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Chapter Five

Tuesday

1953 local -- 1523 ZULU

Mac and Gunny's house

Suburbs of Zaranj

Afghanistan

'Non-judicial punishment...' As I was fiercely kicking and punching the sand-filled sack that Gunny had installed in my bedroom as a punching bag for us to somehow keep up our training, I once again saw Kalesky's face before my inner eye and it made me punch even harder. Suppressed grunts were underlining my efforts to work off my frustration.

>> Why don't I defend him so we can cut a deal to have him undergo your very personal kickboxing endurance routine?

I'd had a hard time trying to keep my laughter low when I had received Harm's last email. He'd pulled out all the stops and had shown incredible creativity inventing nice, slow and wonderfully painful ways for me to get back at Kalesky - and only for a split second had I wondered how this vindictive tendency in his character could possibly have escaped my notice until now. On the other hand, every line of his email seemed to bear traces of his compassionate and only minimally malicious smile, and the picture I had gotten of him back on the pier in Norfolk was once again confirmed: Harmon Rabb simply wasn't capable of taking the law into his own hands. But his efforts to support me and lighten my mood were too endearing.

Sighing, I grabbed for my towel and wiped my sweaty forehead, leaning back against the bare wall and briefly closing my eyes. The smirk wouldn't leave my face, though. I could just picture him looking at me in that unique way of his, half self-confident and half uneasy, waiting for me to relax and smile to let him know that he had made me feel better. Shaking my head with a low chuckle, I put away the punching bag. 'Gotta love that sailor...'

Thank God, I had found the time to wear myself out enough to be able to concentrate on what still lay ahead of me tonight. Just two hours ago, my frustration had threatened to get the better of me when I had learned that thanks to my negotiating talent, the terror cell had received 25 brand-new anti-aircraft missiles. Special treat for Suzie, best regards, Ben. Great -

even though we knew the Stinger copies wouldn't be needed for the terrorists' upcoming project.

Gunny and I had three days left to prevent a major attack from happening - and we still had no idea what our 'friends' were aiming at. Thanks to the information that I had been able to drag out of Kalesky's nose about the group planning on using Al-Husayns for their strike, we had been able to assemble quite a list of possible targets. Two thirds of Afghanistan were within range of the missiles, with a little luck they'd fly right into Kabul. Webb had told us he'd notify the German and Dutch commanders of the international peace forces.

But there was more. Half of Pakistan was in danger, too - the government in Islamabad had secretly been warned. Karachi was just out of reach, but we knew that Webb's CIA contacts in the Pakistani port city were frantically trying to get their hands on some information about what might be worth blowing up. My personal guess lay in the opposite direction, though. The Al-Husayns might even be able to threaten the international airport of Dubai and thus the most important supply route for coalition forces headquarters in Qatar. Gunny doubted the terrorists would take the risk of dumping their costly missiles into the Straits of Hormus, but I was not so sure about that. Stranger things had happened - especially with al Qaeda.

At least I could be sure that neither Iraq nor the Omani waters lay inside the attack zone. I was heartily ashamed of myself for cherishing such selfish feelings, but still, my spirits were considerably lightened by the knowledge that certain people I happened to care about wouldn't be in the wrong place at the right time, whether they were playing reporter in country or taking little joyrides in 40-million-dollar birds.

"You ready, ma'am?" I heard Galindez call from the adjacent room, shaking me from my musings.

"Give me five minutes to grab a shower and get dressed," I answered and ordered myself to hurry up. Tonight might be our last chance to shed a little light on the whole scenario.

2119 local -- 1749 ZULU
Terrorist training camp
A few miles outside Zaranj
Afghanistan

This was one of the few occasions when I actually felt grateful that I was once again wrapped in black from head to toe. Tonight, my *Chador* spared me the effort to try and keep a straight face when I discovered yet another high tech item that the command central of the terror camp was equipped with. Where the hell had they gotten all this from? Okay, wrong question. As long as people like Ben Kalesky were around, nothing of the sort seemed to be too hard to acquire.

Quite a few nations' finest products were assembled among the technical equipment. Russian satellite dishes were peacefully cooperating with a German computer network that was actually running our well-known American software. Chinese short-wave radio transmitters were competing with Finnish cell-phones. How many innocent salesmen were out there, I wondered, who had no clue that the merchandise they had just successfully delivered was now working against their own countries?

"Maryam?" The Gunny took me by the arm and dragged me over to where Kourosh Maghari was sitting in front of a short-wave radio.

"Sit down." Maghari's tone was harsh, even though he had told Gunny earlier that the group appreciated my dealings with Kalesky. But obviously it would have been too much to acknowledge that to me, too. I stifled my frown, obediently lowered my glance and shyly took a seat.

"What am I supposed to do?" I asked Gunny, keeping my eyes down. Of course, I knew exactly what was expected of me, but officially, only Gunny had been informed. I didn't need to know what lay ahead of me and what consequences my cooperation would bring about. I only had to function when required.

"Tell her," Maghari ordered Galindez.

Keeping his voice gruff, the Gunny instructed me. *"Our Iraqi friends in Basra will contact us tonight with updated information on the target. Unfortunately, none of them speaks Farsi and we have no one with us who's fluent enough in Arab. That's why we'll have to communicate in our enemies' language. You will translate."*

Normally, my first notion would have been to ask if the comm link was secure, but a) I was sure the terrorists had that problem covered, b) as a woman, I wasn't supposed to think that far and c) - frankly - I didn't care. So I only mumbled a low "Yes," and nodded in submission to my husband's orders, waiting in silence until I would be needed.

Gunny and Maghari went a few steps away from where I was sitting, meeting with Rokneddin and several other men that I recognized from the other night's meeting. They kept their voices low but, to my great relief, not low enough.

"Do you really think it is wise to cooperate with them in this?" Rokneddin's voice was ringing with doubt as he addressed his brother.

Kourosh put a soothing hand on his younger brother's shoulder. *"We have the same goal, Rokneddin. They may be Sunnites and reject our fundamental belief in the succession of the prophets, but we're all Allah's disciples."*

A man that I had once heard being addressed as Amal Faezi spoke up, an impressive furrow showing on his brow. *"They're Sunnites? I thought Basra was Shiite territory. If I'd known this I'd never have given my consent! And my money, for that matter!"*

The imam fixed his gaze on Faezi. *"Calm down, Amal. Kourosh knows what he's doing."*

"I sincerely hope so, for his sake." Faezi's stare sent daggers at the older Maghari before he turned it to Gunny immediately after. *"And I hope we can trust your wife, too."* He looked over to where I was sitting, briefly meeting my glance before I quickly looked down, mentally slapping myself for letting myself get caught eavesdropping.

Luckily, the Gunny had witnessed my lapse and reacted immediately. With a few quick strides, he was at my side, roughly yanked me up from my chair and slapped me without so much as uttering a word. For the fraction of a second I just stared at him, unbelieving, but then the brief unguarded look that he gave me in between all his acting, made me want to take him into my arms and console him - Galindez looked so lost and unhappy about what he had just felt compelled to do. I winked at him and then instantly slumped down on my chair, holding my

cheek and seemingly biting back my tears. A hard thing to do when everything within me suddenly wanted to laugh out loud at the absurdity of the situation. Harm sure was in for another entertaining email!

"She will think twice of doing anything else than what she's ordered to," the Gunny stated gruffly, returning to the other men who were smirking openly.

'Exactly,' I silently agreed, 'I'm ordered to do as much damage to your devilish plans as I can. And I will - so help me God.'

Just then, the radio crackled and whistled loudly. I jumped and turned to the microphone, feeling the circle of men closing in on me from behind. Almost like a pack of predators they were drawing close, leaning in, looking over my shoulders, keenly observing my every move. I have to admit that I actually began to feel intimidated by the threat that was inherent in the situation and if it hadn't been for the Gunny who somehow managed to stand right behind me, firmly laying his hands on my shoulders, the following minutes might have turned out hard to endure.

[*"Zaranj forr-too-tree, 'dis is Basra base. Do you copy? Over."*]

The voice that came from the loudspeaker was tinny and hoarse, but it made me instantly picture its bearer as the unforgiving Grizzly-bear type. Broad-shouldered, with enormous paws and sharp, deadly teeth. Faking a frightened expression that wasn't too far from my true state of mind, I glanced at Rokneddin who had positioned himself next to me.

"Acknowledge." He put a slip of paper on the table in front of me, reminding me that I had at least to make believe that I needed guidance to conduct a radio conversation.

"This is Zaranj 423, broadcasting on channel 27. Come in Basra base. Over," I slowly read out what Rokneddin had written out for me and then again looked up at him.

[*"Is you reddy, Zaranj forr-too-tree? How many horses stand by forr Friday? Over."*]

Gunny had told me that 'horses' were meant to be missiles but I wouldn't let the group know that I knew. *"They want to know if we're ready for Friday and how many horses we have,"* I translated.

"Tell them we will have five Arabian horses ready to be saddled," Rokneddin instructed me.

Five Al-Husayns. Good. *"We will have five Arabian horses at our disposal. Over,"* I informed our Basra contact, playing the ignorant interpreter again.

[*"Not six? Over."*]

There had to be a reason why our contact wanted one more. One shot to spare, maybe? *"They want us to have six horses ready."*

Rokneddin seemed to contemplate the question for a moment, then gave in. *"They can have six."*

"We will have six horses for you, Basra base. Over"

["You can start early? Over."]

"Our contact asks if we can start early."

After a short whispered exchange with Kourosh and the imam, Rokneddin nodded. *"Tell them they're ready at daybreak."*

"They will be ready to start at daybreak. Over."

["Time is 8:30 in 'de morning. Yourr time. Over."]

Again, I turned to Rokneddin. *"They say that the time is 8:30 a.m., our time-zone."*

"What are the coordinates?"

"Basra base, what are the coordinates? Over."

["First meeting: east longitude is fifty-six degrees, ten minutes, north latitude is twenty-six degrees, seventeen minutes. Over."]

'Meeting' - what a nice euphemism for an attack. And the target was in the west - I had known it. They were aiming at the coalition forces. The only thing that struck me as kind of odd was that the distance seemed a little short. Dubai airport was out of question. Whatever they were trying to destroy had to be right at the coastline. Nothing else would make sense. Or would it?

I had to try very hard not to jump when I suddenly felt Gunny's hand move on my right shoulder. Almost inconceivably, Galindez was tapping a Morse code on my clavicle.

".-/-/--/-/.-."

Water. Apparently, Gunny had inconspicuously taken a look at the electronic map above my head and found that the target was situated at sea. I started to tremble slightly. There weren't any of our ships in that region, were there? But then - how would the terrorists know that on Friday, exactly at 0830, one of our ships would pass that exact spot? What the hell was out there?

I translated the coordinates to the group and once again fixed my gaze on Rokneddin, awaiting his next order.

"Ask them for the other coordinates."

"What are the coordinates for the other meeting? Over."

["Same coordinates, Zaranj forr-too-tree. Second meeting is at 8:35, third at 8:40. Over."]

Three attacks. Two missiles per target. A convoy of some sort? I felt my pulse accelerate ever more. *"The coordinates are always the same,"* I told Rokneddin, keeping my voice disinterested. *"They ask you to meet with them at 8:35 a.m. and at 8:40 a.m., too."*

"Ask them if they really have them with them."

Who? What? I felt like screaming in frustration. "Basra base? Will you have them with you? Over," I stubbornly translated Rokneddin's cryptic statement. On my right shoulder, Gunny's fingers tightened slightly. 'Play it cool, Mackenzie,' I silently scolded myself, 'you're going to find out what this is about.'

I felt Gunny lean slightly to the side and murmur something to Kourosh who immediately answered. In afterthought, I guess it was Maghari's reply that caused Galindez to suddenly squeeze my left shoulder in a way that almost made me cry out, but back then I had no clue what provoked his reaction. It had me turn my senses on high alert, though, and not a second too early.

"-.../-../..-/..-/..-/---/-/..." Galindez tapped. "..."

B/C Weapons. Webb, ASAP.

Holy sh...

Whatever was out there would cause innumerable deaths if the terrorists succeeded in blowing it up. That meant we had to find a way to stop the plot right here, within the next forty-eight hours. As my cheeks started to burn, I almost missed our contact's next sentence.

"Repeat, please, Basra base. Over," I told him, wishing my voice wouldn't threaten to shake that much. Gunny gave my shoulders a rough shove to show his disapproval of his wife's lack of concentration.

["We talk again 'Thursday, half past nine in 'de evening. Your time. Over."]

"They want to contact us again on Thursday at 9:30 p.m." I quickly translated, trying to look guilty.

"Tell them we'll be here." Rokneddin shot me another hostile glare.

"We will be waiting for your call. Over."

["Allah be wid' you. Over and out."] The static ceased as soon as the connection was broken.

Out of here and to my sat phone! In my despair I could think of only one way to give the Gunny and me an excuse to get out of here at once. I started to get up, swayed on my feet, grabbed for my chair and gasped, pressing my hand to my stomach.

"Vajih..."

For the fraction of a second, Galindez caught my glance and understood instantly. He jumped to my side to support me on my feet and looked up at the others. "I need to get her home."

Kourosh fixed his gaze on me, not caring to conceal his disapproval. "What's with her?"

Although we hadn't rehearsed this, Gunny answered within a split second. "She is pregnant. I will take her home and come back to you."

I looked up in shock and only barely managed to keep up my role. I had been thinking about feigning some sickness, not a pregnancy. But now it couldn't be helped. Kourosh nodded and motioned for his brother to take us home.

During the whole ride, Gunny sat at my side helping me sit upright as my fake nausea threatened to overwhelm me. He didn't meet my eyes, yet. A caring husband wasn't really the image that he had given of himself this far and both of us intended to keep it that way. Vajih Goshtasbi wasn't too interested in his wife's health. He only wanted to ensure the safety of his son.

"I'll be back in a minute," Gunny assured our driver and then slowly guided me into the house. Once the door was closed, he immediately let go of me. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he at once apologized, looking decidedly uncomfortable. "I couldn't think of anything else that fast."

"Apology accepted, Gunny," I only answered, already desperately rummaging through my things for the sat phone. "Where is the damned thing..." I muttered angrily.

"Uh... with all due respect, ma'am," Galindez began. I interrupted my search and looked at him, slightly annoyed.

"Ma'am, I need to get back to the car, and I think we shouldn't call Mr. Webb until we dig up a few more details. I'll be back in about two hours. By that time we might be able to tell them a little more about what we're looking at."

"No, Gunny, this can't wait. That's why I faked my little breakdown in the first place, remember? I'll inform Webb about what we know. But you're right: we definitely need more detailed information. So before you go..." I reached into a small side-compartment of one of my bags and pulled out a small transmitter that Webb had given me for special occasions such as this. "Put it somewhere safe where they won't see it and make sure you catch any important bits of conversation. I'll be monitoring you from here." With my last words, I had pulled a headphone with a little receiver out of the same bag.

Gunny gave me the slightest of strained smiles. "Understood, ma'am. Let's just hope they feel like talking."

"With a born diplomat like you around, I'm sure they will." I returned his smile, well aware that it didn't quite reach my eyes - I was too tense.

"Thanks, ma'am." Gunny waved a salute and was already at the door again. I prepared myself a cup of strong coffee and flopped down on our shabby sofa, hoping that I'd at least hear from him soon. I hated long waits.

For the next hour, I felt like I was doing a CIA freshman course on monitoring, the whole time desperately trying to reach Webb but for some reason I couldn't get a hold of him. 'Dammit, Clay, couldn't you just once be reliable?'

Our friends at the camp had apparently gone back to making themselves comfortable with a little tea, discussing all things from oil prices to opium shipping routes. While most of the topics were interesting, at times even highly entertaining, I still found myself drawing patterns on my legal pad. 'Come on, Gunny, don't let me down...'

Eventually, I heard the hum of the voices lessen a little. Apparently, Gunny had dragged someone a little away from the group and was about to question him. I straightened and unconsciously tightened the grip on my pencil.

["Kourosh, can I ask you something?"]

["Of course, Vajih. Go ahead."]

["When I asked you earlier, you mentioned something about the targets being chemical and biological weapons. What exactly are we firing upon?"]

["I'm sorry I couldn't tell you earlier, Vajih, but your wife being around made it impossible. You know you can never trust them."]

["Yeah, I know,"] Gunny cut in with a smile that was detectable even through my headphones.

Maghari began to lay out the plan to Galindez, blissfully unaware that I was at the same time writing down every single word he said.

["Three weeks ago, an Iraqi al-Qaeda cell in Basra contacted us and told us that members of the Iraqi Republican Guard had managed to secure at least parts of their weapons arsenal before the UN inspectors could get their hands on them. They loaded them on three inconspicuous commercial ships that were able to leave Umm Qasr before the port city was lost to the aggressors. The Republican Guard wanted al Qaeda to have the weapons rather than losing them to the invading troops. Some of them are conventional, you know, bazookas, grenades, short-range missiles, real Stingers for instance. But most of them are chemical and biological warheads, designed for Scuds and Al-Husayns."]

Those bastards... my fist clenched so firmly that my pencil broke. 'No, Iraq has no chem-bio weapons.' Sure.

To any bystanders, Gunny's voice would have appeared normal, but working so closely with him, I had gotten to know him better than to be fooled by his seemingly calm attitude. Just like me, he was trying hard to digest the enormity of the news he'd just learned.

["But if The Base has control over those ships, why don't we secure the weapons for us instead of blowing them up?"]

["They tried, but with each passing day, it gets harder to navigate them unobtrusively and right now there's nowhere we could safely unload the cargo. They've already been picked up a few times by western secret services. So our leaders decided we'd better make use of the weapons and cause as much damage as possible, to the western coalition as well as to those who call themselves Muslims but help the enemy."]

["The Emirates..."]

["For example. So, the crews of the ships will get them to the right coordinates on Friday morning and abandon them there. Our task is to blow them up. That's it."]

Gunny and Kourosh kept talking, but the topic had shifted to the Emirates' position in the current conflict and I felt I needed to hear no more. Yanking the headphone from my ears, I jumped to my feet, briefly trying to steady my racing pulse. I had expected some drastic

scenario, but what we had at hand might easily turn out far deadlier than 9/11. There were tens of thousands of coalition soldiers in that region, and millions of civilian people populating the Gulf shores.

Frantic, I once again tried to reach Webb. With trembling fingers, I dialed the irrationally long number, pacing the room and praying fervently that this time, he would be within reach.

["Webb."]

Thank God! "Clay? This is Mac."

Webb instantly picked up the urgency in my voice. ["Colonel! Something wrong?"]

Somehow, his question made me chuckle a little helplessly. "Actually, yes. We found out about their plans."

["How bad?"] was all he asked.

"Threatcon Delta."

["Spill it."]

"The target is a convoy of three commercial ships. They will be blown up on Friday morning, between 0830 and 0840, Afghan time, near the Emirates' coastline, 056 degrees 10 minutes East, 26 degrees 17 minutes North. They have Iraqi chem-bio weapons on board."

Webb had listened quietly while I had explained the situation. However, my last sentence caused a sharp intake of breath. ["Wait! Could you repeat that last part?"] All of a sudden, his voice had lost all remainders of its usual calm.

"They have chem-bio weapons on board that the Baath regime obviously managed to smuggle out of Umm Qasr a few weeks ago, and I'm sure you..." I didn't get to finish my sentence.

["Damn!!! Are you really sure about this, Mac?"]

Alarmed, I swallowed. "Yes, I am. Why?"

["We were sure there were only conventional weapons aboard! Stingers, for instance."]

"There seem to be Stingers among the cargo, but most of it is B/C materiel. Warheads, mostly. You knew about this?"

["Yeah, we did. And based on the information that all materiel was conventional, we worked out some ROEs. Right now, a fighter squadron is headed for the ships to try and destroy them off the coast. "]

"Oh God..." I gasped. And suddenly, an even more dreadful suspicion hit me. Grabbing the backrest of the sofa for support, I forced myself to ask the next question. "Clay, did they depart from the Seahawk?"

["Yes, they did."]

I immediately detected that he wasn't telling me everything. That was when I knew my intuition had once again been proven right. "He's up there, isn't he?" I whispered.

["Squadron leader."]

Chapter Six

2231 Local -- 1831 Zulu

Approximately 180 nautical miles SSE of the Straits of Hormus

"What's our time to target?"

"Eleven minutes out," reported Cash from behind me. "Still quiet on the scope."

"If we're lucky, it'll stay that way."

"Jorgensen told me about your kind of luck, sir ... I'm not so sure I want it."

I had to chuckle at that. An uninformed observer might come to the conclusion that I ended up in a Tomcat every time I paid the Seahawk a visit. Hell, I suppose that assumption isn't too far off these days. I certainly hadn't expected to be flying this particular mission, but the moment Coates and I had reported back aboard, Captain Johnson had pointed me toward the CAG. Apparently the operational tempo had been taking its toll on the air wing: two or three pilots were down with the flu, and there had been a deck mishap the night before that had everybody a little shaken up. No serious injuries, fortunately, but the CAG had said flatly, "If you're sharp, I want you" -- and I hadn't been inclined to disagree.

From the time we'd radioed the Seahawk of our discovery until the time my bird's wheels had left the deck, about three hours had passed. If records were kept for such things, I'd probably be in the running for shortest time aboard a carrier, and my adrenaline level hadn't lessened by even a fraction. As soon as the Seahawk had nailed down the position of the convoy -- entirely too close to the Qatari coastline for anyone's liking -- a warning signal had been transmitted, demanding identification and surrender before action would be taken to force the issue. Predictably, no response was made, and so our mission stood.

It occurred to me, at about ten thousand feet, that I'd barely said a word to Coates as we went our separate ways in the corridor outside CIC. She'd said good luck, and I'd acknowledged it, but I hadn't thought to tell her how well she'd performed over the last few days. For some reason, that bothered me, but I'd have to rectify it after I got back. Right now, my priorities were focused on a tiny sliver of the sea that was getting closer by the second.

The radio squawked. "Echo Flight, Bat Cave. Give us a comm check and stand by for mission confirmation from CENTCOM."

I keyed the comm switch. "Bat Cave, Echo Lead. Standing by."

"Echo Two," acknowledged my wingman, a light-commander who went by the call sign 'Red.'

"Echo Three."

"Echo Four."

"Echo Watcher," chimed in our escort in the E-2, a few thousand feet above us.

After a pause, the order from the Seahawk came through. "Mission confirmed. Parameters are as follows. Target the forward holds with minimum ordnance, and maintain position to provide support until the SEAL insertion is completed. If you take fire, you are authorized to use any and all weapons at your disposal, but provide verbal cues so that we can relay warnings to the SEALs. Happy hunting."

"Easy for him to say," grumbled my RIO once the comm link to the Seahawk was closed. "Those surface-to-air jobs would work just as well on us as they would on any of CENTCOM's aircraft."

"Aw, come on, Cash. You don't think I can outfly the USAF and the RAF?"

"Hey, no offense, sir, but it ain't always just about the flying -- Jorgensen said even you got dinged over Afghanistan!"

"Jorgensen's got a big mouth, doesn't she?"

Cash laughed, as did the others, bleeding off a little of the tension. "Roger that, sir."

It's amazing how much perceptions can change with a little time, I reflected in those few moments of calm before the storm. There was a time when I'd avoided the shipboard aircrews like the plague, simply because I didn't feel I had the right to identify with them anymore. It didn't feel like all that long ago that my career as an aviator had come to an abrupt, painful end, but in reality, it had been nearly eight years since I'd first gotten back in the cockpit and back into the life I'd sought ever since I'd seen my first airplane. It wasn't exactly the life I'd expected or desired, but it was mine, and there wasn't much about it that I'd change if I could.

So much had changed, about the world at large and about my own world, and yet here I was, flying off the Seahawk again, flying over the Gulf again. Maybe someday someone will explain to me how karma works, because so far it still confuses the hell out of me.

"All right, kids, lock it in," I told the rest of the group, ready to get down to business. "Red, Bounce and I will take the first run, in that order, and Buck will keep tabs on us. Use your Fox-Twos. And I don't want us to need a second run. One shot, one kill, all right?"

"Bet your ass, sir!" answered Bounce, also known as Echo Three.

"Dial it back, Bounce," suggested his wingman dryly.

"You're just jealous 'cause you have to stay up here and mind the store."

"Am I going to have to separate you two?" I inquired calmly. "Consider that the last word on the jokes, by the way. From here in, we get serious. Prep for descent on my mark. Three - two - one - mark."

I pointed my aircraft toward the waves, and the other two followed my lead.

We leveled off at about four thousand feet, and I eased my thumb over the weapons toggle. Before I could move the selector over to arm my starboard anti-radiation missile, a burst of static issued from the radio, and the command that followed swiftly changed everything.

“Echo Flight, Bat Cave - *disengage!*”

I glanced in the mirror, sharing a startled look with Cash. “Say again, Bat Cave?”

The young, excited voice from the Seahawk was then replaced by the voice of Captain Johnson. “Echoes, climb to 30 and head back here. *Immediately*. Your mission has been aborted.”

Red voiced everyone’s collective disbelief. “Hammer - ?”

What the hell? I was at least as surprised as the others, but I certainly knew better than to question. “You heard the man. Hit the ceiling.”

So we did. As we climbed, my brain flashed through a number of scenarios, trying to determine a reasonable explanation for breaking off the attack. None of them were particularly reassuring.

“Sir,” Cash began slowly, “why would they abort, unless - ”

“It’s that ‘unless’ that has me worried, Cash. Either those ships are manned by innocent civilians, or there’s something aboard them that we can’t risk blowing up. You want to take odds on which option it is?”

“No, sir.”

We were back on deck approximately half an hour later, and once again I was heading for the Combat Information Center as rapidly as possible. The other aircrews caught up as they finished their own post-flight plane checks, and before long there were eight dissatisfied aviators crowding into the room, seeking answers.

The captain immediately called a halt to the murmurs running through the group, merely by turning to face us. “Report to your ready room and wait there for amended orders. Depending on how plans work out, you may be going back up with very little notice, so be ready. Commander, with me.”

I followed him to the briefing room, every step heightening my desire to yell in utter frustration. How much longer was I going to be jerked around before someone told me what was going on?

As soon as I stepped through the hatch, though, my fears were partially confirmed. Clayton Webb looked up at me from his seat at the table, his expression as impassive as ever. “Sorry to ruin your fun,” he remarked, without a trace of humor.

I dropped my helmet and survival vest on a chair and took a seat, dreading what was to come. As far as I knew, Webb had been mobile throughout the region for the past few days, spending more time at coalition headquarters than anywhere else. If he’d hopped a transport out here in time to beat me back, we had a much more serious problem on our hands than we’d thought.

"There's something on those ships that we can't risk blowing up," I stated flatly, and waited for him to elaborate.

Webb nodded grimly. "Reliable information from outside assets points to terrorist control of the ships. Apparently their plan was to hide in plain sight. They banked on the theory that the dock workers would be accustomed to seeing the occasional conventional weapons come through on the black market and wouldn't be particularly concerned. The man you talked to --"

"He wasn't lying," I broke in, my feelings on the matter resolute. "He saw what he saw, and nothing else."

"Yes, he did, and it's a good thing he's got Marines watching him right now, because there are people out there who won't be happy to learn that he tipped us off to anything. The terror informant network in the city is more extensive than any of us had expected." The agent rubbed his eyes wearily. "The containers marked with conventional weapons' designations are just that, and there are more of those than you were told about, too. But nine of the containers marked as ceramic dishware are also concealing chemical warheads for use with medium-range missiles."

My throat constricted involuntarily as the enormity of what I'd almost done crashed down on me. If we'd fired on those ships and ruptured even one of those warheads, all because I'd come back with incomplete intelligence on the threat ... I'd have been responsible, not once but twice, for the resulting destruction.

"We had to act on the information we had," Captain Johnson said, seemingly reading my thoughts. "We can rarely afford to wait for only a possibility of learning more. I stand by the decision that was made, and you should, too. Having said that, we need to take another look at the current situation."

No kidding. "Do they have the capability to sea-launch a chemical attack?" I asked, forcing myself to stay focused on the present.

Webb shook his head. "Not so far as we know, but that isn't their goal. The plan is for the crews to abandon the ships at an appointed time, before the weapons are detonated by a ballistic attack."

"Where the hell are these guys getting their hands on the missiles to do this?"

"A rather impressive array of black market contacts. Russian, mainly, but also some other former Soviet states." Webb gave a snort of contempt. "There's even an opportunistic American working the region who's going to get the full Guantanamo treatment when I get my hands on him, trust me."

An American selling military equipment. Suddenly a dim flicker of recognition flared in my mind, and I stared at him. "Webb, those reliable outside assets that you referred to a minute ago -- I don't happen to know them, do I?"

He lowered his gaze for a moment. "Yeah. It's them."

A cold hand reached into my chest and twisted hard. Of all the possible complications to this mess ...

Captain Johnson scowled at the both of us. "Someone care to give me a decoder ring?"

"Colonel Mackenzie and Gunnery Sergeant Galindez, sir. They've been undercover with an al Qaeda cell for a few weeks now, trying to expose -- well, this, I guess." I raked a hand through my hair, trying to clamp down on the swirling emotions clouding my brain. What was I allowed to feel at such a time? Anything? As little as possible, probably. *Come on, suck it up.* "We know the schedule for the attack, then?"

"We do, and we've got a little time to play with, but not much. Even if they didn't know we were tracking the ships before, they probably know now, so it's possible that they'll move up their timetable. Our immediate objective is to neutralize the ships -- a secondary one would be to take out the base that's carrying out the attack. Thanks to the colonel and Galindez, we've got a confirmed position on the missiles they'll be using."

"What are you going to do, target Mac's position with her own satphone?"

Webb looked like he wanted to smack me one for such a blunt protest, but he kept his cool. "They'll get time to evacuate. Hell, you can call her yourself once we get things coordinated with CENTCOM. But let's get back to the previously identified immediate objective, all right?"

The ships. Right. God, did I need to get my head in the game.

"We need a disabling strike that won't allow them an opportunity to use their weapons," the captain said, opening a folder that listed the battle group assets at his disposal. "Targeting their engine rooms will at least prevent them from getting any closer to shore, but there's still a risk that the crews will go kamikaze and detonate one of the warheads."

I spoke up instinctively, before the thought was fully formed. "I seriously doubt that will happen, sir."

Johnson glanced up. "Can you explain that assertion, Commander?"

"The terrorists' plan is to hit the ships at a specific time, after the crews have already bailed out. They don't have any intention of going down with the ship. They're willing to kill, but they're not willing to die."

Webb turned to the captain. "Knowing that, can the SEALs go undetected long enough to get aboard and disable both the engines and the crews?"

Johnson folded his arms, and I thought I saw a hint of a smirk. "They're SEALs, Mr. Webb. That's what they do all day and dream about all night. Yes, they can get it done. I'll give the order -- those ships could get closer to shore every second. You, on the other hand, have an air assault to plan, so I suggest that you get with the CAG and open up a line to Headquarters. Commander Rabb, Petty Officer Coates was forward-thinking enough to arrange quarters for you while you were gone. Get some rack time. CAG will let you know if he needs you."

Mechanically, I came to attention as he left the room, feeling slightly numb. So much was happening, and I felt like I understood precious little of it.

Vaguely aware that I was being watched, I turned toward Webb. "The skipper gave me a break, not you. This is your project, isn't it? Go do it."

The agent waited a moment before replying. "Why do you always have to qualify everything as 'my plan' or 'my mission'? I know what my responsibilities are, but I'm not the one who packed a chemical warhead in a crate of salad plates."

"No, but Mac and Gunny sure didn't decide to infiltrate al Qaeda on their own, did they?" I regretted the words almost as soon as I said them; not out of any deference to Webb, but because they were a little too revealing about my state of mind.

It was too much to hope that he wouldn't pick up on that. As much as I typically hate to admit it, Clayton Webb is extremely well trained in all forms of intelligence gathering, human sources included. He knew perfectly well where my thoughts lay. "Mac's a big girl. She can take care of herself, and she'd deck you for trying to do it for her." He paused briefly, and I felt his gaze on me again. "Actually, she wouldn't deck you for that, would she? Anyone else she would, but not you."

I wasn't at all comfortable with the idea of discussing that implication with him, so I chose to ignore it. "You know what I'm talking about. If we go forward with this attack, we'd better have a damn good reason to believe that our people are completely and totally out of the way."

"Nobody's arguing with that. All I'm saying is that we're in phase one of this, and you're jumping ahead to phase fourteen." Webb stood up. "Listen to the captain for once and get some sleep."

With no better ideas on how to improve the situation, I decided to take their advice. The billeting officer directed me to a stateroom, where a note was sitting on the table next to my bag.

<< Sir -- Don't worry about updating Admiral Chegwidden tonight. Since it's midday back home, I'm on my way to call him now before I hit the rack. If you need me, I'm going to be hanging out in the legal office in the morning -- they look like they could use the help. Hope things went well up there. Good night, sir -- Coates >>

Thanks, Jen, I thought, somewhat bleakly. But it looks like we're just getting started.

There was only one thing I could think of that might restore some order to my chaotic existence. I wouldn't be able to say much, but I was willing to take whatever I could get. I powered up my laptop and logged into my email, hoping against hope that I'd be able to reach her in some tiny way.

Chapter Seven

**Wednesday
2023 Local - 1553 ZULU
Suburbs of Zaranj
Afghanistan**

The small onyx pearls felt cool and smooth in my hand. As I was silently sitting in my armchair, pretending to be listening to the happy chatter that was filling the room, I was distractedly twirling the string of pearls between my fingers. My friend Itrat, the muezzin's wife, had given

it to me earlier, hugging me tightly and telling me how happy she was for me that I was finally pregnant with my first child. With a wink, she had then told me that, although Vajih was hoping for a son, she was sure that I was going to have a girl, that the prayer chain was for her and that I should call my little girl Anusheh.

Anusheh - fortunate.

I couldn't quite fight the smile. 'Anusheh Rabb' sounded entirely too weird...

Whenever my thoughts got to this point, I told myself to get a grip and let it go. Wishful thinking, Mackenzie. Block it out of your mind for another year. Patience. And yet, I couldn't help it. I could be sure that ere long, my thoughts would again wander off in a direction that was still off-limits.

Compared to not even 24 hours ago, my state of mind had done a 180-degrees about-face. Ever since I had gotten off the phone with Webb last night, I had spent the time pacing the small living-room like a lion in a cage, praying, swearing, hoping... When Gunny had returned from the group meeting, I had instantly filled him in and from the look on my face, he had immediately come to the right conclusions about what was going on inside me.

I envied him and Harm. I even envied Coates. They could at least do something whereas all I could do was sit and wait. And it was driving me crazy. It wasn't so much the fact that Harm's life might be in danger. As long as he didn't take fire he would be relatively safe 'up there'. I was more afraid that he might break from his immense feeling of guilt, should he happen to cause death and destruction in such unimaginable quantities. Something would die within him, and there would be nothing I could do to help him.

I had checked my mailbox every hour, and finally, finally... just after 0400 local I had found what I had been so desperately waiting for. The email was short and extremely vague but it made me blink away sudden tears of relief.

>> *Dear Mac,*

I just wanted to let you know that all is safe over here. I hope all's well with you, too. Things are starting to get crazy but I promise I'll try to stay in touch.

Take care, will ya?

Harm

A next-to-no-info mail for everyone else. For me, a rare moment of insight into my best friend's mind, for once ridded of the firm walls that he normally keeps up around himself.

'Dear Mac.'

Not 'Hey, Ninja Girl' or 'Howdy, Stranger'. Just 'Dear Mac'. So simple and yet so revealing. This line said more about how he was feeling than many words could have. He was opening a door for me to draw near because he somehow needed to connect with me. Consciously or unconsciously - I don't know. But the meaning was unmistakable.

Apparently, he didn't know exactly how much I knew about his mission and about what he had just gone through. The fact that he didn't allude to anything specific told me that even now, he was still trying to protect me, that he didn't want to upset me in case I hadn't heard yet about the near-disaster. This was his understanding of 'need to know'. Obviously, I didn't need to know any details about an operation that might have forever changed his life or even ended

it, but hadn't. And it was equally obvious that he had but a vague feeling yet about what he had been spared. The full emotional impact would come later.

I didn't feel like going too much into 'heart talk' either, at least not until the tension had lessened, so I decided to keep my answer just as short. Only one word would hint at my state of mind - if he wanted to pick up on it, fine by me. If not, there would be other occasions. Right now, all I wanted was to reassure him that he didn't need to worry about me, either. Resolutely squaring my shoulders with a slight snuffle and smiling a little, I typed my quick reply:

>> *Harm,*
Thank you for letting me know. Don't worry - I'm fine.
Stay out of trouble, okay?
See you soon.
Sarah

After school, I had been invited to my usual weekly wives tea-circle while Gunny met with the respective husbands. We had contemplated whether I should excuse myself and stay home, claiming to feel sick because of my pregnancy, in order to monitor the men's conversation. But we had eventually decided against it. The attempted air-strike hadn't gone unnoticed by the group. The Muslim Brotherhood was furious and had sworn death to whoever had betrayed them.

The terrorists were now trying to somehow speed up their timetable for the missile attack. But since they had to coordinate everything with our friends in Basra, this would most probably turn out to be a fruitless endeavor. And they knew it - a fact that made them angrier still. So what Gunny and I needed now was to keep our cover intact at all costs. We needed to show normalcy.

Desperately.

Subsequently, I had plastered my nicest mother-to-be smile to my face, had patiently endured an entire 15 minutes of hugging, kissing and well-wishing and then had settled down in Itrat's tea-parlor, glad to get rid of my *Chador* for a while and to have a few moments for emotional chill-out.

Gunny had already warned me that a few members of the group were harboring a yet unproven suspicion against me. Who out of their middle could possibly have let slip something about the convoy's position to the Americans? Only the woman, eternal Eve, the personification of evil.

The consequence was that I was now desperately trying to wipe out any remaining traits of the jarhead within me. Walking in the streets, I hunched even more, drawing my *Chador* closer. Whenever a man crossed my way, I let him pass more reverently than ever, trying to blend into my surroundings. I gritted my teeth and bit back witty replies when my male pupils thought teasing their teacher was real fun. I continued to pretend that I enjoyed exchanging housekeeping-gossip with my fellow housewives and I seemingly gave in to the physical effects of my pregnancy, walking slowly, needing to sit down, vanishing into the bathroom to heave. Seeing me this weak, the Marine within me had started hoping the ground would just open up and swallow me.

Galindez could be glad that somehow the Latin-American macho genes were still present in his personality. His wife had become as uninteresting as anything to him. If he ever looked at me, he'd frown. But he was all the more jovial towards the other men, finally feeling secure enough linguistically to become a little more talkative and make real friends.

When Gunny returned from his male get-together, I was already home, pondering whether or not to send another few lines westward. The Gunny's face made me push away my idle thoughts, though. Deep lines of concern were furrowing his forehead.

"Hey, Gunny, what's the matter?" I immediately put down my mug, removed my feet from the couch and got up to get him some coffee.

"You are, ma'am," he replied with a sigh. "At least for the group. More and more of them believe I made a mistake dragging you with me."

I handed him his cup, which he acknowledged with a small smile and a nod. "But I thought those people trusted you," I stated with a slight frown.

"Oh, they do, ma'am," he replied. "And they keep telling me that it wasn't my fault. That we had to use you because of your English but that you must have leaked something out about what they're planning."

I threw my hands up in exasperation about their prejudices. "But how should I have done that?" I asked no one in particular. "When I was radioing, I was talking to al Qaeda in Basra. There was no one on the line to whom I could have passed on information. Everyone heard me and I couldn't possibly be sure that no one would understand what I was telling them. Just what are they thinking I did?"

Sighing, Gunny took a thoughtful sip of his coffee and I saw his features relax for a moment as the warm, aromatic liquid was running down his gullet. Then he again turned to me. "None of them speaks English, ma'am. They think Kalesky might be working for the government after all. You might be so weak as to have a crush on him and you might have told him when we were scheduled to confer with Basra base. Then you could easily drop a few hints, just inherent in your choice of words. That's the general opinion. Someone even suggested I have a paternity test done once our child is born." Gunny's grin didn't even halfway reach his eyes.

"Me and Kalesky? Great God..." I mumbled, disgusted beyond belief. Then I emptied my mug with a resolute swig. "So the group's sure I'm the culprit?"

Pursing his mouth, Gunny paused a moment before answering. "Yes and no, ma'am. Most of them do, I think, but not the people that matter. The Magharis don't, for example. Kourosh himself considerably smoothed the seas in the discussion. The imam trusts you and so does the muezzin. With Faezi I'm not so sure. And the others... well, without much education it's easy to find some scapegoat to blame."

"Then what exactly is the situation?"

"For the present it would seem that we're safe, ma'am. The imam maintains that we shouldn't have agreed to cooperate with a Sunnite cell at all. He made a valid point stating that anyone who didn't believe in the rightful succession of the Prophets couldn't be trusted to be a true example of Allah's warriors. And he underlined his accusations with quite a few quotes from the Koran. For once, the muezzin didn't disagree and the Magharis seconded them. If the four most important members of a terror cell stand this united, I seriously doubt that any 'enlisted' member would dare to start a mutiny."

I pulled my feet up on the couch, embraced my legs and rested my chin on my knees, thinking. I hated the idea of having the Gunny do all the work without me to at least watch his six. But I realized that we had no choice. I had been exposed to public suspicion. There would be nothing to gain from my active participation anymore. On the contrary: the prejudice against me might reflect on Galindez, too, and we would lose our insight into al Qaeda altogether.

"I guess all I can do from now on is monitor your proceedings, Gunny," I said, the frustration evident in my voice.

"I'm afraid so, ma'am." The Gunny didn't look happy at all at this prospect. "If I may..." he stopped, unsure how to proceed.

I only gave him a weary smile and waved consent.

"Ma'am, you might want to act sick, due to your pregnancy. That would get you out of the line of fire." Gunny looked as if he were already scanning the room for any possible cover, clearly counting on my anger about his protectiveness.

He was quite right. "Galindez, you sound like Commander Rabb now," I stated pointedly, indignation showing in my voice. "I do think I can handle teaching a bunch of kids how to read."

Gunny stood his ground. "Excuse me, ma'am, but I think it might indeed be better if you stayed indoors for a little while. I won't be able to get to you fast enough if any of those lunatics decides to take matters into his own hands and do away with you."

This guy damned sure knew how to push my buttons. 'Harm's bad influence,' I thought grimly, feeling my temper rise. "Gunny - don't. I'm going to school tomorrow morning, acting just as if everything was fine. There's nothing to worry about, so don't make up things, okay?"

Trying hard not to flinch at the icy undertone my voice had taken up, the Gunny made one last attempt to convince me to comply. "Respectfully, ma'am, I think there's reason enough to worry about your safety and you won't have to face Commander Rabb and tell him you were hurt. I will."

"That's enough, Gunny," I stated curtly, trying to stay calm.

"But with all due respect, ma'am..."

"I said 'enough', Gunnery Sergeant!" As I jumped to my feet, Galindez immediately followed suit, coming to attention under my killing stare. I took my time to slowly step close until my nose was within inches of his. With the same deadly calm that had proven so effective back on the Watertown, I now let Gunny know that he had decidedly overstepped certain boundaries. "Gunnery Sergeant Galindez, this is still my mission. You're under my command. It is my prerogative, and only my prerogative, to decide how we'll proceed in this matter, and it is my

conviction that the only way to act normal and save our cover is to go on with this mission just as it was planned! Do - I - make - myself - clear?"

My voice had risen considerably by the time I had finished. If possible, Galindez straightened even more, his eyes staring right through me into the great nothing.

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am!"

"Dismissed," I slowly hissed.

Men could be such a nuisance.

Thursday
0712 Local - 0242 ZULU
Suburbs of Zaranj
Afghanistan

The morning air was chilly and I wrapped myself tightly into the thick wool of my *Chador* as I walked along the narrow street that led from our house up to the main road where the district school was located. My anger still hadn't completely dissipated and the brisk walk in the cold desert wind was just what I needed to wear me out enough to be believable in my role as a docile woman suffering from excessive morning sickness. Once on the main road, I would slow down and put up my pained face, but until then I really enjoyed the exercise.

The sun had barely risen, leaving my path in the dark still because of the long shadows the close house-walls were creating. There was not a soul to be seen yet, but that, too, would change once I'd reach the main road.

I was so caught up in concentrating on the rhythm of my power walk that I didn't see it coming. Before could react, I felt myself pinned to a wall between two of the houses on the left side of the street. A hand covered my mouth to keep me from screaming.

Trying to make out who my attacker was, I found that he had chosen the spot well. No sunray had yet made its way down here between the massive walls and it was too dark to make out any distinct details. I gasped when I felt something cold and sharp being pointed at my throat.

"Scream and you're a dead woman, Maryam Goshtasbi," a hoarse voice whispered into my ear.

I swallowed and nodded, signaling I had understood. My attacker removed his hand from my mouth.

"What do you want from me?" I managed to get out in a voice that I hoped didn't convey anything of my Marine mode that had, of course, instantly kicked in.

"From you? Nothing," the voice continued, seeming slightly amused. I felt a sharp pain where the knife was touching my skin. The voice continued: *"What we'd really want would be to have you out of the way once and for all. Women are of no use in a Holy War like ours. They only mess things up. Or worse, they sabotage them."*

"Then why are you doing this?" I whispered, tingeing my voice with a rather realistic quiver while trying to analyze the situation and come up with a plan.

"Because," the owner of the voice seemed to revel in what he thought was me panicking, "Vajih told us you were worthy of our trust. While I wouldn't bet a single Afghani on that, I still take your husband to be a man of honor. So, actually, we're doing you a favor, Maryam. I think my blade has told you that normally, you'd already be dead. But I'll be merciful, for Vajih's sake, and spare you. This time.

"But consider yourself warned. We'll watch your every move, Maryam. We'll be there, whether you're awake or asleep, whether you're at home or elsewhere. We'll observe you in whatever you'll be doing. And should we ever get a hint that you're bonding with the enemy, the cut will go much deeper than this!"

With his last word, the assaulter tore his knife away in a swift movement that had me suck in my breath, trying not to cry out in pain as I felt the blade slice my skin. While I was still trying to regroup and force my pulse back to normal, I became aware that my assaulter had vanished.

I could tell that the cut was only superficial but it hurt and had started to bleed like hell. Pressing my fingers on the wound and feeling like strangling myself, I started to stumble back home as quickly as I could, my vision suddenly blurry.

Luckily, I hadn't yet covered much of a distance from our house, so within mere minutes, I was desperately fumbling with my key in a vain attempt to open the door with my left, terribly trembling hand.

Seconds later, Gunny opened and his eyes went wide with horror at seeing me. He quickly pulled me in and closed the door, locking it firmly. Then he swept me up in his arms and carried me into my bedroom, lowering me on my mattress.

"Good God, ma'am!" he gulped out tonelessly, reaching for the first-aid kit that I kept right under my bed.

"No big deal, Gunny," I croaked out while he applied a sterile pressure bandage to my throat.

"Whatever you say, ma'am," he muttered dryly, avoiding my glance.

I felt my cheeks starting to burn with fresh anger - at his insolent remark, but a lot more about my own foolishness not to have trusted his judgment. I owed him an apology. Thanking God that it wasn't Harm whom I was talking to, I swallowed my pride. "Look, Gunny, about last night..."

Galindez gently cut me off, still not looking at me. "No offense taken, ma'am." He produced a few strips of leucoplast from the med kit and firmly fixed my bandage.

"No, let me finish," I objected. "You had more insight into the situation. I should have relied on your judgment instead of insisting on my plan."

Only now did Galindez meet my eyes, the barest hint of a smirk showing on his face. "Permission to speak freely, ma'am?"

"Granted," I complied, dreading what was coming.

"You tell Commander Rabb what you told me, ma'am. I don't have a death wish."

I had to grin despite the pain. "I will, Gunny. Thanks."

"You're welcome, ma'am. What about school?"

I sighed in defeat. "All right. Tell them your pregnant wife is unwell."

Man, would Harm be in his element right about now.

Chapter Eight

1342 Local - 0942 Zulu

USS Seahawk - Approximately 65 nautical miles SE of the Strait of Hormus

She signed it 'Sarah.'

Damn. Clearly, she'd understood everything I'd attempted so clumsily to convey in my brief message, but now I wasn't sure how to interpret the reply. Either something was happening on her end that had her feeling frustrated or vulnerable or both, and she was reaching out for whatever contact she could get ... or for some reason, she simply wanted to be Sarah to me right now. Actually, both could have been true, for all I knew. Or maybe neither. God, this method of communication was getting on my nerves.

I heard a rapping on the steel hatch, and then a voice in the corridor outside. "Commander, you're wanted in CIC."

"On my way," I called, shutting the laptop down. The last thing I needed was for someone to see just how many emails had been bouncing back and forth between this ship and an undercover asset in theater. Secure email is pretty damn secure, but if someone were to somehow gain access to her computer itself, a message marked 'navy.mil' waiting in her inbox would be tough to hide. It surprised me to think that I hadn't considered that risk before this. Obviously Mac had been willing to take it, and I knew she'd take every precaution to erase the messages, but I still should have known better. I should have prioritized her security over my need to connect with her. Damn.

The CAG was waiting in the Combat Information Center, studying a printout of target coordinates. I didn't have to ask what the target was. We didn't dare launch against the terrorist camp before the convoy was secure, for fear that they might arm some or all of their weapons upon hearing that their comrades had been attacked. Now that the SEALs had had a chance to thoroughly plan their insertion and identify the most effective opportunity - just before midday prayers - they were set to act, and consequently, so were we. "We're go, CAG?"

"We are," he confirmed. "2040 tonight. I assume that you're comfortable with the same strike package as the convoy strike? Buck, Red, and Bounce, with an eye in the sky to cover your sixes?"

"Fine by me, sir." That spike of adrenaline that usually accompanied the assignment of a new mission was noticeably absent this time. Instead, there was this knot in the pit of my stomach,

serving as a constant reminder of the possible consequences of this particular strike. "Any word yet on the SEALs?"

"They launched from the Reuben James about an hour ago. We should be getting something soon." The CAG's lip curled ruefully. "Of course, if we get word to go to battle stations, that'll answer the question for us."

Great. That's a thought I really want to hold on to. "Aye, sir."

"Pre-flight briefing will be at 1900. I suggest using some of your remaining time to familiarize yourself with the terrain. This is an area that coalition forces haven't had much experience in." Handing me a file, he turned back to the display in front of him. "Dismissed."

On my way out of CIC, I passed Webb in the corridor. "You heard?" he asked without elaboration.

"I heard." I held out a hand to him, palm up.

Comprehending, Webb handed me a slip of paper with a series of numbers on it. "The first set is hers. If you get through - "

"Don't say 'if,' Webb." He didn't argue. "*When* you get through to her, give her the second set. As soon as she and Galindez are clear, they can check in with us using that number."

"Thank you." I turned in the direction of the communications room.

"Hey, Rabb."

I turned back impatiently, not wanting to delay this warning. "Yeah?"

"She's gonna be fine, you know."

Coming from Webb, that was almost a Hallmark moment. Forcing a smile, I replied, "Sure."

The comm room was operating with its typical calm efficiency when I arrived. The officer in charge had apparently been told to expect me, because he immediately led me to a station in the corner. I had to wonder whether Webb had requested that small concession to privacy.

I'd told him not to say 'if,' but the truth was, I was very worried that I might not be able to reach Mac or Gunny. It was the middle of the day, and they could easily both be out - in fact, it was likely. I might have to keep trying for some time, since satellite phones didn't exactly utilize voicemail. But there was no real choice. She'd simply have to answer. The alternative was more than I could bear to consider.

Blessedly, not long after I donned the headset and entered the numbers, I heard a series of clicks, the faint echo of a satellite connection, and the weary yet unmistakable voice of my partner.

"Maryam."

In spite of the situation, I had to smile. "Is that what you're calling yourself these days, Marine?"

"Harm!" Her voice brightened considerably, and I thought I heard a note of relief in it. "God, it's good to hear your voice, sailor."

"Trust me, the feeling is very much mutual. You have no idea how glad I am that I caught you, but why aren't you at school?"

There was a split-second of hesitation, beyond the normal time lag, before she replied. "I didn't go today. Force protection issue."

That didn't sound promising. "You okay?" I immediately asked.

"Sure. We're just being careful. What about you? The strike was called off in time?"

"Thanks to you, yeah. Two SEAL teams are securing the convoy as we speak. No word on casualties yet, but nothing's been detonated, so we're pretty optimistic."

There was another pause before Mac's voice returned, and I could almost feel her tension through the connection. "Harm, they're moving up their plans as fast as possible. The attack could be carried out in less than a day. There's no way the boarding parties will be able to secure the cargo and remove the chemical agents in that amount of time."

"I know. That's why I called. I need you and Gunny to get the hell out of Dodge. Don't worry about how your cover will hold up. Just do whatever you have to in order to get yourselves at least twenty clicks out of town by 2030 local time tonight."

Her response was tinged with quiet understanding. "You're coming in, aren't you?"

"Mac, we have to prevent that attack. Your intel's been great - the civilian risk will be extremely low."

"I wasn't asking about the strike in general. I understand how necessary that is. I was asking about you."

I shut my eyes for a moment, knowing how my original line of work tended to affect her. An apology hovered on the tip of my tongue, but this wasn't the time. Instead, I tried to keep my response upbeat. "They're short some pilots out here, and I do have a somewhat unique perspective on the ROEs."

"I'll bet." I heard her soft sigh, and then the jarhead shield went up. "I can't say I'll be crushed to leave this little paradise behind, but this probably means I won't get the pleasure of nailing Kalesky's ass personally."

I knew she was only trying to keep the conversation light, as I had, but suddenly I couldn't muster up the courage to play along anymore. Too much about this plan still scared the hell out of me. "If possible, head for the coalition camp near Kadesh. Here's the contact number. If you can't raise the Seahawk on the satphone, the Canadian regiment will be able to put you on the 21MC."

She took the numbers down, still sounding uncertain. "Keep your altitude up, okay? These guys have got enough Stingers to really wreck up everyone's day."

"I'm not worried about Stingers. I'm worried about you two getting out of there." I recognized the edge in my own voice, but felt fairly powerless to restrain it. "I've got pre-flight in about five hours, wheels up in less than seven. I really don't want to be wondering where you are at that point."

"I understand."

No, you don't, I wanted to shout, tightening my hand around the console's edge until my knuckles whitened. How could anyone understand this? Searching for a way to get my message across without putting too much on her shoulders, I finally said, "I'm not kidding, Sarah. Be careful. We've got a lot left to do in this world."

She was silent for a moment, and I knew the use of her name had registered with her. "That we do," she replied at last. "I'll go alert Gunny. We'll be on line with an all-clear for you ASAP."

"All right. I'll see you soon, okay? Somehow."

"I'll be looking forward to it. Take care."

The line disconnected. I sat back in the chair and just stared at the console for a while. A small digital readout displayed the current time in glaring, unblinking lights. I fought the urge to slam my hand against it. Violence against chronometers wasn't likely to affect the passage of time one way or the other.

Come on, Mac. Get out of there and call before I lose my mind.

1534 Local - 1134 Zulu

Never before had I had such difficulty finding ways to waste time aboard a carrier. I'd been over the strike preparations more times than I could count. An hour in the gym was my limit: if I truly put all my fears and frustrations into a workout, I'd be too tired to fly. The movie on the ship's TV channel was some inane buddy comedy that only reminded me of how young the majority of this crew was. Christ, how did I end up here? I didn't come out here to take a combat mission. Shouldn't it be someone younger, someone better trained - someone who wouldn't have the obstacle of knowing the personnel on the ground so well ...

Over the roar of the waves, I could barely make out a metallic thumping from behind me. When I turned from the rail, Coates was standing there, her hand resting against the bulkhead.

"You don't need to knock out here, Petty Officer," I called to her, attempting a wan smile. "It's not a private area."

"No, sir, but those looked like some pretty private thoughts." She stepped out to join me on the fantail, zipping up her jacket. "I've been looking all over for you, sir. Thought you'd be hanging out somewhere closer to the jets."

Almost without thinking about it, I uttered a sentiment that hadn't been true for over ten years. "I don't particularly want to look at the jets right now."

The young woman blinked. "This mission's going to be that bad?"

"That's going to depend on a lot of things." I leaned my forearms on the rail. "This camp we're hitting - it's where Colonel Mackenzie and the Gunny have been operating."

Coates's eyes widened, and she searched awkwardly for a response. "She's bugging out, isn't she, sir?"

"She said she would. But so far nobody's heard from them, and it just keeps getting closer and closer to go time."

"Shit," she breathed, moments, before a look of panic flashed across her face. "I mean - I'm sorry - "

"No, that's pretty much how I'd summarize the situation, too." I shot a rueful grin in her direction.

Coates shook her head. "If you get to the target and they haven't gotten clear ... will you - "

"Blow my brains out?" This time I couldn't even fake a smile.

Somehow, that didn't shake her as badly as I would have expected. "I was going to say, will you be able to drop your weapons. Without knowing for sure if they're safe."

It was a question I shouldn't have tried to answer aloud, especially to a junior enlisted, but I needed to. I needed someone to bear this crushing burden with me, if only for an instant. "I swear to God, Coates, I don't know," I whispered.

To her credit, she didn't unravel when confronted by the complete paralysis of a senior officer. Instead, she spoke in a measured tone. "Commander, with all due respect and then some, maybe you shouldn't fly this one."

"Nobody should have to fly this one. Nobody should have to take an action that he knows could kill friendlies or civilians. But it happens, because it has to, and the least I can do is keep up my part of it all."

"Sir, this isn't like providing close air support for the infantry. Knowing Americans could be in the strike zone is one thing. Knowing that someone you have a - " She fumbled for the right word. " - connection with ..."

"That connection is the reason I have to go." I knew that this was going to sound bizarre, but I wasn't in the mood to care. "I told Mac once that I always know where she is, and to a certain extent, I believe it. When I went down in the Atlantic, she was the one who directed the SAR bird to my location. I guess I'm hoping that whatever that little trick is, it might help me get a feel for where she is when we launch. Maybe just a general sense of direction would make the difference."

Coates gave a soft sigh, and I shook my head. "I know. Go ahead and report me for that psych eval."

"No, I was just thing about how romantic that would sound if it wasn't really happening."

I probably should have tried to contest that assessment, just on general principle, but she was right. The person who meant the most to me in the world might be sitting in the middle of a target that I'd been ordered to destroy. There's a concept Shakespeare never dreamed up.

"She's a Marine," I said firmly, hoping to convince us both. "So is the Gunny. They'll find a way to get clear."

The petty officer nodded bravely. "They're probably already clear, sir. Just having communications issues."

"Good answer. Keep repeating that to me for the next few hours, whenever I look like I'm getting close to freaking out." After a few moments of silence, I turned to face her fully. "Listen, I keep forgetting to say this, but you've been doing a really great job out here."

Coates was caught off-guard by that, and it took her a moment to decide how to respond. "Thank you, sir. But I've just been doing what was directed."

"You weren't directed to spend your off-hours helping the fleet JAGs, but you did."

She looked embarrassed. I got the sense that she wasn't accustomed to receiving praise. "It's not like I had anything better to do."

"That's not the point, though, is it?" I returned my gaze to the horizon. "I just wanted you to know that I wrote you up for a commendation medal. The nomination package is on my computer, so if something should happen on this mission, you are hereby ordered to make sure it gets submitted, all right?"

Coates paled. "Don't say things like that, sir," she begged, giving a shaky laugh. "You pilots are supposed to act like you're bulletproof. It makes the rest of us feel better."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry." I tossed her a crooked smile. "Seriously, Jen. Thanks for everything. Including this."

"Least I could do, sir." She followed my gaze out across the breaking waves. "Do you mind if I stick around for a while?"

The instant she said it, I suddenly realized that I'd much rather have company than be alone with thoughts such as these. I wondered if she'd realized it, too. "Be my guest."

Sometimes I wish I had a little sister. I think I know just what I'd want her to be like.

Chapter Nine

**1507 Local - 1037 ZULU
Mac and Gunny's house
Suburbs of Zaranj
Afghanistan**

Although I had ended the connection myself, I kept staring at the telephone in my hands, twirling it around, trying to mentally regroup. Five hours and 23 minutes to wrap things up and get the hell out of here. It sounded like an easy thing to do but I was sure Murphy would want a hand in this, too. I'd be foolish to hope that for once, a Webb operation would go smoothly. Harm was involved. No need to say anything else.

Had my concern for him not threatened to choke me, I would have laughed at the irony of the situation. He was ordered to carry out a mission that he knew well might easily kill me - if he wasn't be killed first by the missiles that I of all people had acquired for the people he was ordered to eliminate. Not even Webb could have made up a scenario like this. But, of course, the two of us were destined to end up in the middle of it. I had long since given up wondering if God would ever decide that we needed a break.

After a full three minutes and 18 seconds, I finally managed to get a grip and focus on what lay ahead. I needed to contact Gunny. ASAP.

Luckily, just like the military, the Red Half-Moon supplied its employees with sat phones. I knew I wasn't supposed to have a phone at home but Gunny and I had agreed that, should I ever need to call him, he would act as if I were a supply contact back in Isfahan. I dialed his number.

["Goshtasbi."]

"Gunny, it's me."

["Hello Abtin! How are things? When's the convoy due?"]

No one would have noticed the instant wariness that rang in my colleague's voice, probably not even our coworkers. But living under the same roof had taught me a few things about Victor Galindez: the adrenaline level in his blood had just about tripled.

"I got a call from Commander Rabb, Gunny. A squadron is coming in for the camp at 2030 tonight. We need to get clear and confirm once we reach the Canadians at Kadesh."

["Understood. I think I left it at home. I'll go get it and you can call me again in half an hour. Have a good trip!"]

The line went dead. Bless the Gunny for his quick thinking. He'd be here in ten and I was determined to have our evac packs ready by that time. I quickly changed into BDU pants, boots and a brown t-shirt, throwing into my backpack whatever I thought might be worth taking with me. When I came across the little prayer chain, I stopped, smiling despite the situation.

Anusheh Rabb.

Well, maybe not, but the pearls in my hand felt like little lucky charms. Perhaps, if I just believed it firmly enough, they would keep us safe tonight, Gunny and me, and Harm, somewhere up there. Quickly I wound the little chain twice around my left wrist and put on a long-sleeved sweater.

22 minutes later I was sitting on my bed, my *Chador* ready to be thrown over, two packed backpacks beside me, the house in neat order.

No sign of the Gunny.

It was then that I began to worry. Contemplating if I should try to call him again, I finally sighed and decided against it. It would be too obvious if he got two sat-phone calls within one hour without having been home in between like he had said he would.

But what the heck was taking him so long? Impatiently, I drummed a little salsa on my thighs with my hands.

There! The key in the lock. Finally...

I jumped to my feet, hoisted up all the baggage onto both my shoulders and staggered to meet Galindez in the doorw...

Jesus Christ! 'Please, God, don't let this happen! Not now!'

Galindez was standing in the corridor. He was bleeding from a gash above his right brow, as well as from his nose that was starting to swell. Two men were hovering behind him, pointing handguns at both his temples while three others were coming towards me, rage distorting their features.

What followed seemed to play out in slow motion. They got to me. I dropped the luggage and tried to fight them. They overpowered me. I got a breathtaking blow to my stomach. They bound my wrists. They gagged me. Then they dragged me up on my feet and in the direction of the door.

As I stumbled past Gunny, our eyes met, his expression mirroring mine. 'Too late.'

All the way to wherever we were going, I was desperately contemplating just how much the terrorists had learned about our mission and - what was even more important - how much they knew about the imminent attack on their camp. I was sure that no one in the group spoke English. They wouldn't have let me - the woman - do their vital correspondence if any of them could have done it, or would they?

We'll watch your every move, Maryam...

They sure had made good on their promise. The sat-phone conversation must have been monitored, that much was self-evident. But which one? Harm's call or mine? Or both? How did they even know I had a sat-phone? Or had they monitored Gunny's? Or did they listen to just about everything that was broadcast to and fro throughout the region?

We were on the middle bench of an old van whose rear windows had been painted so that no one would be able to see what was inside. Gunny was sitting rigidly beside me while the man on the front passenger seat kept his gun trained on us, daring us to utter a syllable. I was starting to sweat profusely, but not solely because of the *Chador* they had wrapped me in. It was because, once again, I heard a clock ticking. But this wasn't the calm mental tick-tock I remembered from the day of little AJ's birth. This was the timer to a bomb, cruelly ticking away. An avalanche of sand streaming through a giant hourglass with a deafening roar. A cardiac monitor, mercilessly slowing down until the steady beep told me that a loved person's heart had gone into arrest...

Swallowing, I fiercely ordered myself not to panic. 1608. There was still time to escape and get a warning to the Seahawk. 'Think, Mackenzie. Think hard. Use that bloody brain of yours, dammit!'

When the van pulled to a rough stop, the sliding doors were yanked open and I became aware that we had been brought to the camp. The two men from the bench behind us dragged us out of the car and pushed us forward until we arrived at a small warehouse right at the center of the camp. There was nothing inside except a couple of metal chairs and various electronic communication items.

Instead of making us sit down, the guards made us stand against the backrests of two of the chairs and firmly tied our hands to it. Our legs were spread and the ankles tied to the chair legs. The gag in my mouth was causing me extreme nausea but I deliberately slowed my breathing and lifted my chin as the door opened once again and the Magharis slowly entered the room, together with Amal Faezi. All three stepped close to us and just stared at us, never saying anything. I admit that their stares were intimidating but I held my eyes up. If they wanted me down, they sure as hell would see me fight first.

The threesome didn't seem to be too interested in the Gunny. On the phone, I had told him what to do, that much was clear even from the tone of my voice. You didn't have to understand English to get the difference in rank. Apparently, a woman who, in her own country, had the power to order men like Vajih Goshtasbi around, was a lot more interesting than the man who accepted her as his superior. Besides, that very woman had obviously succeeded in fooling them. I mentally braced myself for what I was sure would be an experience to remember - if I would be given the chance to.

They started out with a heavy blow in my face.

Trying not to moan and ordering the stars in front of my eyes to stay in line, I glared back at Kourosh.

"I can't believe we let this happen," he mused in a thoughtful voice, more to himself, although I knew exactly that his words were meant for my ears. *"We let our enemies operate right under our nose. I have to say, you are quite skilled. Impressive. It's a shame - you would have made a good warrior, even though you are a woman."*

I waited, trying to guess where Kourosh would take this. In the meantime, I received another blow to my face, this time to the other side. I bit down my hiss.

"So, you told your friends about the ships, did you?" Kourosh's voice was as honeyed as it could ever be. *"You were really lucky, you know that? From what we heard from our friends on the vessels, the fighters were almost in firing range when they broke off."*

Damn those emotions. I could refrain from reacting when they struck me. But I couldn't stop my eyes from widening in shock when I learned just how close Harm had come to firing on the convoy. 'God Almighty...'

Kourosh's face distorted to an ugly grin, showing a row of yellow horse-like teeth. *"Oh... sorry, didn't you know? Just a few minutes later and your sweetheart would have been desperately gasping for non-contaminated air... what a cruel death, Maryam... or should I say Sarah?"*

Okay, that answered at least one of my questions. Harm's call had done the trick. Obviously, al Qaeda had facilities to intercept satellite communication, and they had been monitoring my

surroundings, probably ever since the failed attack on the ships had been noticed. No wonder - I had been the one to have all the information, if not on the target, then on the coordinates and the planned time for the terrorist bombing. If our local 'friends' initially hadn't suspected me, Basra Base obviously had.

Kourosh reached out and, with a disgusted expression on his face, pulled the gag out of my mouth. I had a hard time refraining from spitting into his face. While Faezi removed the cloth from Gunny's mouth and angrily let his fist come down on Galindez' nose again, making him wince in pain, Kourosh stepped still closer to me until our noses were mere inches from one another. Still, I held the eye-contact.

Rokneddin approached me from the other side. Dangerously calm, he took over. *"You decide, Sarah. Either you tell us what you know and we'll kill you quickly. Or you don't and you will meet Allah's wrath through our hands. Let's start with something simple. Who are you?"*

Drawing a deep breath, knowing full well that it might be the last one I was ever to take without hurting, I squared my shoulders. I was going to answer his question, yes. But he would soon find out that he would get nothing further.

"Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie, United States Marine Corps, service number 401-23-10, current duty station Wash..."

A powerful slap from Kourosh made me stop. This time, I couldn't refrain from sucking in my breath. Kourosh was wearing three rings on his hand that had made sharp contact with my cheekbone. *"Enough! A Marine colonel. Fine. And who's your 'husband'?"*

Preparing for the full impact of his anger, I glared at him.

"Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie, United States Marine Corps, service..."

I had focused all my attention on Kourosh, so Rokneddin's kick to my stomach caught me totally off guard. I cried out and gasped, wanting desperately to press my hands where his foot had hit me.

"Again: who's he?"

Gunny spoke up, loud and clear. "Gunnery Sergeant Victor Galindez, United States Marine Corps, service number 108-24..."

He didn't get any further.

"No one asked you, weakling!" Faezi's precisely-aimed right hook effectively silenced Galindez as it hit the classic knock-out point. From the corner of my eye, I could see my colleague go down, making the chair he was tied to topple right over him. No one bothered to look.

Rokneddin pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and took his time to light one. I couldn't prevent myself from starting to tremble, but I never lowered my gaze.

"Who's that Commander Rabb you mentioned on the phone?"

"Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie, United States..."

Swiftly, Rokneddin shoved the sleeve of my sweater up to my shoulder and extinguished his cigarette in the pit of my elbow. I gave a cry of excruciating pain, feeling tears sting in my eyes.

"Who is Commander Rabb?" Kourosh's question was accompanied by another kick to my stomach.

I was starting to lose my orientation, arching my body in all directions in vain attempts to ease the pain. I was sobbing now but I let the tears flow. I needed my strength to pull through. 1648. 'Still time to warn the Seahawk.'

"Lieutenant... Colonel... Sarah Mackenzie... United..."

Kourosh's left hook made me lose my footing. Just like Gunny, I hit the ground, taking the chair with me. Faezi stepped on my hip, applying his full weight, flattening me completely.

Rokneddin knelt down in front of me, looking down into my eyes that I held raised to him. I would not back down.

"Your choice, Sarah." His voice was almost soothing. *"We'll know how to make you talk, and - courtesy for our special friends - we'll even bring an interpreter so you won't have to bother speaking Farsi while being tortured."* He drew a dramatic, pitying breath, reaching out and caressing my cheek. *"It's a real pity, you know? For an American, you're almost handsome..."* He sighed again, nearing his face to mine.

This time, I did spit him into the eye, making him swear in disgust. He gave the back of my head a rough strike. My already sore cheekbone hit the concrete, making me moan. Something warm and just a little sticky began to trickle down to my jaw. I tasted it as some of it ended up between my lips. My blood.

Rokneddin's stare had hardened. *"So be it."* Hearing his voice, I couldn't fight the impression that the room temperature had diminished by at least ten degrees. *"Be sure of one thing, Sarah. Regardless of what you'll tell us or not - we know when to expect your friends. This... what was his name? Harm?"*

The look in my eyes must have confirmed that he was remembering correctly. A thin grin spread on Rokneddin's lips.

"I see... Harm. He's your favorite client, right?"

"You goddamned mothe..."

My murmur was cut off by another kick to my side. I groaned, squeezing my eyes shut.

"Is there anything you'd like to tell me, Sarah?"

"Lieutenant... Colonel... Sarah..."

This time, Rokneddin kicked me himself. And he did it with fierce delight. His first hit made me roll to my side, gasping. As if he had waited for the opportunity, he then forcefully planted his foot where I was hoping I would one day carry Harm's child. This kick was my undoing. I broke down, sobbing silently.

Rokneddin got up. The sound of his voice alone revealed his opinion about women in combat. *"Cry on... we'll leave you alone for a little while. You won't have much breath left to wail once we return and let you feel what it means to oppose yourself to Allah. Maybe you'll find some consolation in the prospect of meeting this... Harm... tonight - in Allah's eternal hell, after we pluck them down, one by one, as soon as they reach the Helmand River. See you later, Sarah."*

I didn't have the power, nor the will, to lift my head. Their steps told me that they had turned and were leaving the room. The slamming of the door confirmed my perception.

1711.

The pain in my gut was driving me insane. But what was even worse was the awareness that Harm and his squadron were about to run into a trap. I had little more than three hours to save him.

Theoretically.

Looking at it realistically, I had no chance.

The tears started to flow afresh, kindled by this feeling of being lost and utterly helpless. The certainty of my own death didn't really register in my consciousness. It just didn't matter anymore.

Just before I gave in to my exhaustion, I somehow thought about the onyx pearls around my wrist. The feel of their polished surface against my skin seemed like a promise of what the future might hold in store for me. For us.

We've got a lot left to do in this world...

'Keep us safe, God, please, keep us safe.'

Then, the world slipped into darkness.

Continue to Chapters 10-14