

I

THE RUBBER EYEPiece STUCK TO my skin in the heat coming off the asphalted roof. Sweat greased my face and dripped under my chin making me itch. It might be pre-dawn but damn I couldn't stand much more of this torture. The five storey apartment block squatted in the New York district of Queens and from this high corner of a tenement building, with the aid of my mounted scope, I could see the much finer apartments of Center Boulevard in Hunters Point. I shifted just enough to ease the cramp in my back for a moment before settling. Just one of the many disadvantages of age and a life lived on the edge of violence, the constant aches. To be honest I'd never planned to live this long but that's what happened when you were well trained, damned good at your job and some dark version of lucky that preserved your life.

I relaxed again, breathing through my nose and continued to watch the apartment 678 metres away. It wouldn't be much of a challenge to kill the bastard I hunted, not at this distance and in this sultry weather. My bladder made life more tricky. I eyed the bottles I'd been pissing in for the last thirteen hours waiting for my target to return to his luxury penthouse. The importance of remaining hydrated on a job had been drilled into me, it helped maintain concentration if your body didn't have to suffer from lack of water. The downside? The stuff you didn't sweat out had to leave your body regardless and getting up to take a piss just didn't happen when you are a sniper.

The man I hunted had touched down on American soil at 16:35, but the target could take anywhere between two hours or several days to reach his penthouse from JFK. It all depended on what he wanted to do in the vast city of New York. So, I waited with patience even a cat would envy, for the fucker to turn up. Unfortunately, I waited in a New York sweatbox, covered in fumes and dust. Even at 05:36 the sounds of the city rumbled around my high perch, bouncing off the nearby buildings.

Making a hit from this distance wasn't about the target so much as making certain I wasn't spotted by the overlooking buildings and the helms running around the sky. I wore clothes that were thin enough to cope with the heat and dark enough to blend with the tarmac I lay on, which stank by the way, and had a few broken cardboard boxes draped over me and the muzzle of my Barrett MRAD and its suppressor. The .308 Sinclair rounds were my preferred option for this American rifle over this distance. They'd go through the glass without deviation and hit the target like a hot needle being pushed into warm butter.

A light flicked on in the glass and steel stairwell. Elation rushed through me but the world in my scope didn't shift and neither did the long muzzle. The arrogant prick lived inside a glass bubble and I had a way to shatter it. The target didn't trust elevators, so he and his bodyguards walked up the stairs. I could see him on the phone, no one concentrating on the target's surroundings; they certainly would not be able to see me.

I eased my finger to the trigger, my breathing didn't change, neither did my heartbeat. The target came to the top of the stairs and paused.

I squeezed the trigger. A dull *spat* whispered out of my rifle. Between one calm breath and the

next the glass shattered and I watched red blossom over the marble interior of the stairwell. A single shot and I'd done my job. The man dropped to the ground. The bodyguards, three of them, drew their weapons but I just remained still and continued to watch through the scope. There was shouting, wild gesticulation, calls made on phones and I could hear sirens screaming. I wanted to move away before the authorities turned up, not because I feared being found, it would just complicate matters. The three men all turned their backs to me, giving me the opportunity to slide away from my vantage point and begin cleaning up my nest.

The clean-up took long enough to see the police and ambulance arrive but I'd already packed my gear, changed into clean clothes I'd brought with me and descended to the street through the stairwell. Once outside I looked like a large man carrying a gym bag and a small day sack. The black baseball cap I wore shielded my eyes from the sunlight glinting off the shop windows and the elation of the job being completed well, without additional casualties, began to wear off. The muscle cramps in my back and legs from remaining still for over thirteen hours started to force me to slow down. Once upon a time I'd have been able to do a three day stint and then run a bloody marathon across a desert carrying a fifty kilo pack. These days I looked the same on the outside – at least that's what my vanity told the mirror – but bits of me inside just didn't work as well any more. Water and protein bars might feed a twenty-five-year-old body but not a forty-eight-year-old one.

Thinking about scran made my stomach grumble but I needed to shower before I considered forcing someone to serve me food in one of the thousand eateries in the area.

After walking eight blocks I found the hotel I'd registered in and returned to my room without needing to use the front desk. All they would remember was a man walking out one day and returning another, these places were anonymous. In my room I dropped my bag and pack, stripped out of my clothing and headed for the shower. The cool water caressed my taut flesh and the multitudinous scars of past campaigns that littered my body. It felt ridiculous to enjoy a simple shower this much but as I rubbed my shorn hair clean my eyes slid closed and I allowed myself a smile. Someone once told me that if I made the effort a bit more often my smile could melt the hearts of terrorists and politicians alike. As a soldier I had little time for either and tended to clump both groups into my 'kill list' frame of reference.

I switched on the TV and the news reported the shooting. They were already assuming the Russian was killed by either his own government or a rival, which amounted to the same thing. I sat on the bed, opened the gym bag and removed the rifle. I stripped her down while watching a film about zombies and cleaned each part with a meditative air of peace settling into my mind. Cleaning a rifle, even after a single shot, had always been a place of peace for a working mind. Even in the early days I'd taken pride in my weapons and this small act kept me focused but not able to think outside the moment and I never liked the comedown after removing a target. This smoothed the transition, put the box back in the right place and allowed me to bury my dead.

My next task would be food but my phone buzzed and took priority.

I hit the speaker button. "I hope you're not phoning to check on me?"

"As if I would dare," said a woman's cultured voice on the other end.

"You are the only person brave enough, Aria, and for that I will always love you." I heard a disgruntled harrumph the other end.

"There's nothing more in the world that makes my skin crawl than you telling me you love me," she groused.

I managed a half smile. Aria found me work and I paid her a finder's fee. She didn't work with me exclusively but we had an understanding. I took the work *others*, meaning governments mostly,

couldn't do without causing them to lose sleep but needed doing anyway – hence the dead Russian.

“Truce, Aria, why are you calling because you already know I've done the job?”

“I should bloody hope so, they've paid you enough to get it done clean. But I've another job for you,” she said getting to the point.

That decision was easy. “No.”

“Luke, you'll want this one.”

I shoved the oiled rag down the barrel of the suppressor. “No. I don't do back-to-back jobs any more. I don't need to and I've just spent three days *and nights*, I might add, on a rooftop in a New York summer making sure I had the right location. I'm going home tomorrow,” I said.

I had spent a great deal of time stalking New York's streets to find the right apartment building to take that shot. It needed to be high enough, full of residents who weren't interested in strangers or empty of people altogether, and overlooked by few domestic buildings. Office workers seeing me wouldn't have mattered so much but people tended to pay attention to changes in their home's immediate surroundings.

“You really will want this one,” she repeated, making her voice lighter and mischievous.

I lay back on the bed and looked at the ceiling of the hotel room. A nice blank white space. “No, I won't. I have a dog in the Cotswolds that needs me.”

“Rogue is fine, the nanny cam in the dog sitter's house is reporting back to me on an hourly basis.” Aria's sarcasm didn't go unnoticed.

I frowned at how much Aria had infiltrated my personal life, such as it was these days. “Rogue will be missing me and why have you hacked my camera?”

“Why do you feel the need to spy on your dog sitter? Helen seems to be a very nice English woman.”

“She's a formidable woman,” I said. Helen stood at five foot and a whisker, age almost indeterminate, with steel colouring and a soul to match. She kept my Malinois in check like few other people could manage, including me most of the time. “And I don't spy on her, I spy on the dog.”

Aria barked a laugh. “You just keep telling yourself that.”

The ceiling in this hotel looked inviting. I could lie on the bed and stare at it for hours, which is what would happen until I took that flight back to my country cottage and the dog, where I could stare at my ceiling instead and not sleep.

I sighed and wondered when it would stop. When the drive to work, to be in the zone and hunting might leave me in peace to enjoy the life I kept trying to re-build. “What's the job?” I asked.

Aria made a pleased hum that made me want to turn it down on principle. “You want to go back to the UK? Your wish is my command.”

“I doubt that somehow but okay. What's going on?” I asked. I rarely worked on UK soil, my skills weren't needed too often. That and hunting my back garden felt too pedestrian.

“I have little information at the moment but they are paying a great deal. The person who contacted me said his name was Damien Stapleton.”

“Doesn't ring a bell.”

I could hear fingers moving like greased lightning over a keyboard. “No, he clearly doesn't exist. I've done a full background check and I can't find him anywhere. It's good news really because it means he doesn't have a reason to create a full identity. He's just using a name for a little protection. It's why I agreed to contact you because this mission is specific to you.”

I frowned. That wasn't normal, not many outside the industry knew who I'd become since leaving the Regiment. “They asked for me?”

“They want, and I quote, ‘Sergeant Luke Sinclair, for a pick up.’”

My frown deepened. “A pick up?”

I heard the clatter of more computer keys as she spoke to me. “Yep. They need you in London and then you have to go and retrieve someone.”

“From?”

“That’s why they want to meet you in London I guess. You have the standard clause at that point to reject the job but we keep the deposit.” And Aria of course wanted her cut of that deposit, which would be a sizeable sum.

London in the early summer wasn’t as bad as New York and I could be home in three hours, less if the motorway wasn’t packed. “Alright, I’ll bite. Get me a flight to Heathrow.”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Fuck off,” I muttered, hanging up the phone.

That title sent chills up my spine, who would be asking for me as Sergeant Luke Sinclair? I hadn’t been in the army for almost five years and I might have a problem leaving certain parts of the life behind – mainly the killing bad guys part – but I didn’t miss the chain of command. My mind wandered off down a rabbit hole and I fought to drag it back, but failed again. My room felt lonely and cold, much like my life for the last five years.

I pushed off the bed, contemplated shaving but decided I liked the grizzled look for New York, and went in search of the nearest gay club. I needed to drink and I needed to fuck. Aria sent through the flight details to London, I had twelve hours to burn and in New York even during the day, I could find some trouble to enjoy.

I SLEPT ON THE FLIGHT, all the way, my cock and brain quiet for the duration. I'd found a naughty little minx who proved to be bendy and fun, not the type I usually liked but he'd made me laugh and I did precious little of that so we'd had a good time. When I touched down in Heathrow I relaxed while going through security, my gym bag remained hidden in my bus station locker at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. I chose the location to keep my gear safe because bus stations are far more anonymous than airports. I could leave a bag for weeks before I needed it again and no one checked the lockers. Airports were different, especially in New York, with heavy CCTV and regular patrols with dogs, so leaving something that smelt of gun oil would not be prudent. When I left the bus station I yellow cabbied it to JFK looking like any other businessman in the airport.

Arriving in London, expecting to take the train into the city, I found a man with a card and my name written on it – printed not handwritten. The weird chills up my back turned into a gut crawling suspicion. Who wanted me back in the UK with such desperation? Why did they have my fucking name on a card in thick black print? I didn't like anyone announcing my presence in a public place, this might be England but there were hostile *eyes on* even in Heathrow and broadcasting a covert operative's name, even if they were retired, was just plain wrong.

"This way, sir," said the clipped English accent. The man wore a nondescript chauffeur's uniform but he walked with military precision and watched the crowd like I would if I weren't busy watching him. It didn't feel right being angry with him, orders were orders and he'd been given the card.

I kept my thoughts quiet and private. I didn't bother wasting energy asking questions, he wouldn't give me answers and it would irritate me further not getting them. We drove into the centre of Westminster, which took seventy-three minutes on a Friday afternoon in the summer, and he parked in an underground car park in Horseferry Road, near the Home Office.

My gut tugged hard. The chills up my spine turned into a full skin crawl and I couldn't help watching the cameras following my progress behind the chauffeur as he led me into the office complex. I felt like giving the cameras the finger but I'd left that juvenile behaviour behind when I'd left the idiot who would have given the finger regardless. I entered the elevator and we rode in silence for three floors. We were above ground level and when I stepped out of the shiny new metal box I found myself overlooking St. John's Gardens.

"This way, Sergeant," said the chauffeur.

I followed. We walked along a blue carpet, offices on my right, windows on my left, exits marked with green signs and people in suits looking busy. So far not a military uniform in sight but I could feel them everywhere. Each person we passed in the corridor had the bearing, the spine held tighter than civilians did, especially when they worked crouched over computers all day. These people all had a sense of purpose and very little wasted movement or chatter. It spoke of more officialdom than I wanted in my life.

My jaw began to tick as my teeth clenched. The chauffeur opened a door ushering me through. "In

here, sir. I'll let them know you've arrived."

"Thanks," I said. A man stood at a table covered in coffee and tea making facilities. He hummed and poured too much sugar into his coffee. The set of the shoulders, the narrow hips and wide shoulders, the short dark hair, with a sprinkle more of grey, it all set me off. My instincts screamed at me to run, but whether towards him or away I wasn't sure.

Then he turned. His eyes widened the moment they met mine. So blue. So very blue. The coffee bounced in his hand, sloshing over the top. "Fuck me," he muttered, rescuing the cup and shaking off the burn.

It had been just over five years since I'd heard him scream that in our bed. He'd been begging me to after one of my extended blowjobs.

"Sam," I croaked, then coughed to hide the emotion choking me, sweat broke out on my palms and spine. "Samuel, it's been a while." I fought to close down.

"Luke, I..." He'd gone very pale and his hand trembled. Nothing put fear into Sam like emotion. It's why he'd left me in the end, that and the gun I'd pointed at his head. He couldn't handle the emotional cost of his actions. Mind you neither could I when it all exploded. If we'd had a grenade in the bedroom that day it would have done less damage.

"Coffee?" he asked.

"Not one of yours," I said, stepping fully into the room.

He watched me, but kept well out of reach. I approached the table covered in drinks and as it turned out, food, but we didn't speak. I could do with something more substantial than a croissant but *scran* is *scran*.

"What are we doing here?" I asked, plonking a pastry on a plate and not looking at him. If I worked hard I might find I could ignore him to the point he vanished.

"Thought you might be able to tell me that," he replied.

"I don't know anything, but as we're both here I'll be turning the job down. I don't work for the British Army and I've no intention of going anywhere with you," I said, tearing the head off the innocent pastry and biting down on it. I could smell his cologne, the same one he always wore, and I had to admit he looked good. Rested. A slight softness to him that hadn't been there five years before, but Sam had always liked his food and hated exercise for its own sake.

"Really?" he snapped, the Texan accent dragging me back to another time and place. "It's been five years, Luke, you sure you can't hang on to your grudge a bit longer? Let it fester a bit more? After all, forgiveness is something you're *so* good at."

Okay, we were heading for the rocks after thirty seconds. Had to be a record even for us. "Fuck you, Sam."

The door opened. "I rather hoped you two could bury your hatchet long enough to not be fucking anyone, including each other," a woman's voice cracked through the room, more able to silence us than a bullet to the head.

We both straightened and I felt my hand twitch with the need to salute, fortunately the croissant stopped me. "Major Brant," I said, eyes forward, spine and thoughts instantly focused on the small, lithe woman standing in front of us. Her brown eyes were hard, the smattering of freckles over her nose blending with the tanned skin and despite being ten years my senior, every fibre in her five foot six inch frame, had lost none of its purpose. Her short cropped hair contained no grey but the brown colour was no longer natural.

"Sergeant Luke Sinclair, it's good to see you again. And it's now Colonel Brant," she said, walking between myself and Sam.

“Congratulations, ma’am,” I said.

“Thank you.”

“Suck up,” muttered Sam.

“Fuck off,” I muttered in return.

Colonel Brant sighed. “It’s good to see you as well, Sergeant Samuel Locke.”

“Why am I here?” Sam asked. He didn’t even attempt to show her respect. He might have snapped straight out of instinct when she walked in the room but he wasn’t going to let her control him if he could fight her. That was Sam all over.

She glanced at him and I could see her need to rise to the challenge of taming her tiger. It’s what she’d called us once, her tigers. She let us off our leashes to hunt for her, returning to her with prizes. We’d all be very drunk at the time but it had stuck, they’d been intense but good years working for her in British Military Intelligence and Unit Twelve specifically.

We were the blunt instrument the other agencies – MI5, MI6, and Special Branch at a push – used to hunt down and remove threats to the UK and Europe. We were frequently aligned with US interests, but due to the lack of oversight Unit Twelve often enjoyed and the small size of our team, we were able to do the jobs other branches of the military couldn’t do in places they really shouldn’t be doing them. Unit Twelve’s origins were murky and Brant’s teams rarely worked together, but wherever she sent us there was little doubt we were needed. Sam, being an ex-SEAL, wasn’t a normal recruit for the Unit, but he thrived in the unique environment. Every member came from Special Forces or found themselves pulled from the Parachute Regiment, including the women.

Her eyes found mine. “Thank you for coming on such short notice, Luke. You’re not an easy man to track down.”

“You’re still paying me right?” I asked.

Sam’s expression darkened. “You’re a merc?”

Shit. I didn’t want him knowing anything about my life. “None of your damned business.”

He barked a laugh. “You’re a fucking hypocrite.”

“Yeah, well, at least I’m not king of the fucking doughnuts,” I muttered. It was a low shot and he knew it but it worked.

He took a step closer to me, his blue eyes sparkling with anger, those wide shoulders tipping forwards and preparing for a fight. “You’re a real piece of work, you know that? It’s been five fucking years –”

“Four years, eleven months,” I snapped.

“And three days,” he shot back.

My eyes widened. He kept track? I did because he was right, I was a fucking idiot who didn’t let shit go and my shit with Sam was the deepest I’d ever ended up in and I’d been to some shitty places in the world.

“Gentlemen,” Brant said, stepping between us. Despite being almost a full foot shorter than either of us, she dominated the fractious space. “I need your heads in the game, not on each other. I would suggest couple’s therapy but I don’t think there is a therapist in the world who could help you two.”

I drew in a sharp breath and stepped back, my heart pounded, my gut soured and my hands shook. I thought it was rage, I was pretty sure it was rage and anger and hurt and grief for what I’d lost but looking into his face...

He’d shaved, the dark stubble usually making him look like the rogue he was, gone for a few hours at least. The crooked nose, from being broken several times over the years, made him appear more savage than soldier. How many times had I kissed that nose?

He studied me in turn and I wondered what he saw, had I changed much? I didn't think so, but my joints were older and slower, even if it didn't show on my face.

It took too much effort but I forced my attention to the colonel. "Why are we here?"

"I need you to retrieve someone from Syria," Brant said.

I focused on her. "Syria?"

"Yes, and need I remind you that you are still covered by the Official Secrets Act?" she asked, preparing a cup of coffee for herself.

"Um, sure," Sam said, plonking his arse down on a table. His well-worn jeans tightened over his thighs and he smirked when he caught me looking.

I wanted to growl in anger.

"What I am about to disclose does not leave this building," she said, looking us both in the eye and concentrating fully on impressing us with the seriousness of the situation. We both nodded like good little ducklings. "In a refugee camp in Syria we've found Angelica Snow."

My internal wheels raced, hit a muddy patch and kept spinning, sucked down by the name that haunted too many of my white ceiling moments in the dark of the night. Sam let a whistle relieve him of tension. I sat and tried to deepen my breathing. We both carried too many physical and emotional scars from the last time we'd tangled with Angelica Snow.

“SHE’S DEAD,” I STATED WITH a finality that made the wheels in my brain stutter back to working order.

Brant looked at me, her expression sympathetic. “Clearly not.”

“We blew up the building we left her in and we’d filled her with holes,” Sam said. Memories crowded us. The ghosts of hundreds of missions filed past in silent ranks to condemn us, we both felt them that much I knew.

Our ex-commanding officer knew this would be hard for us to hear so she kept her voice gentle. “It’s her, gentlemen. DNA tests prove it.”

Squeaking shrill noises crowded my head and I forced a breath into my chest to quieten them. “Why call us in? You’ve more pets to play with I’m sure, you don’t need us. We’re old men, Elizabeth,” I said, talking to her as my equal for the first time.

She relaxed enough to lean back against the table containing the food. “We’re all older, Luke, but few are as well trained and have your experience in the field. I need you, both of you.” She crossed her legs at the ankle, her brown boots and jeans with green shirt combination making her masculine but never detracting from her strong femininity. Elizabeth Brant was the closest I’d ever come to being tempted by the fairer sex. I wish the same had been true of Sam.

“Sorry, I’m out. I’m happy to play training games with your boys in Hereford but I’m not going back into the field.” Sam glanced at me and said, almost in a whisper, “I’m not safe.”

“You’re working for the Regiment?” I asked. My shock was genuine; I thought he’d been forced to leave the country after quitting Unit Twelve.

He shrugged. “Someone needs to train the Trogs in how the real boys fight.”

I snorted. “You mean how we have to back you guys up in the field because you’ve never managed to win a war? That training?” I asked, allowing myself a smile.

He chuckled. “Suck it up, Brit Brat. You know we SEALs have you beat hands down.”

“Fuck off do you. The SAS just want to know how to take you down.” I realised we’d been living less than fifty miles apart. Why? Why was he still in the UK? Did he know I lived in the Cotswolds? Slad wasn’t more than an hour away at most.

Brant sighed. “Cocks away, gentlemen, at least until I leave the room.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” we said together. Our eyes locked and a flare of heat rushed through me. The same thing seemed to happen to Sam because a flush of colour raced up his pale Irish American face.

Brant didn’t do a very good job of hiding her smile. “Let’s get back to business shall we? It’s not a combat mission, boys. It’s just a pick up.”

“Why us?” Sam asked.

“You’ve been requested by Snow directly.”

Oh, goodie, another grenade to chuck into the room. “Sorry, what?” I asked.

“Why don’t you come with me and I’ll be able to explain in more detail?” She pushed away from

the table.

“Wait, if I agree to go with you does that commit me to the job?” I asked.

It was Sam’s turn to snort. “Worried about your pay cheque?” Or maybe that was check – the uneducated oaf.

“No, more worried about your sorry butt dragging me down if I’m committed to you,” I shot back. “Oh, that’s right, you don’t do commitment so I shouldn’t worry.”

I could almost see the punch he wanted to throw at me and the glee at the thought of ripping him apart in this nondescript office surged through me. Every time we’d descended into fist fights there had been people to pull us apart and we’d never had a chance to find out who was best. Maybe this time...

“No commitment until you see the details,” Brant said, once more putting herself between us. “And one more bitch from you, Sinclair, and I’ll have you up on charges whether you work for me or not.”

An empty threat perhaps but Brant could do far worse than arrest me if I pissed her off, we both knew it, and wrecking her building would qualify for the real threat. We followed our mummy duck out of the office, down a short corridor to the end of the hall. She presented her iris to a scanner, then gave an eight figure code to the keypad. Top line security. Sam glanced at me as we continued to follow her and I could see the wheels turning in his head, the words on his tongue, but he kept his mouth shut. We could read each other far too well, even after five years, and it hurt to know that; it hurt to know we knew how to push each other’s buttons so fast but we couldn’t seem to help each other to find peace.

From the outside it looked like another office building butting up against a hotel in the centre of London, but now we were behind the façade and the new world of cyber hunting held sway. The vast open plan office looked like a geek’s version of heaven. Even knowing what I did about modern warfare being committed on screens thousands of miles from the front lines men like me occupied, I was impressed. Information bounced from screen to screen, updates spewing forth in a tsunami of ones and zeroes. Men and women moved from warzone to warzone without leaving the office.

“Your latest Russian target provided us with a tangle to unravel,” Brant said to me over her shoulder.

Sam glanced at me. I shrugged. “Russian, someone paid me to make him a non-Russian while he visited New York.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “That was you?”

“What did you hear?”

“That it was a blinder of a shot only half a dozen people could have made,” Sam said. “I should have guessed it was you.”

“You didn’t know I was active?”

“No,” he said with none of his usual spark. “No, I didn’t.”

I frowned. Why was he living fifty miles away from my home base, he hated the weather in Hereford? I knew Sam better than anyone else in the world and something was off. No time to consider it in depth now though, Brant was right, I needed my head in the game. It had been a long time since I’d played with other children in the sandpit.

We walked into another office marked, ‘Unit Twelve’ on the door. A young man, all spit and polish, sat behind the desk in barrack dress of the British Army. He rose as we entered, “Colonel, I have some intel you should be made aware of—”

“Not now, Corporal,” Brant said, waving a dismissive hand in the man’s direction. I almost felt

sorry for him, Elizabeth wasn't known for her tolerance or compassion. I had no idea why people thought women were weak, more than one had kicked my arse, both metaphorical and literal, over the years. I'd seen them fight like lions to save someone else's child and equally shoot anyone, other women and children included, in the head if it suited them. The line between the genders no longer existed for me, in that context at least.

"Take a seat, gentlemen," Brant said, waving at the two chairs. We sat, good little duckies that we were.

Brant fiddled with her computer for a moment and the screen behind her head woke up. "Three days ago we received this from an embedded Syrian refugee worker. We have them in most of the camps and access the CCTV data on a regular basis. During a routine facial scan of the new arrivals this shot was taken at the registration desk."

An image flashed up, a woman in a headscarf stood at the desk. The image was full resolution and in colour. They didn't mess about in Syria, too many ISIS women and children who'd been taught to kill, floating about looking for a way to escape the revenge now tearing the region apart. This face made my stomach flip and I shivered. Cold black eyes, hard features, more cut-glass English than Arabic, but gaunt now and older, much older than when we'd last seen her almost eight years before.

"Jesus, it is her, it's Angelica," Sam whispered. I glanced at him. Eyes too wide. Skin a clammy white. Whatever else Sam and I were, we were brothers-in-arms and my brother looked scared.

He of all people knew her intimately. She'd been the one to torture him for six days before I managed to get him out. We thought we'd blown her up and the compound in the process but obviously not.

"She's registered under the name Maryana al-Marrash," Brant said, all fact. Though I'd been witness to one of her rare displays of temper when we lost Sam to the bitch so I knew this cut her as well.

"She's looking at the camera, as if she wants to be seen," I said, the urge to touch Sam overwhelming me. I kept glancing at him to check he was okay, the fine tremor and sheen of sweat made it clear he was not okay at all. I gave into the urge. I reached across the space between our chairs and grabbed his wrist. He started in surprise, his eyes going wide as they focused on me. "It's alright, Sam. She can't hurt you."

He nodded and blinked rapidly as if trying to clear his thoughts. "Yeah, yeah, just... I thought... I wake up sometimes and she's... It's better when I can tell myself she's dead." He moved his hand away, placing distance between us again. Though I knew it had more to do with the company we were in than any attempt to escape my touch. Despite this it made my chest hurt and my heart ache.

Brant, of course, noticed it all.

The first time Sam and I met in Afghanistan, my SAS team and his SEAL team, worked together but I'd kept my sexuality quiet, not secret, just discreet. When we'd been posted together in Unit Twelve our friendship began to twist into something more, at least for me. During his second year in Unit Twelve he'd been hurt, badly, and I'd given him one hell of a deathbed speech about love in all its forms and he needed to forgive me for loving him, despite the revolving door of women that went through his life. Sam had made a full recovery and once returned to Unit Twelve made my life difficult until we'd fucked. Or rather he'd fucked me because at that point he had no experience with men. We didn't stop fucking for three more years. Brant kept it quiet but the entire team knew within three months of it starting because some idiot shot me and Sam lost his temper. He went postal in Thailand and killed dozens of drug traders for hurting me. We were supposed to be chasing a lead about a virus the Chinese wanted, not killing drug smugglers. After that we moved in together in my

flat in London. Intense didn't begin to describe our relationship.

It blew up in my face eventually though.

Brant continued while watching our silent pain. "Once facial recognition caught her the rest was easy. A DNA swab confirmed it was her. The real clincher though is this," an email flashed up, "in this, which is written in Farsi of all things, she states that she's ready to come in if it's you two who come to get her, anyone else and she'll kill herself."

"Good, send in the SEALs," Sam muttered.

The roughness of his wrist had felt so good, much more my type than the twink from the night before, and my palm itched for more. Sam always felt solid and real, no one ever seemed that way outside work.

"Her intelligence is too good."

"You know she's just fucking with you, right?" I asked. "She's never going to give you information on live cells or plans."

Brant looked away for a moment. Sam glanced at me, we both knew that look. "What is it?" I asked.

Elizabeth Brant looked nervous. "We believe the insurgents have weapon's grade enriched uranium and triggers inside an old Soviet nuke, they are also sourcing a pathogen that spreads on the back of the measles virus. We think it's come out of Iraq and gone through Iranian hands, which is where we think Snow has been. We believe this is the information Snow wants to trade. Where it is, where it's going and who wants to use it most. We need that intelligence, gentlemen."

"Most of the world is inoculated against measles," I said.

"And those that aren't are just stupid," Sam added.

We were soldiers, we lived by rules and the rules said – vaccinate children. To be fair we'd been in places too poor to afford even these simple luxuries and seen the damage a disease like measles could do to communities.

"The measles virus is highly contagious, this pathogen is carried by the virus, it piggybacks and therefore spreads just as quickly. It acts like a haemorrhagic fever."

We both stared at Brant. "And who exactly is responsible for creating this little bundle of joy?" I asked.

"Fuck," said Sam. "It's the US isn't it?"

"They have a lab in Iraq, if it's there it's off the books. To be fair, the Russians have one in Siberia and the Chinese have one in Tibet."

"Well, that's okay then," Sam muttered. He rubbed his thick thumb over his wrist where I'd touched him moments ago. Watching his unconscious reaction to our physical contact went straight to my dick, via my heart unfortunately.

"So, you want her back here to give you information on the lab, the bombs, and I expect you want her to repeat the formula for the killer disease as well so you can wave it under the nose of the Americans next time they step out of line?" I asked.

Brant shrugged and nodded. "Just about sums things up at the moment but the situation and intel are somewhat fluid right now. We want you two to go in to the camp, get her out before she kills herself and return her to us."

"You want a bow tied around her fucking neck as well?" Sam asked.

Our CO didn't rise to the bait. "Only if you feel like it." Brant didn't say another word, merely sat back and waited for us to make a decision.