

BECCA C. SMITH



ATLAS

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Dedicated to Susan, Peter, Dylan and Ruby Wrenn. My second family. You guys mean the world to
me! Love you!

The Riser Saga

Riser

Reaper

Ripper

The Alexis Tappendorf Series

Alexis Tappendorf and the Search for Beale's Treasure

Chapter One

PUNCH!

Crap, Kala Hicks reprimanded herself. *Another bar fight? What's wrong with me? Seriously!*

She just couldn't seem to stop herself. Some jerk would try and hit on her and BAM! Kala would be either throwing a punch or kicking a groin. Kala couldn't figure out what offended her most: guys that wanted to have sex with her or guys that wanted to have a relationship with her. Both made her furious beyond measure.

This particular asshole tried to grab her waist and pull her close. Before he could reach his hands around her, Kala's fist split his nose.

The man was screaming to high heaven.

"Relax, dude, I'm a girl." Kala was even more offended at how much of a baby this guy was. But she knew she was being unfair. Kala was a trained Navy Seal sniper with two black belts, one in Judo and one in Aikido and one in Tae Kwon Do. A punch in the face from Kala was the equivalent of a punch in the face from any man (probably worse, since they never seemed to expect it from a woman). Kala was five six and only 120 pounds, her shoulder length auburn hair framed a straight nose, giant green eyes, and perfectly shaped lips. The girl was stunning. Jack Norbin, her commanding officer, would often assign Kala undercover missions because her looks were so unassumingly "safe," while her fighting skills were deadly. Though as the team's sniper, Kala usually found herself holed up in a room lying on a table with her rifle and an earpiece telling her who to put a hole into. Either way, Jack never worried about Kala's ability to defend herself.

On the other hand, Jack *did* have to worry about Kala getting into unnecessary fights.

Like now.

"You bitch!" the man wailed. He tried to punch Kala back since the whole bar was laughing at him.

And by laughing at him, it was more that they were laughing at Kala's short fuse. Kala's fights were quite the amusement for the other bar regulars. Just a way for Kala to blow off steam, and if it entertained them at the same time, they were all for it.

Kala easily dodged the man's fist and sent another blow to his chest.

The man gasped for air.

"Just walk away," Kala sighed. She was bored already and the thought of beating the crap out of this guy until he stopped trying to fight back was not something she was in the mood for tonight.

Next time, walk away yourself, idiot, Kala grumbled to herself.

Kala wished she had more self-control, but she'd been like this her entire life. Her mother abandoned Kala in a dumpster as soon as she gave birth to her. She was discovered the next morning and taken to the hospital. Kala ended up being one of the unlucky kids who was never adopted, her childhood spent moving from foster home to foster home. The only family that Kala ever gave a damn about were the Johnsons. She was sent to them when she was fifteen years old. Owen and Linda Johnson. Owen was in the Navy and drilled respect into a very unruly Kala. She loved him for it and followed in his footsteps by joining the Navy. When she started her training, the Seals nabbed her right away. Kala's test and target practice scores were off the charts, always deadly accurate. A few years of exemplary service later and she was nabbed again by Jack. Kala had been on his team ever since, working secret government missions that usually required a lot of killing and mayhem.

For a smart girl, Kala often wondered how she could be so dumb. A question her fellow soldiers wondered sometimes as well.

"You okay, Kala?" Derek yelled from the back of the bar.

Even if Jack was the commanding officer, Derek Echols was the big brother in their little crew of two women and two men: Kala, Lali, Derek and Jack. They were never too far apart from each other.

even in off duty time. It kept their minds in the game — because they never knew when they'd be summoned to perform a mission. Though currently only Derek was around.

“Fine, thanks,” Kala half-waved to Derek.

CRACK!

He did not just do that!

Kala felt the wooden bar stool hit her lower back with a loud crunch.

Seriously! Ouch!

Kala was pissed now.

But not as pissed as Derek.

Kala almost felt sorry for the poor guy as Derek jumped up on his table and charged like a bull, leaping from table to table until he slammed full force into the guy's chest. Derek picked the man up by his neck and flopped him on the surface of the bar, breaking every glass that had happened to be resting there.

“Trust me, you'd be worse off if I had let *her* get a hold of you,” Derek said in the man's ear. “But then again...”

Derek shoved the man so hard the guy slid all the way to the end of the twenty-foot bar and toppled off the end in a heap. The man's friends hurried to his side, then carried him out of the bar before he was stupid enough to try coming back for more.

Kala rolled her eyes at Derek. “I had that under control.”

“Yeah, you were a complete lady.” Derek handed the bartender a wad of cash to pay for the damages. The bartender didn't flinch: apparently fights in there were commonplace. If you paid what you owed, he was just fine with that.

Kala laughed. “Yeah, yeah.”

“What did he do? Ask for your number?” Derek motioned the bartender for two shots.

Before Kala could blink, the shots were ready.

“Worse, he tried to have a conversation.” Kala drank her shot with Derek.

“The nerve,” Derek chuckled.

Derek was tall, well over six feet, and all muscle. He wore his hair shaved, which suited his dark complexion. Derek was always dressed in military fatigues, and Kala wouldn't have been surprised if he slept in them as well. She had never seen anyone so loyal to their country. Derek lived and breathed America. He had been a marine before he was recruited to be on Jack's team, and Derek was *Sempiternus* all the way. Kala knew he would take a bullet for any one of them.

Kala picked up the rickety bar stool that had served as a tennis racket to her back and sat down. “I'm going to be sore tomorrow,” she moaned, rubbing her back. It wasn't painful yet, but that was probably because she'd already had four shots of tequila that evening.

Derek touched his forehead. “I think I hit my head when I slammed him into the bar.”

“Idiot.”

“Moron.”

Derek and Kala both started to laugh. Pulling up a bar stool, Derek ordered two more shots of tequila and the two of them slammed them back like pros.

“Sooner or later you're going to have to let someone in,” Derek said this carefully. He knew he'd risked injury by bringing up the touchy subject.

But Kala was too drunk to get mad. More importantly, she was too scared that Derek would figure out that not only had Kala “let someone in,” but the person she had let in was their commanding officer, Jack. She could barely admit it to herself, let alone any of her team.

Even Jack was in the dark at how much Kala truly cared about him. And it was more than just *caring*. Kala was in love with him.

The 'L' word didn't come naturally to Kala. It always felt forced and fake when she thought about saying it out loud. She was jealous at how effortlessly it came to most people. Some people said it easily as "good-bye" in a conversation. It made Kala feel like she was some kind of alien, incapable of human emotion. Kala made Jack think that he was her "booty call," but that was a lie, because Jack was so much more to Kala. The intensity of their relationship scared her more than anything in her entire life, and that was saying something considering she was a part of the most elite special ops team ever assembled.

"Not if I can help it," Kala picked up a newly refilled shot glass and toasted Derek, who shook his head.

At that moment Kala's cell phone buzzed. She stared down at it. It was a text from Jack simply stating: *you coming over tonight?*

Kala's chest tightened. She felt like a teenager. The guy gave her butterflies and she really despised that. But she texted back: *be there in 20*. Kala groaned internally at her own weakness. It looked like tonight Kala was Jack's booty call and not the other way around. She should have been strong and said no. Sleeping with your commanding officer broke about a hundred rules, but Kala didn't care. Being with Jack was one of the few true things she had in her life. Any time with him beat tequila shots in the wee hours of the morning. Period.

"Gotta go," Kala informed Derek. "Thanks for taking out the trash for me."

Derek motioned the bartender for another drink. "See ya tomorrow."

Kala casually saluted and walked out of the bar.

The cold January air felt amazing after the stuffiness of the bar. It had rained that morning, giving the air a fresh-after-the-rain smell that Kala loved. Being stationed in D.C. wasn't exactly Kala's first choice of homes, but after the last three years she had learned to appreciate the little things. Kala's foster-jumping life was in Los Angeles so she had been raised in sunshine. Seasons were an entirely foreign concept to her when she joined the Navy. Her first winter was in Virginia Beach and even though everyone kept telling her that 48 degrees was mild, it felt like she had been stuffed inside a freezer. Kala wasn't one to complain, but a part of her would always miss L.A. for the weather.

Kala's beat up maroon '73 Buick Apollo sat in the back of the bar's parking lot, but she knew she was in no condition to drive. At least she didn't have to worry about anyone stealing it: though sentimentally Kala felt that her Apollo was the best car ever made, no one else seemed to agree with her, especially thieves. Luckily, Gordo's Bar was near the center of town off of 16th street, so hailing a cab wouldn't be a problem, especially if you looked like Kala. She wasn't exactly dressed for a night out, but her t-shirt and jeans with a black leather form-fitting motorcycle jacket showed off her figure to any man with eyes.

Hailing the first cab that drove by, Kala slid into the back seat and gave the driver Jack's address. Even as she said the numbers out loud her chest squeezed again. She was ready to punch herself for being such a sap. Kala knew more about her sniper rifle than she did about love. The military was a welcome distraction whenever things got too complicated for her emotionally. Kala was blessed with the innate ability to hit her target no matter what the distance or the trajectory. So being a sniper was no brainer. Kala had no idea where she inherited this gift and she often wondered if her mom or dad had been soldiers themselves. Knowing her luck, they'd probably been homeless crazy people who were really good at darts.

Owen had taught her how to shoot tin cans in their backyard. It was the first real moment she ever had with anyone before in her life. No one had ever given her the time of day, always writing her off as the problem kid they wanted to get rid of. But Owen treated Kala like his daughter that day. He patiently taught her how to safely use a gun. Kala would never forget the glimmer of pride shining in his eyes when she had hit five cans on her first try. After a few weeks of training with Ka

consistently hitting every target Owen put in front of her, he entered her into a shooting range competition. Kala came in first place and Owen and Linda were so proud of her they kept Kala's trophy displayed in the foyer of their house for everyone to see.

The cab stopped in front of Jack's brownstone. Kala paid the man, giving him a sizeable tip. The cabbie was more than thrilled and tipped his hat to her as she left for Jack's front door.

Kala was almost sobered up, or at least only slightly above tipsy, but her training still kept her aware of her surroundings no matter how fuzzy her state of mind.

Jack's brownstone always seemed to reach out and welcome Kala more than her own apartment. There was just something so inviting about the building's old architecture with its dark brickwork, arched windows and stone stairway leading up to a wrought-iron entry.

Kala hopped her way up the stairs and knocked on Jack's door. Even though her heart was racing and her palms were sweating, an outside observer would never know. Kala knew this emotion—this “camouflage” was a blessing and a curse. A blessing because it kept her safe from getting hurt. A curse because she could never let the people she cared about really know how she felt.

The clacking sound of someone walking by caused Kala to turn and look.

It was a woman wearing a business suit with a tailored trench, holding a briefcase in her hand.

There was nothing special about her by all outward appearances, but something about this woman made Kala's skin crawl. Enough so that she felt for her gun, but quickly remembered she wasn't armed.

The woman didn't look at Kala as she walked past Jack's brownstone, but Kala had the feeling that the woman could see her all the same. It was an eerie feeling that Kala couldn't shake. As if the woman had eyes on the side of her head. If she weren't so creepy, the woman would actually be quite stunning. High cheekbones framed a chiseled youthful face. A long nose, full lips and gigantic brown eyes made the picture complete. With her stark black hair pulled back in a loose bun, and tailored pants suit, any observer would think that she was a businesswoman coming home from a long day at the office.

But not to Kala.

Kala couldn't stop staring.

This was another reason why this woman was alarming her. If someone had been staring at Kala the way Kala was staring at this woman, Kala would have stared right back, and let's face it, she probably would have ended up in some kind of violent confrontation. Or at least a verbal one.

It was hard for Kala to let things go.

But this woman walked off down the street without a single glance.

“What is it?” Jack's voice broke Kala out of her stare down.

Kala turned to him and tried to shake her paranoia. “Nothing. Just some lady. She gave me the willies.”

Jack pulled Kala in and kissed her, then pulled away with a smile. “Someone actually gave *you* the willies? Now that's someone I'd like to meet.”

Kala shrugged, which normally would make any guy annoyed at her obvious lack of affection, but Jack was used to it. He nodded his head toward the inside of his house to invite Kala in.

Kala moved past Jack and entered inside his apartment. After Jack's knee-buckling kiss she wanted to jump him in the doorway, but her stubborn pride wouldn't let her.

“You got anything to drink?” Kala took her jacket off and threw it over one of Jack's plush armchairs.

The inside of the brownstone was just as cozy. From the golden hardwood floors to its soft cushioned furniture, Jack's place was as warm and inviting as the outside. There was a brick fireplace framing the living room, with a dining room and kitchen right behind it. On the mantle were pictures

of his family: brothers, sisters, parents, nieces and nephews. Jack was seriously the All-American Boy. ~~Everything about him was perfect. He had a perfect life with a perfect family and was just well.~~ perfect. Being a Navy Seal himself, Jack's physique was all tone and muscle. Sometimes Kala couldn't look at him for too long, his face was gorgeous in a scrappy-sexy kind of way, and his shaved head was always a weakness for her. And it certainly didn't help that he was only wearing his A-shirt and boxers.

"What would you like? I have scotch or vodka." Jack walked over to the kitchen and pulled down the two aforementioned bottles.

In that moment, Kala no longer wanted anything to drink. She just wanted Jack.

There was something so sexy about a polite guy. Bad boys were never her thing, probably because *she* was the "bad" one in most relationships. And being twenty-eight years old, Kala had had more terrible relationships than she cared to admit. But Jack. Jack was different. He was kind and protective *and* a bad ass to top it off.

And did she mention he was gorgeous?

Kala walked to the kitchen and grabbed Jack by his shirt, pulling him in for a passionate kiss. Jack was easily persuaded away from the alcohol as Kala led him up the stairs and into his bedroom. Being with Jack sexually was the most intense experience Kala had ever felt. As closed off as she was, sex never meant anything to her before, it was just a means to an end. There was never a guy Kala felt worth her time. But Jack was different. He was attentive — and cared more about her experience than his own. The hardest part for Kala was not letting Jack see how intense her feelings were for him.

Jack lowered her to the bed and the two of them ripped off each other's clothes like they had acid on them. Kala flipped Jack over so she was on top, which Jack didn't mind in the least. She leaned down and they kissed with some force, as if they couldn't get enough of each other. Kala loved the way Jack kissed her. His kisses were the perfect combination of light and forceful that made Kala's whole body tingle.

Jack reached over and turned out the lights as the two of them proceeded to have a good time.

Kala listened to Jack's heavy breathing as he slept beside her. Normally, this was her cue to sneak out, but for some reason she didn't want to leave just yet. He looked so peaceful lying there with the down comforter keeping him warm on this cold winter's night. Jack never asked her to leave. He never asked her to pretend they weren't seeing each other. He completely gave Kala her space and time. Never pressuring. Always respectful. Who was this guy? Jack was flawless.

That's what scared Kala the most.

There must be something wrong with him. No one was that perfect.

Kala tried to resist the urge to snoop, but since it was in her nature, she carefully crawled out of bed and walked to Jack's dresser. She had probably been in Jack's room over a hundred times and over a hundred times Kala had done exactly the same thing she was doing now: looking for anything that would confirm that there was no way on the planet someone like Jack could exist.

After a few minutes of searching, she came up with what she always came up with:

Nothing.

Kala didn't know why it was so hard for her to trust men she was in relationships with. Sure she had a crappy childhood, but once she met Owen and Linda, her life had turned around ten-fold. When it came to combat, Kala never had a single trust problem. She knew her fellow soldiers would die for her and that she would do the same for them. But for some reason when it came to relationships, Kala never really cared about the guy, not like Jack, who she figured had to be some sort of robot or clone.

She took a deep breath, then went to the window to feel the cold against the glass. Sometimes just holding her hand against the pane and feeling the cold air hovering on its surface calmed Kala down.

Pulling the sheer curtain aside, she looked outside. Kala's heart jumped in her throat.

~~The woman from before was standing across the street, staring straight at Kala.~~

Kala threw the curtain aside and instinctively grabbed Jack's gun out of his side table.

Jack was up instantly.

"What is it?" He jumped out of bed, poised for action like a trained soldier.

"That creepy woman is out there, staring at your apartment," Kala said while cocking the gun.

Jack carefully took the gun from her hands. "What are you going to do? Kill her for staring?"

Kala shook her head. What *had* she been thinking? It wasn't like her to grab a weapon just because someone creeped her out.

Then again, Kala never got creeped out.

So what was it about this woman that made Kala's skin crawl? The person down there was a businesswoman for God's sake. Carrying a briefcase.

Or a bomb.

Maybe that's what set Kala's teeth on edge. Her instinct that this woman was a terrorist.

Kala grabbed back Jack's gun and looked him in the eye. "She has a briefcase and I'm checking out."

Jack didn't argue. He pulled the curtain open further to get a look at the mystery woman himself. "Where is she?"

Kala was putting her jeans on, but dashed back to the window.

The woman was gone.

And really gone.

No sign of her anywhere.

Jack wrapped his arms around Kala from behind and kissed her neck. "Are you sure you weren't imagining things?"

Was she?

Could she have possibly made up the whole thing in her head? It definitely wasn't like her, but it was late and now that Kala looked outside...

She pulled away from Jack and placed his gun down on the dresser, then she rejoined him at the window. "You think I'm crazy," she accused.

Jack smiled. "My kind of crazy."

Kala relaxed and smiled back as Jack leaned down, giving her a kiss that made her knees wobble.

A loud buzzing interrupted them.

Kala mumbled into Jack's lips, "That's your phone."

Jack finished the kiss, then pulled away and picked up the phone by his bedside.

Kala watched as Jack's face revealed something she'd never seen in him before. Ever.

Fear.

It was so foreign to her she didn't know how to react.

"What is it?" she asked and found that her voice was shaky.

When Jack looked up at Kala, all signs of fear were gone.

Kala was starting to wonder if she was going insane. First the woman appearing-disappearing, then Jack being scared? Her eyes were playing tricks on her. Or her brain was. Or maybe it was all the tequila.

"We've got an assignment." Jack put his phone down and started to get dressed.

Kala was a bit taken aback. Usually when the team was called in all their phones went off at the same time like a universal alarm.

Kala's phone hadn't made a peep.

A slow inkling of doubt started to creep up in her brain. Was Jack lying to her? Why would he whe

she could easily catch him in a lie like that?

“Are you going to get dressed?” Jack was transitioning into “commander mode.”

“Yeah,” Kala said and since she already had her jeans on she reached for her t-shirt on the floor.

Both their phones went off at the same time.

Kala grabbed her phone off the dresser and checked the message:

Compound A.S.A.P.

Kala tried not to show what she was feeling. Something was weird. And something was off. Jack received a message almost two minutes before the rest of the team received orders to report in. It was nearly impossible for Kala not to be suspicious. In the three years that Kala had served in Jack's company, Jack never received orders first. Orders came from General Turner and they were simultaneously sent to everyone on the team. So who had given Jack the heads up? And why?

Kala desperately wanted to grab Jack's phone and see who the first message was from.

Jack was fully dressed and tossed Kala her jacket. “Let's get going.”

“I took a cab.” Kala was horrified. The last thing she wanted to do was arrive at headquarters with Jack. Derek and Lali would know right away about their affair. It was extremely difficult to hide anything from the two of them and Kala was positive Lali was already suspicious. But to arrive together at three in the morning? They wouldn't be fooling anyone.

“Your choices are simple: take another cab or come with me. What will it be?” Jack had a kind and hopeful look in his eyes, and Kala knew he wanted her to come with him.

“I'll call a cab.” Kala just couldn't. She wasn't ready.

Jack seemed to be okay with this as he smiled knowingly at her. “Stubborn as ever.”

Kala just nodded, called a cab and headed for the front door.

Jack went with her. Before he walked towards his car he leaned down and kissed her. “See you there.”

Kala nodded back and watched as Jack got into his car and drove away, toward the Compound. She waited for her cab as patiently as she could, but patience wasn't exactly her strong suit.

That's when she saw the woman again.

She was down the street, standing there, holding her briefcase. The woman couldn't have been more than three hundred feet from where Kala stood.

Kala wasn't going to let it pass this time. Unarmed, Kala ran toward the woman.

The woman didn't move. It was like she wanted Kala to confront her.

When Kala was within ten feet of the woman, she slowed to a stop.

“What do you want?!” Kala yelled at the woman aggressively.

The woman smiled at Kala and Kala felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise.

“Not you, dear,” the woman said as if sharing some inside joke with no one in particular.

Kala walked slowly toward the woman.

Eight feet.

Six feet.

Four feet.

The woman held her hand out to stop Kala from coming any closer. “That's far enough, Ms. Hicks. Shouldn't have said her name.”

Kala leapt the final three feet and had this woman in a headlock before the woman could react.

“How do you know my name?” Kala whispered harshly in the woman's ear.

“Stay away from Jack,” the woman warned.

Though Kala had the upper hand, hearing this made her push the woman away from her.

“Are you sleeping with him?!” Kala accused. Now she was pissed. If this woman was a scorned lover, or worse, another lover, Kala would have finally figured out what was wrong with Mr. Perfect.

Jerk!

Before Kala could move, the woman was suddenly in her face. Her eyes were bright blue and *glowed* slightly.

Glowed! Kala had never seen anyone's eyes glow before!

What the hell was in that tequila?

Hallucinogens. Definitely hallucinogens.

Kala instinctively moved like a cat and was behind the woman, holding the psycho's arms behind her back.

The woman seemed shocked that Kala was able to capture her. "I see what Jack sees in you," the woman admitted.

"Let's see what you have in this briefcase," Kala grabbed the case and shoved the woman away.

Kala opened it despite her years of training that taught her to take it to the Compound where they could handle it safely.

Aside from a pen and a single piece of paper, there was nothing in the case.

Nothing.

Kala tossed it aside and wondered how her instincts could be so off. Then she said what she dreaded the most, "So what? You two a couple?"

"No," the woman answered simply. "But we will be if you don't ruin it for him."

Great, a stalker, Kala thought to herself.

The woman's eyes glowed again.

What was going on?

Kala stood in attack stance.

"Not this time, little one," the woman scolded Kala like she was three-years old.

Before Kala had a chance to make a move, the woman disappeared.

Completely.

Kala thought she was going nuts. One minute this woman was standing in front of her and the next Kala was standing by herself on the sidewalk.

"You call a cab?"

Kala turned to the street to see a taxi waiting for her.

"Um, yeah," she said, reeling from what just happened.

Kala still wasn't sure what *had* just happened. She sat down in the taxi and told the cabbie the Compound address.

The driver nodded and they drove off.

Chapter Two

Kala stared out the taxi replaying the last ten minutes. The woman had seemed obsessed with Jack. Warning Kala to stay away from him was the standard jealous girlfriend threat. But it had seemed like more than that.

And her eyes freaking *glowed*! Kala still didn't believe that she'd seen that right. Maybe the street lamp had hit this woman's eyes at an angle that made it look like they were glowing?

But then she vanished from thin air.

By the time she arrived at the Compound gates, Kala was convinced that someone had slipped her hydrochloric acid or some kind of drug at the bar. What she'd seen was impossible. Kala wouldn't be surprised if she had made up the whole lady thing in her head. Kala was a jealous person. It made sense that she would hallucinate a stalker business lady with glowing eyes that could disappear on cue.

Seriously?!

Kala shook her head. She needed to clear her mind before she went in. Missions required full and complete concentration. For the sake of her fellow soldiers she needed to file this incident away immediately. Kala was tempted to report the possibility that she had been drugged, but she knew there'd be testing required and she wouldn't be able to go on the mission. That was something Kala wasn't willing to give up.

And, secretly, she was worried that the tests would come up clean and that maybe what Kala saw wasn't drug-induced, which would indicate that she might be crazy.

Kala paid off the cab driver and walked up to the front gate entrance. From the outside the building appeared to be a series of warehouses and hangars. Nothing special. No one knew that those buildings were just fronts for what lay beneath. An enormous underground compound almost a square mile in size, housing the highest level of military combat and technology on the planet. The base was a half mile underground, encased in walls made of a special metal that was undetectable by satellites and radar. Kala still felt a surge of pride every time she entered the structure that was known only as the Compound. She was one of the few chosen to be a part of something so important. Kala kept on wondering when they'd realize they'd made a mistake and boot her out, erasing her memories of something dramatic like that. But, so far, her sniper skills had kept her invaluable to the team.

Kala arrived at the gate, where three armed guards stood attentively in a small booth. She flashed them her badge and they waved her through, buzzing for the gate to open.

A jeep awaited Kala as she moved closer to the warehouses. Derek was driving.

"I saw your Apollo in the parking lot and figured you'd take a cab. How's the head?" he asked sympathetically.

Kala hopped in the jeep and shook her head. "I don't know what the hell they put in the tequila, but I swear to God I've been seeing weird crap." Kala secretly hoped Derek would volunteer that he had had similar hallucination issues, but he just chuckled.

"Must be lack of sleep, kiddo. Aside from this monstrous headache, I just had one hell of a buzz." Derek drove them through a pair of enormous doors and straight into one of the unassuming hangars.

There were a couple of jeeps parked inside the gigantic hangar, though other than that, it was completely empty.

Derek and Kala jumped out of the jeep and walked to the center of the room.

A holographic circle rose up from the ground around them, surrounding the pair, then rotating and scanning their bodies with beams of light. Kala could see her and Derek's stats appearing on the rotating hologram with chains of DNA circling their bodies and then the words IDENTIFIED AND CONFIRMED flashed. The hologram vanished and the floor became a platform that began lowering them underground.

The one weakness Kala had in terms of physical endurance was motion sickness. No matter how hard she tried to fight it, something about her equilibrium just couldn't handle fast motion. And the platform they were on was descending fast. It flew down into the bowels of the Compound, slick black walls flying by them at frightening speed.

Derek looked over at Kala and tried to hide a grin, but Kala noticed.

"Shut up," she groaned.

"How many times have you been on this thing?" Derek was highly amused.

"You suck." Kala took a deep breath, trying to steady her stomach. It didn't help that she still had half a bottle of tequila in her system.

Within seconds the platform stopped and two doors slid open. Kala shook off her queasiness with a couple more deep breaths and walked inside.

Kala was still amazed every time she entered the Compound: holographic images rotating on computer consoles, smart screens, shelves stacked with every kind of gun imaginable. It was like the military had puked on a science fiction novel. The same slick black metal made up the floors, walls, ceilings and doors.

The Compound was an entire city built underground. The section that Kala and Derek had arrived at was just the Research area, a mixture of scientists and soldiers, each with their own agendas working at various stations.

Lali came up behind Kala.

"You guys get your orders yet?" She was already dressed in full combat gear. Lali was shorter than Kala by a few inches, but what she lacked in height, she made up for in muscle. Kala wondered how Lali's shoulders could be bigger than most men's, but Lali managed to pull it off and still look like a girl. Lali had short bobbed black hair with blue eyes. She smiled at Derek, but talked to Kala, "We're on the stealth carrier tonight."

They shared their little joke at Kala's "air-sick" expense. Kala shrugged like she wasn't concerned, but that only made the two of them laugh.

"You guys love this," Kala grumbled at her two teammates. "I'll make sure I vomit on the both of you."

"Let's suit up," Derek grinned.

The three of them walked down a series of hallways until they reached their ready room. It was a typical locker room, except all the lockers were made of the same black metal as everything else in the Compound. Kala and Derek started to suit up in their combat clothes.

"Change of plans." Jack entered dressed in a black body suit that almost looked like scuba gear.

Kala's stomach fell. She knew what his clothing meant, and Jack quickly confirmed it.

"Phase-suits tonight," he announced and Kala groaned.

No one really liked phase-suits, but Kala hated them the most. Mainly because it aggravated her motion sickness, but also the whole idea just felt unnatural. She could never get used to the sensation of walking through walls. The new phase-suit was better than the last with only minimal disorientation, but if any part of the body wasn't covered, it would be left behind.

As in not being attached to the body anymore.

Last year, Lali lost an ear when the team took down the terrorist leader John Graverstin. The seal on her hood popped open from the impact of running through a thick security wall and when she stepped into Graverstin's bunker, Lali's left ear didn't come with her. Kala had to give it to Lali, though. She hadn't made a peep. Lali only grunted slightly from the initial shock and pain, then she was all business. In less than ten minutes, Kala's team had taken down Graverstin's entire base of operation. Kala barely noticed Lali's missing ear anymore, since she always kept it covered with her hair.

Kala reluctantly slipped into a black bodysuit. The suit itself was made from a special kind of stretch material, like a thick spandex. It was mainly there to make sure everyone's body parts stayed covered so that when they put on the phase-suit nothing would be showing. It was tight and uncomfortable and Kala felt like Catwoman in it. And not in a good way. Showing off her womanly curves always made her self-conscious. In combat situations she wanted to be seen as tough, not sexy.

From the passing glance she just saw coming from Jack, she was out of luck.

Reason number one thousand why she shouldn't have let herself get involved with her commanding officer.

After everyone was suited up the four of them headed toward the Cog, where all the fancy military gear was housed. You had to have a level five clearance just to enter the Cog, and considering that the highest clearance level was six, that was saying a lot. Jack's team was all given level five clearance, only Jack had six.

Kala walked second to last in the group order and felt like she was wearing a big onesie. Not only were her hands covered with tight-fitting gloves, but the suit covered her feet as well. To top it off their suits had face hugging hoods currently hanging behind their necks. With no heavy shoes, the four of them hardly made a noise as they walked through the black metal hallways toward their destination.

They reached the double doors of the Cog a few minutes later. The four stood in front of the doors and a holographic wall shot up in front of them like it did for Kala and Derek on the elevator. It scanned each person individually, their profiles rotating in front of them, until they were all cleared for passage.

The black doors silently slid open.

The Cog. Home for every imaginable and unimaginable piece of military gear owned and invented by the government.

Kala knew that one of the head honchos of the whole compound, General Geoffrey Turner, was responsible for it all. He and his partner, General Harry Clifton, started the secret OPS program years ago and were pretty much given free reign to do whatever was needed to protect the country. Kala had never met General Turner, but she had heard stories of his greatness. Turner had been a Seal himself, so Kala always felt a little extra pride that they had once been a part of the same team. General Turner basically scoured the earth for the best and brightest and he was pretty much allowed access to whatever he needed to use for experimentation. The results were astounding, the phase-suit being Turner's greatest accomplishment so far.

The Cog itself was a giant circle with smooth walls. Upon first glance the room appeared empty. The black marble floor was the only reflective surface in the space.

Next to the door, Jack typed into a small panel.

A piece of the flat wall opened up and a metal rod with four phase-suits slid outward. Kala was always a little disappointed at not being able to find out what lay beyond the surface of the walls. She had only seen about a quarter of the high-tech inventions that were stored in the Cog. Kala wished she could spend a day exploring everything in there, but only Generals Turner and Clifton had that kind of clearance.

Kala walked with the others to the phase-suits and took hers off the rack. Phase-suits were lighter than they looked, but still weighed at least five pounds. They were constructed with a thick charcoal grey material that made the uniforms ideal for night missions. The cloth felt almost rubbery to the touch, but the surface was smooth. It was one piece that zipped up all the way to the top. Like the black undersuit, a hood made up of a mesh version of the phase-material dangled on the back. It covered the entire head, snapping into place around the neck so no area was exposed, but still making it possible to see.

The second part of the suits was the most important to Kala: the vests. This was where the gun

were stored. Kala threw hers on and neatly tucked her two side arms into the inside of the vest. Not her beloved sniper rifle, but with this kind of mission, Kala had to settle for handguns. Kala hated the type of jobs. Phase-suits meant *up close and personal* and Kala much preferred aiming out a window at a target hundreds of feet away. It wasn't that she couldn't take care of herself. Kala held her own. It was more that she liked to observe and prepare for all possible outcomes. Hand-to-hand missions were the equivalent of a smash-and-grab to a thug. Sloppy. Kala hated sloppy.

It meant more things could go wrong.

Chapter Three

Kala and the team quickly finished suiting up. Once fully dressed, Kala shuddered to think of how if anyone ran across her unit in a dark alley, they'd run screaming. The team was quite an intimidating vision, and without being able to see their faces, Kala thought they looked a little bit like an invading force of aliens.

Jack led the team to the hangar deck where a stealth carrier awaited them. Within the darkness of the night and the dimly lit space, Kala had to squint, trying to peer through the mesh of her hood and see the ship better. Smooth black matte metal made up the surface of the airplane. Though the wings and nose of the plane were slick and aerodynamic, the "carrier" part made the plane look like a pregnant fighter jet. Hydraulic hinges opened the mouth of the beast, acting as a ramp for Kala and the others. Right up the fat belly, Kala entered the ship and quickly strapped herself in the row of seats bolted into the side of the plane's wall. There was an identical row of seats across from her in which Lali and Jack strapped in. Derek sat next to Kala like a pillar of hardened stone.

Kala took a deep breath as the metal walkway shut closed. As the carrier was taxiing out of the hangar and onto the runway, Kala tried to stay as calm as possible. The last thing she needed was to get airsick. The sound of the jet engine was barely audible as the plane raced down the runway and into the sky.

After about ten minutes of being in the air, Kala tried to keep from puking. She leaned her head back on the cold surface of the craft to distract herself from the sensation.

Kala could feel the plane vibrate as it moved through the air at an impossible speed. It was a specially designed stealth plane that was undetectable to all radar systems. This wasn't the first time Kala had flown in this plane, but she could never quite get used to the ride.

Jack motioned to the team that they should listen, "Our mission is on Air Force One."

Kala pushed aside all feelings of nausea and focused on the task at hand.

"Air Force One?" she asked with surprise. Normally, Kala kept quiet, but hearing their destination and all the implications that it held was a little jarring.

Jack nodded. "The President is being held hostage. We need to take the terrorists out and gain back control of the plane. The President's life is our top priority."

Kala was used to high priority missions, but the *President*? Everything came in sharp focus for her. How often does anyone get to save the President!

"Get ready to jump," Jack barked. He unstrapped himself from his seat and hit the button that opened up the door.

Cold air rushed into the cabin. The team climbed out of their chairs and stood in a line on the edge of the plane.

Staring into the night with wind blowing all around, Kala saw Air Force One flying below them. The stealth craft was keeping pace with the larger plane to try and make the jump as smooth as possible.

Jack handed everyone a small device the size of a lipstick container. Oxygen.

Kala took hers and opened up the bottom of the mesh face-covering, placing the mini-oxygen tank in her mouth. Being this high up, the pressure alone was substantial, but trying to breathe would be impossible. Plus, there was never a guarantee that their team could keep Air Force One in flight. If anything happened to jeopardize the cabin pressure, they'd need oxygen there as well.

"Kala, you first," Jack yelled over roaring wind.

Jack always had Kala go first because of her ability to adjust after passing through the walls. She may have motion sickness, but when it came to phasing, Kala was the first to snap out of the disorientation stage.

Kala nodded. She hit the small button on the upper right shoulder of her phase-suit turning it on. When Kala heard the familiar buzzing sound of the suit coming to life, she jumped.

Adrenaline coursed through her as the tearing wind surrounded her body. Jumping mid-air going 700 miles per hour wasn't exactly something Kala enjoyed, but she felt the rush regardless. She hoped the speed of the jump wouldn't interfere with the suit's pass-through capabilities. The last thing anyone needed was to lose a body part on this mission. Especially if that body part ended up being her head.

It took less than five seconds to reach the tail end of Air Force One and once Kala hit the surface of the ceiling she closed her eyes. Traveling through walls was always a surreal experience, but doing so 3,000 feet in the air made it all the more bizarre. Every fiber of her body felt liquid, as if for just a second Kala had been turned into water. A millisecond later, Kala belly-flopped onto the floor of the back cabin. Recovering almost immediately, she was quickly on her feet and drawing out the two guns from her vest.

Kala pulled back the mesh face-covering and spit out her oxygen device, pocketing it inside her vest. She squeezed her eyes open and shut a few times to regain her bearings. There was always a moment of disorientation no matter how disciplined she was, but Kala shook her head to keep focused. The last thing she needed was to be caught unaware by the terrorists who'd taken over the plane. Kala was still in shock that she was in Air Force One. As many high-ranking covert Ops she'd been a part of, Kala had never met the President. This wasn't exactly the way she wanted to meet him, but saving his life from terrorists had a certain heroic majesty to it that Kala could appreciate.

Aside from the urge to vomit up all the tequila she'd downed earlier that evening, Kala was ready to go. She'd landed in the back of the plane, in a room where office supplies were stored. Perfect place to rendezvous and take stock of the situation. A single door led to the main cabin in front of her, but it was closed. While Kala was waiting for the others to arrive, she crept up to the door and opened it with a crack.

The belly of the plane consisted of cushy leather chairs that looked like they belonged in a house, not on an airplane. They were arranged in rows, all facing a podium. Obviously the Press section was in the plane. Kala cursed to herself. Normally in missions the whole team would be fully briefed of the location they were entering. But this?

The orders from the higher-ups must have been fast and panicked for the operation to be this disorganized.

Kala surveyed the area. The room was empty. She just hoped that Jack had a little more information to go on since the team was pretty much riding blind on this one.

As if in answer to her request, Jack thumped to the ground behind her. The guy even managed to look graceful when doing a face-plant from the ceiling drop. For Kala there was no way to land with any kind of decorum when falling through a flying plane in a phase-suit. Kala had learned to take her SPLATs with a certain amount of humbleness.

Jack was on his feet in seconds, shaking his arms and legs to rid himself of the disorientation. He pulled back his face-covering and spit out his oxygen mouth piece. Jack made eye contact with Kala giving her a slight smile. "You good?" he asked.

With all the adrenaline rushing through her system, Kala smiled back. "Yeah. The next room is clear. Where's the President?"

"In his main office. It's at the forward end of the plane," Jack answered.

Kala knew then that Jack was privy to a lot more details of this mission than he had let on. She trusted him with her life, so as much as she wanted to inundate him with questions, Kala kept quiet.

The rest of the crew hit the floor shortly thereafter. A few minutes of adjustment time and they were ready to go.

Jack took the lead. The team went into their standard formation, which consisted of Jack up front, Kala, Derek and Lali in the back.

Jack led them into the empty Press section. Everyone had their guns out and ready. Only Kala held both her guns, she felt more comfortable with two, ready to take down the men who held the President hostage.

As they passed through the bolted leather recliners, Kala looked outside the small round window. She realized that the plane was headed toward a large grid of lights: Washington D.C. The goal of these terrorists might be to crash the plane somewhere in the Capital. They needed to gain control of the plane immediately.

Kala made brief eye contact with Derek behind her. She could tell he was thinking the same thing. An understanding passed between them. Kala knew that they'd both do anything to stop these crazies. *Anything.*

Jack took them through five more sections of the aircraft, all empty. The whole situation reeked of something strange. Normally, there'd be guards stationed along the way. Maybe the terrorists thought that a rescue mission would be impossible once in the air. Either way, something just felt off to Kala.

She eyed Jack in front of her. He looked extra nervous as well. It wasn't like Jack to show any kind of emotion in an operation, but he looked downright petrified as he motioned the team forward into the galley. Seeing him like that made Kala even more wiggled out. Something was definitely *wrong* about this whole thing.

Kala tucked her second gun inside her vest. She felt like she needed a free hand.

Jack stood in front of the closed galley door leading to the next room. He whispered, "The next room is Medical and then the President's office. Intel says he's being held in the latter. We'll go in fast. Head shots only. We don't want to hit a window and lose cabin pressure."

Which meant no random firing. This wasn't a problem for Kala, but Lali had a bit of a trigger finger problem. And now that the plane was flying directly over the country's capital, they couldn't let it go down.

Kala noticed that Jack was sweating. For any other person, this wouldn't be an issue, but Jack never sweated. Kala knew it was probably because this mission was way bigger than anything they'd ever done before, but instinct told her there was more to it than that. Jack was scared, and it had nothing to do with terrorists.

Jack slowly cracked open the galley door and Kala could see through the opening that there were at least five men in Medical. All with guns.

To everyone's surprise, Jack swung the door open wide announcing their presence to the bad guys. But that was just it.

The men in Medical were Secret Service.

Their guns were up and pointed at the team, but upon recognizing their uniforms' military insignia, they lowered their weapons.

The door to the President's office was shut.

Kala and the others filed into the galley to confer with the Secret Service men. Kala had counted correctly, there were five of them. Wardrobe was typical of government bodyguards: black suits and ties. The five of them had obviously been preparing to siege the next room, loading guns and conferring in a small huddle.

When Jack and his team joined them, their leader spoke up, "I'm agent Ford. I'm assuming you're Turner's squad?" Ford directed his statement at Jack.

Jack nodded, "Jack Norbin. What are we looking at here?"

"The situation is delicate..." Ford paused, looking like he was unsure of how to continue.

"Delicate how?" Kala asked when Jack hadn't.

It was as if Jack already knew what was happening and Kala and the rest of team were the only ones in the dark. It still struck her as odd that he wasn't confiding in them. They were such a tight-knit group and to have their leader acting so aloof made Kala ill at ease.

"There are no terrorists on this plane," Ford stated carefully.

Huh?

Kala didn't think she'd heard him correctly. "A hoax?"

"This is the worst crank call ever," Derek grumbled to himself.

Ford shook his head in the negative. A look passed between him and his men.

Something was very wrong.

And Derek was growing impatient. "Are we all going to stand around here like we're at the water cooler or something? Or are we going to save the President?"

Kala felt the same way. A bunch of elite military and Secret Service huddled like they were about to play flag football. Everyone's side arms out and ready to shoot. And more importantly, Kala was ready to shoot.

"That's just it," Agent Ford glanced at Derek, "The President *is* the threat."

Kala and her team stared blankly at the Secret Service agent.

"Excuse me?" Lali asked. Normally, the girl kept her mouth shut, but claiming that the President himself was the actual threat was preposterous.

Ford wiped sweat off his brow and explained. "The President has five bars of C-4 strapped to his chest hooked up to a bomb with a remote trigger that only he holds." Ford was obviously freaked. No wonder Ford and his guys had been conferring in the Galley. What could they do? Shoot the President?

That's what Jack's team was for.

Kala took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down. This was an impossible situation. She wondered why in the hell the President would want to blow himself up!? And over Washington D.C. He could kill thousands of innocent lives.

"Do we take him out?" Jack asked Ford. And not with the incredulity that Kala would have expected from Jack. It was almost as if he was asking for Ford's permission.

Ford's eyes were practically bugging out of his head. "We've been arguing about that for the last twenty minutes! It's the President of the United States for God's sake!"

Jack placed a hand on Ford's shoulder, "That's what we're here for. You swore an oath to protect him at all costs. We didn't."

Kala was pretty shocked at how calmly Jack said that. It was in that moment that she knew something with absolute certainty.

Jack was there to kill the President.

He had known what his mission was way before they suited up, and Jack had been mentally preparing for it the whole time.

Jack nodded to Ford. "We've got it from here."

Ford's demeanor had slowly deteriorated since Kala's crew arrived. He was an utter mess sweating, shaking and clenched. Ford ordered his men to stand aside.

Jack motioned to Kala to stay behind him, and the others followed in their standard formation.

Very carefully, Jack opened the door that led to the President's office.

What awaited them was terrifying.

President Jareth Wilton stood behind his desk. He was wearing a vest that held five grey bars of C-4 wired into a bomb. Wilton was a tall man, well over six feet with stark black hair and a long face. He was a young President, only fifty years old, but he looked like he'd aged twenty years since the last time Kala had seen him at a press conference, with dark rings under his eyes and worry lines on his forehead.

But his smile was what made the scene surreal and horrific. His thin lips were grinning as if he just climbed Mt. Everest.

President Wilton stared directly at Jack as the door swung open the rest of the way. "I figured it out. I figured out how to break it! No one will ever have to do what I've had to do again! Do you realize what this means?"

Kala knew then and there that the man was cracked. Figured what out? Break what? He was rambling like a mad man.

But the more frightening moment came when Jack responded back to Wilton. "Killing yourself is impossible. People have tried that in the past."

Not only was President Wilton talking crazy, but apparently Jack knew his language and was responding accordingly.

Kala noticed that Wilton's eyes lit up when Jack spoke. "You're the one they sent to replace me."

Jack nodded.

What? Kala was seriously confused.

Kala spoke up, "What's going on Jack?"

Replace him for what?

Jack didn't acknowledge Kala or the rest of the team, which was shifting uncomfortably behind him.

Wilton shook his head, serious. "You can't do it. You have to let me detonate this bomb. We have to crash the plane! It's the only way to stop it!"

"You can't stop it!" Jack yelled back.

"I can and I will!" Wilton talked into an earpiece. "NOW!"

The plane nose-dived.

Everyone jolted forward and stumbled from the force of it.

Jack barked orders, "Lali get up to the Flight Deck and by any means necessary take over the plane!"

Lali paused for a second, she looked more confused than Kala felt, but after a moment to gain her bearings as the plane was falling fast, she managed to high-tail it out of the room and up to the Flight Deck.

Kala was sure they'd hit ground at any moment.

Jack aimed his gun at the President's head.

Wilton was frantic. He ducked behind his large oak desk that was bolted to the ground.

"You can't kill me! You'll ruin everything!" Wilton yelled.

Jack turned to Kala and Derek. "No one shoots him but me!"

Kala kind of nodded, but she was in shock at the fact that they were about to flatten a part of the capital with Air Force One. She really didn't care what Jack was saying. She couldn't let President Wilton set off that bomb and kill thousands.

Jack shot at the desk, trying to hit the president, but he didn't come close.

Only Kala could make a shot like that and not get them all killed from shooting a hole through the plane.

Kala and Derek made eye contact. Kala could tell Derek was thinking the same thing. He whispered so only Kala could hear, "Do it."

Kala's nod was barely perceptible.

Jack saw her and his eyes went wide. "Kala STOP!"

Kala shrugged. "I can't let him do this, Jack. I'm sorry."

Only the top of Wilton's head was showing.

It was enough.

Kala took her shot.

Chapter Four

“My, my, this is quite a surprise. Welcome,” President Wilton said, offering Kala a seat.

Kala was sure that she was either dreaming or dead.

In front of her was President Wilton. He was at a small café, sitting in an intricately ornate iron wrought chair, with an equally ornate table in front of him. A small espresso rested on the table. The café looked old, like they were in France or Italy, made of aged brick and ivy growing up the walls of the building. Cobblestone sidewalks and streets lined the whole area, making Kala feel like she had walked into an old painting.

There was absolutely no one in sight except for Wilton, not even inside the café. It was like there had been some sort of evacuation and only the President and Kala had been left behind.

An identical chair to the President’s sat empty across from him. “Trust me, you’re going to want to sit down.”

Kala knew it had to be some sort of delusion or dream. The plane must have lost oxygen or a pressure and Kala probably passed out. The President no longer had a C-4 bomb strapped around his chest. In fact, he looked quite relaxed in his dress shirt unbuttoned a few buttons and his khakis. Being the last person Kala saw before she blacked out, it made sense that she’d see Wilton here.

“You’re not dreaming. I assure you this is all quite real. I’m not the President though unfortunately that’s how you’ll see me. You should have seen what I looked like before Mr. Wilton took over. I was quite the Adonis,” Wilton said jovially.

Kala reluctantly sat down because at this point what else could she do? If this were a dream she would wake up at some point. If she were dead... Well, she might as well enjoy the illusion of being alive for a bit.

Wilton looked happy that Kala complied and sat down. “You still think you’re dreaming, don’t you.” It wasn’t a question.

Kala didn’t answer. She didn’t feel the need to respond to a figment of her imagination.

Wilton sighed in amused frustration. “No one has come here *by accident* before. Every replacement is vetted from birth and trained their whole lives to do this job. By the time they get to me, I simply give them the explanation on how everything works and send them on their way. But you...” He let the thought hang.

Wilton’s face went from amused to angry in about a millisecond. “SPEAK!” he screamed.

It was so real, Kala jumped back in her seat. “Why? You seem to be pretty comfortable doing all this talking.” Kala’s sarcasm never failed her.

Wilton laughed. “You’re going to be interesting, I can tell.”

Kala wished she’d wake up. This dream was getting weird.

Wilton was serious once more. “How many times do I have to tell you: you’re not dreaming!” His voice was insistent.

“You can scream ‘til the cows come home, but there’s no way this is real,” Kala said, hoping that would jolt her awake.

She felt her throat close, like invisible hands were strangling her. Kala clasped onto her neck, trying to pry off the force, but no air was coming through her passageways.

She knew then.

Wherever *this* was: it *was* real.

Kala nodded to Wilton, showing him that she believed him.

Her airways opened up, letting a flood of oxygen into her lungs.

Definitely real.

All sorts of scenarios ran through Kala’s head. Had she passed out and been dumped here? Where

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