when you do something so totally un-Navy.” He waited a beat as he heard a soft ‘Oh’ to add, “Then, I want you in my bed at night, all soft and cuddly after we’ve made love.”

It took a second before her blue eyes looked up to him, seeing his smile. “You mean...you still want...I mean...” She broke off, stumbling over the words.

Ethan rolled onto his side with her tucked against him, his finger gentle on her face. “You think, if I didn’t still want you, that I would have just made love to you?” he asked, eyes sharpening. “Watch the answer to that, too.” Seeing the honest fear made him sigh, and his lips kissed her face, her eyelids, and finally her lips.

“Cass, nothing could make me stop loving you. I wanted to give you more time to recover from all of this, but I’ve never wanted anyone more than I do you.” His kiss tasted her tears. “What’s wrong?”

She hated this. “You know...all of it,” she whispered, memories still raw.

“Yeah, I know. He told me. Does it matter to you?” he asked, seeing her eyes widen to search his face.

“Of course it does.” Cassidy couldn’t believe he had to ask that. “You can guess...what he did but...” she paused, shuddering. “What he was going to do.”

Ethan leaned over her. “All you have to think about is us and what you want me to do,” he told her, holding her gaze. “You know I’d never touch you in any way you didn’t like.”

“He... he...he kissed down there.” Shame burned her face. “Would you ever?”

He had to wait until he could keep his voice even. “Only if you wanted me to,” he assured her, seeing her disgust. “Some things you’ve experienced at other’s hands could be good if done with someone you love and trust.”

“It hurt, Eth,” she whispered, looking away from him as the memories came on too suddenly to resist.

Reading her face, he refused to have this night ruined for her by memories of horror. Easing his body closer, he shifted so he could lift one of her long slender legs. His lips brushed her skin and her eyes froze.

“No, Ethan.” Cassidy tried to reach for him, but he eased her back.

“Trust me, baby,” he soothed, hoping he wasn’t moving too fast as he kissed her leg, moving his lips up inch by inch until he reached her inner thigh. “So soft, so warm, you are so perfect, Cass.”

She laid still, eyes locked on her lover as his hand curled on her breast and he laid his head on her abdomen. She couldn’t find words to express fear when he blew on the small mass of auburn curls between her legs, making her shiver.

Hearing her whimper and sensing her fear, he was gentle and slow when he first touched the marks her tormentors left, and then he shifted, meeting her eyes with a warm smile before lowering his head.

Cassidy went rigid, fingers clutching the blanket with a silent refusal to scream, but the air rushed out of her lungs, and her eyes rolled back.

Ethan's hot, soft mouth lowered to her most private core, his lips moist as he touched her. He waited, letting her adjust to this new intimacy before shifting his head so his mouth deepened, increasing the pressure.

"Ooohh," she moaned aloud, not aware her legs moved apart to give him more access and not aware her body welcomed the attention by becoming moist and ready.

Hearing her cries and feeling her body move, Ethan closed his lips over the lips that sealed her body and drew them into his mouth, suckling.

Her body arched with a cry part moan and part whimper, his one hand moving up to soothe her by rubbing her chest while his other slid under her to lift her hips. The increased pressure had his head swimming as he continued to suckle her, tasting her juices. His tongue touched her core and with no effort, she opened for him.

"Ethan!" she cried out this time, wanting him.

Pulling back, he slipped his finger where his tongue had just been and she writhed next to him, eyes closed and head tossed back. He watched her as he slid two fingers into her soft, moist center and kept a rhythm until she cried his name, her hips moving as he slid his fingers in deeper, causing her to bolt upright in his arms.

Slipping those fingers out and replacing them with one from his other hand, he supported her and pressed the fingers that were slick with her own moisture against her lips.

"Taste, honey" he whispered, easing them into her mouth. Ethan moaned as she at first hesitantly took his fingers into her mouth, then closed his eyes when she began sucking on them.

"I want you again," he gasped against her hair. Feeling her nod, he laid her down, removed his fingers and slid into her.

Already hard and ready to explode, he held off while pushing her toward her own climax, capturing her mouth and still tasting her. "Look at me," he ordered. "I want to watch you. I want to see you when you explode."

Holding her gaze, Ethan squeezed himself and pushed down on her hips when he felt her hands stroke him from behind. “God!” he hissed, pushing harder, faster until he pulled her up with him, her ankles locking around his waist. He pressed her to him with one arm, stood and pushed her back against the bedroom wall.

Cassidy screamed into his shoulder while he continued to shove into her, hot, hard and huge. She felt a wave coming over her and lost control, meeting his thrusts. When he fell back on the mattress, they rolled together as power overtook control. On top, he held her down while he pushed, then rolled over to let her move.

Feeling his fingers mold over her skin as he held her on his shaft, she began twisting, moving over him, on him until he pulled her down and plunged his tongue into her mouth, his hips undulating to take her again and again. Slipping a hand up, he caressed one breast and felt her shudder against him.

Ethan met her climax with his own until finally all was silent except for gasping.

“I’m thinking we may need a vacation after this weekend,” he predicted, but froze at her tears. “Cass?”

She stayed silent until she looked up and saw his worry. “Thank you.”

Ethan’s smile was soft, as was his kiss when he lowered his mouth to hers. “My pleasure, Commander,” he whispered against her mouth.

He heard her laugh before she turned into his arms to cuddle. “Stay.”

“I’ll be right here, baby,” he promised, drawing her closer, then he let himself fall to sleep.

## Chapter 33

Morning came all too soon for Tremayne. When he realized her mattress consisted of a thin piece of foam on the floor, he cursed himself. He had made love to her *here*.

Next, he noticed the absence of both his shirt and Cassidy. Going in search of both, he found her in an unfurnished living room, sitting on the floor in only his shirt and holding a cell phone.

“No, Aiden, I’m sure the Marines are exaggerating the circumstances.” She rubbed her head as the voice yelled. “Of *course* Lani didn’t put a jarhead on a ceiling fan. Ford did that.”

Ethan smiled as he eased behind her to kiss her neck, enjoying how she leaned back and nestled against his chest.

“Don’t be silly. I paid for the damages and the lads are covered.” She tilted her head as his mouth caressed her neck. “Uh, Aiden, what?” She blinked, losing her thoughts when his lips nipped at her earlobe.

Taking the phone from her limp hand, Ethan winked. “Go play with the squad, West. We’re busy.” He tossed the phone into a box before slipping her into his arms. “Have I told you I love you?”

“Not this morning,” she replied, matching his kiss until he groaned. “I think you could be dangerous, Ethan.”

“Funny, I was thinking the same thing about you,” he returned, eyeing the room. “Do you know that you have no furniture?”

He saw her frown. “Yeah, I only stayed here one night.” She shrugged, standing with his shirt only reaching her thighs. “After the break-in, Chavez insisted I stay with him.”

Ethan’s head jerked up at that comment. “What break-in?” he demanded, turning her to face him. “Brookes didn’t mention that.”

“That’s probably because Lt. Brookes didn’t know,” Cassidy replied, smiling at his look. “I knew if he found out, he’d blab to you and I didn’t want you to worry.”

Not worry. He shook his head as he looked at the boxes. “Been living with Chavez and his family?”

“Between them and Gibs,” she sighed, rolling her eyes. “I’ve considered looking for something else, though.”

Ethan stepped closer to touch her throat. “Really?” He leaned in to smell her hair. “I happen to know of somebody looking for a roommate. Handsome guy, Navy. Loves you so much it hurts.”

“It could be hard, working and living together,” she murmured, gasping as his fingertips trailed her throat to find the buttons on his shirt. “You may get tired of me.”

“Tired of those mercs, maybe, but I could never get tired of you,” he whispered, easing two buttons apart and going hard when he saw her cleavage. “Say you’ll come back with me, Cass. Back to my home, back to the squad. Come back to me.”

Cassidy’s breath caught as he bent to nuzzle her neck, his morning beard making her giggle. “I never left you, Ethan,” she whispered.

His eyes darkened further as he lifted his head. “How quickly do you think I can get the men to move all this back to my place?”

“Why? You in a hurry?” she teased, gasping as he pulled her against him so she could feel him.

“I want to make love to you in my...in our bed.”

Cassidy considered that and reached for her phone. “Tell them I want out of here and you’ll have a platoon here within thirty minutes.”

“They better make it ten or I’ll have you on the floor by then,” Ethan growled, grabbing the phone to call his second in command to get the ball rolling.

### **Ethan Tremayne’s condo, ninety minutes later:**

“This is the second time I’ve done this,” Gibson groaned, temples pounding from his headache. “I’m tired of moving you, Cass.”

As the men of First Platoon finished moving Cassidy’s things back into the condo, she grinned at them.

“But, Gibs, if I stay, think how much fun you’ll have teasing Aiden.” She heard the groans but felt Tremayne near.

“That it?” he asked, surprised to see a smaller mess than he expected.

Chavez leaned on the couch. “Yep, she doesn’t have that much.” He saw his commander getting edgy.

Looking around to be sure the men were done, Ethan finally gave in. “Okay, it’s a weekend. Everybody out!” he ordered, giving Brookes a look not to ask. “Be good until Monday because I don’t want to be bailing anyone out.”



Gibson started to ask a question, but Channing grabbed his arm and dragged him out.

Cassidy laughed as Tremayne escorted the last man out, shut and locked the door and turned back to her.

“I guess I’ll just put some things away.” She turned to take a step, already laughing as he lunged to grab her by the waist and lift her up in his arms. “Ethan, I’m all sweaty and dirty from moving boxes and keeping them from killing Gibs.”

“That’s fine, baby.” Ethan shut his door with a foot and headed for the bathroom. “I planned on taking a shower.”

He saw and felt her tense, then relax. “I don’t know what I can do, Ethan. I can’t always promise I can give you...”

“I know.” Ethan kissed her, easing her into the shower stall. “We’ll go slow and take it from there.”

As he undressed, she watched him, feeling her stomach muscles quiver as his jeans slid down. “How much trouble would we be in with the Master Chief if we didn’t make it to the Quarter-deck on time Monday?” she asked.

“We’d probably be in plenty since he’s turned into a stickler for the rules.” Ethan stepped into the shower, his gentle hands helping her disrobe. “But I’ll risk it.” Pleased and happy for the first time in a long time, he listened to Cassidy laugh before he pulled her under the water spray with him.

## THE END

**Watch for the next exciting novel in the S.E.A.L. Team Omega series, *Treacherous Alliances*, coming SOON!**

## Here's a sneak peek at the second novel, *Treacherous Alliances*:

### Prologue

The Hotel Del Coronado has been one of the more lavish hotels in the San Diego area for years. It had seen the likes of movie stars, heads of state, and more stroll through its doors.

Well known and popular, the management liked to think they were above the more mundane things that struck other lower class hotels. Of course, that all changed the morning that guests complained about a disturbance in one of their more exclusive rooms.

A sensation of drowning in the rolling waves of the Pacific Ocean is what started bringing him around.

Groaning as his body ached and his head felt like exploding with the noise of hammering from somewhere, the man hissed and tried to cover his now throbbing head when the feeling of something cold and hard in his palm caught his still numb brain.

“Wha...?” struggling to open his blue eyes against the heaviness that wanted to keep them closed, it was the nauseating smell of blood that finally got through to him.

Ignoring the pain in his head, he forced his eyes open to look around. Confused at first as he looked around the disheveled hotel room, he fought to not only get his bearings but also to remember.

How'd he get here...wherever here was and who...blinking his eyes, he strained to think of even a name. His name, what was it?

Again, that smell pierced his haze and made him look at his hand. The small 9mm handgun he was holding didn't look familiar...should it? No, he knew that while the pistol itself was alien to him the feel of it shouldn't have been.

The question of why did he have a pistol in a hotel room when he was with...blinding pain took his breath even as he was looking into the bedroom and...

“Oh, God,” stumbling into the room, he found the source of the smell.

Soaked with blood, it was the body laying naked and motionless on the bed that caught his attention.

She would have been beautiful if not covered in blood with a 9mm bullet wound in her chest. Blood caked in her long honey colored hair and a look of terror froze her face.

Still staring at this, he was numb and still confused when the hammering got louder just as the hotel room door was kicked in.

“Freeze!” a stern voice snapped as six uniformed officers stormed the room with weapons drawn.

“I...I...don’t know what...” the confused man, seeing blood on his hands when he went to run them through his black hair.

Looking into the bedroom, the officers seemed to know what must have happened and decided not to take any chances.

Their offender didn’t seem to want to resist but they’d been told by hotel staff when called to the room who the guests were and reacted.

Weapons pulled to cover the man, two officers were quick to move on him while another read the usual Miranda rights.

“Commander Ethan Tremayne, you are under arrest for the murder of Liz Decatur...”

**Watch for the rest of this thrilling adventure coming Spring of 2010**

