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Chapter 1

Somewhere in coastal Maine ...

Gabrielle closed her eyes as the hot shower beat against her skin and blood slowly slid down her arms and legs, washed away by water and steam. Weary and tired, she put both her hands against the cold tiles in front of her, letting the water pound against her scalp. She didn't want to know how many times she came back from missions wounded, drained, and empty, waiting for the heat to reach her bones and her hot water tank to run cold. Water dripped from her blonde locks, forming a waterfall around her face.

Once the adrenaline stopped coursing through her veins, she didn't have anything left. Again, after the fire, she was alone. Not that she minded being alone. On the contrary, most of the time, loneliness gave her a sense of freedom, and when she needed companionship, there was always the presence of her weird brothers and sisters in arms. And when the night grew too cold ... Well, she couldn't remember the last time she actually had a man warming her bed. Not since that imbecile she brought to her hotel room. One stupid move to forget as fast as possible. She allowed herself to make mistakes in her private life, but not in her line of work. Never in her work.

But, nonetheless, she had sex with the moron. Was she that far gone? When she looked back at it, she saw more of an outlet for accumulated tension. There was absolutely no possible connection between them, but once she only focused on the warm flesh and competent enough hands, it was all she needed.

Of its own accord, her hand glided down from the tile to her cheek, to her neck, trailing her fingertips toward the valley between her breasts only to circle back and lazily make concentric circles around her nipple. Her other hand fisted on the wall as she pinched and pulled her sensitive tip, her breath catching a little. Despite the heat, she felt goose bumps running down her spine.

Only focusing on the touch, she spanned her fingers, moving down on her flat stomach. It quivered in anticipation, but she kept going slowly. When her fingers touched her dampened curls, she couldn't help but sigh. Impatience grew as she slid it through her sensitive folds and lightly caressed her clit. Now, a mere spark ignited into a flame. Her head fell back when she opened her legs a little more, as her fingers pursued her pleasure. She couldn't stand it anymore, wouldn't deny herself a second more. She increased the tempo and pressure until the wave took her. For one perfect moment in time she was blind and deaf, with only pleasure and lightness surrounding her. Well, until she was no longer alone in the room.

Training and instinct took over as she grabbed her gun, which was tucked beside her shampoo bottle, and pointed it at the intruder through the glass door.

Realizing immediately it was her boss and friend standing in her bathroom, Gabrielle lowered her weapon.

“Beatrice Dante! For God’s sake!”

Folding her arms and leaning her hip against the sink, Beatrice angled her head, and the mischief in her eyes made her seem so much younger. Or maybe it was her spiked red hair and light dusting of freckles that made her look like a pixie.

“You don’t answer your phone, you don’t answer your door, and I was beginning to think you were dead.”

Gabrielle grabbed the towel she had flung above the glass door and wrapped it around her, before taking another one for her wet blonde hair.

“I’m not dead.”

“I can see it now.”

“No need to ask how long you’ve been standing there I suppose.”

Smiling, Bea shook her head.

“Another evidence you’re definitely not dead. Glad I could see that as you’re so tight lipped about your personal life.”

Gabrielle snorted. “What personal life? Since I began working for you, I’m either chasing bad guys or getting myself shot at. When I’m home, and let me tell you it isn’t often, I barely have time to buy new batteries before you send me off to another assignment.” She grabbed a thick blue terry robe hooked behind the bathroom door and put it on before walking out.

Bea followed her downstairs into the kitchen. “And now that you had your regulatory orgasm, you’re ready for another mission. Isn’t that wonderful?”

“Fuck you, Bea.”

“You know, I wish I could, but I’m without a dance partner and we have a little crisis on our hands.”

Gabrielle harrumphed as she opened the fridge. She wasn’t the only one tight-lipped about her personal life, and she knew her boss enough to guess she had a man.

“There is always a crisis. But this one isn’t for me. I asked you for some R&R, and I’m taking it.”

Leaning on the island, Bea crossed her arms. “You’re the best at what you do.”

“You bet. But even your best needs to take some time off. Otherwise, tired as I’m, I will be at risk of making mistakes.”

“Gabby—”

Swiveling to face her, she signed for her boss to stop talking. “Don’t! I never ask for anything, Beatrice, and you know it. Before my last assignment, I told you I needed time off ... hell, even before the last assignment, I begged for it. So now, I’m taking it.”

Gabrielle turned her back to her boss and grabbed some bread and a brand new peanut butter jar—she’d had the bright idea to get one at the airport convenience store. She didn’t say a word, but she suspected she wouldn’t have much time for anything more substantial. She may try to build a thick brick wall around her to keep Bea out, but she couldn’t deny the woman who saved her and later became her friend. So, she sat at her kitchen table overlooking the ocean and began to slather slices of bread. Beatrice came beside her and pulled a chair without a word.

For a long time, the two women stayed silent. Gabrielle ate, her eyes fixed the horizon, where the line blurred between sky and sea. The clouds swirled darker as the wind picked up and created new patterns. How ironic the weather could fortune tell what was to come. She never truly paid attention before. Perhaps she didn’t care much before for bad omens.

“James called me.” Bea’s voice said the words as if she was telling her that her car broke down.

At Admiral Feander’s first name, Gabrielle’s stomach sank. One of the most prominent men in the country with so many medals he could drown from them, he was an old friend of Beatrice, and even more than that—way before she became her friend, way before all this. Bea may be trained at hiding her emotions, but Gabrielle knew she had more than a soft spot for him. She suspected her friend had fallen hard. They remained discreet about it, and Gabrielle respected their wishes.

“I will only hear about it if it’s about a booty call, because any other answer, I don’t want to know.”

Gabrielle closed the jar as the peanut butter turned to mud in her mouth.

“Gabby, you know he wouldn’t request the help of Purgatory if it wasn’t important.”

Gabrielle untied her wet hair and started combing her shoulder-length strands with her fingers. Anything to keep her hands busy from rubbing her gritty eyes.

“The only way I would do it is if James or his own son were in deep trouble. As far as I know, he seems well and little Simon is leading a stellar life abroad. I say little Simon, but I guess that a genius physicist and biologist isn’t really little. Not anymore. Ask another, Bea ... Rickard, Mac, anybody else but me.”

When her friend leaned back in her chair, Gabrielle turned and saw she wasn’t looking at her. Her cat’s eyes were fixed on the same stormy horizon. Her gaze was lost a little and she seemed tired. Beatrice Dante never looked tired. She was fierce, stubborn, dangerous, but never unsure or tired. What was eating at her? Her short red hair was all up in unruly spikes, as if she had combed them with her fingers, one time too many.

“Speak to me, Bea, what are you not telling me? When James calls, you’re usually full of fire and spit. Is something wrong?”

When her friend glanced back at her, she shook her head. “There is a lot I don’t know yet. But James asked for my help, and yours, to extract one of his men, kidnapped during a mission in South Africa. Very hush-hush, not in the books, if you catch my drift.”

“One of his men, you mean a Navy SEAL?” Gabrielle almost laughed at the question. “I always knew one of those stupid, no-brain cowboys would get caught.”

“Well, joke all you want, but these no-brain cowboys, as you call them, are rarely caught. That’s what should worry you.”

“Wait a minute, you said one man. Navy SEALs never play solo, what’s the deal?”

When Beatrice leaned forward, her eyes were bleak. “The man captured was working alone, under a special request from James. Now, he’s stuck, politically speaking. If South African authorities discover an American operating in their country without prior permission ...”

Gabrielle snorted. “It would do the exact same thing as before, not so long ago, when you got in the same situation, in the same country.”

Bea dismissed her argument. “Yeah, well, let’s not dwell on past misfortunes, shall we? And you know why I cannot go myself, nor send anybody else but you. There is no time for any type of preparation, and you’re the only one who can deal with this kind of pressure.”

But for how long? The question buzzed in Gabrielle’s ears. On the other hand, she understood her boss. As an operative, she was the most experienced and the one capable of anything, so far. And she had made a vow; she couldn’t deny what she had promised.

“One last mission, before a break. And not a mere two weeks, I want a full two months without you calling me for anything except offering me a drink. Are we clear?”

All the tension seemed to flee from Bea in a rush. *So unusual for her*, Gabrielle thought.

“When do I have to leave?”

“The jet is ready to take you whenever you’re ready.”

“Wow, you were so sure I would go without a fight?”

Bea smiled. “Not without a fight. I know you need rest, lots of it. The last missions were no walk in the park. But, Gabby, I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important. Please believe me.”

Gabrielle reached for her friend’s hand. “I know, Bea. Otherwise, I wouldn’t jump on a plane to save the ass of a Navy sailor.”

Johannesburg, South Africa

The throbbing in his head and side didn’t lessen. Probably because of being in a cell for so long or, almost certainly, caused by the latest beating he received from his captors.

Captain Sullivan Thorne, Navy SEAL and now an undercover agent in deep shit, never ceased to analyze the situation. So far, the guards didn’t have a steady round pattern, nor the same men came and went with any regularity. New faces, new times; sometimes they stayed longer, or they left after a glance. The only consistent men were his torturers. Same three bastards, same questions, same beating. Over and over again, for three days now, if his calculations were accurate. There were no windows or any outside light apart from the blinding neon swaying above.

So far, he knew he could endure this for a while longer. In fact, he had suffered worse in his career, and for the information he gathered for the admiral, he would push himself even past his breaking point. Whatever it was. What worried him most was not the pain, but the lack of water, food, and sleep. He could withstand a lot, but without vitals, he would become weaker, more susceptible to mistakes and slips.

Leaning back against the wall, he extended his legs. His jeans clung and pulled his skin due to the heat and dried blood. One by one, he moved and stretched his muscles, making sure he didn’t get too stiff or sore.

Warmed up, he closed his eyes and tried to catch a power nap before anyone would notice. As he leaned back his head, he heard loud voices and some kind of commotion in the hallway. What forced him to react was a female voice. Definitely female ... in hysterics and tears. What the—

The door crashed open and a very blonde, teary, and pregnant female barged into the room.

The guards followed suit and it took everything in him not to smile at how they seemed desperate to get her out of here and calm her down.

Did he know her? Beyond the tears and reddened face, he was pretty sure she was a total stranger. *What's she doing? And more importantly, how did she get in here?*

Then, the teary fury turned to him and froze. "Baby? Is that you?"

Baby? Her southern accent was so thick he almost blinked. She hugged her enormous belly with one hand and reached for him through the bars with the other.

"Baby cakes! It's me, your wife, Jenny Lee. Don't you recognize me? It took me so long to find you!"

Sully was about to frown when he saw the blonde wink her baby blues at him. Was this a trap?

"Come on, sweetheart, how could you forget me? Please, honey bee, grab my hand, and let me touch you ..."

Warily, he got on his knees and reached for her. If it was a trick, the blonde woman would pay for it. When she grabbed his hand, he was surprised by her strength. She cupped his head to awkwardly kiss him through the bars, and he perceived something slide in his hand. *A key.*

When the blonde kissed him lightly on the lips, the softness unfazed him compared to his pained body and harsh conditions.

The two guards grew restless and pulled her back. She winked at him again, but before he could draw a breath, she punched one guard on the wind pipe, silencing him, while breaking the neck of the other. The blonde turned back and then sliced his throat open. Each movement was done with outstanding precision. She was a seasoned operative, no doubt about it. As she grabbed the guard's phone, he used the key to unlock his cell.

"Captain Sullivan Thorne, I'm Gabrielle, your rescue party for today."

Well, well, gone was the accent. Now, it was more difficult to know where she was coming from. A blend-in accent.

"Who sent you?"

“The request was made by Admiral Feander.”

The admiral? He thought he would send a SEAL Team for help, not a single operative.

“You work for him?”

“More or less.”

Frowning, Sully was about to ask for whom she worked when she removed her flower dress over her head.

His brain blanked for a moment as he noticed all the white skin and curves, but mostly the attached pouch. She wasn't pregnant after all. How he'd believed this in the first place, he didn't know.

The woman named Gabrielle, now in white lace boy shorts and bra, dropped the pouch on the ground and unzipped it, revealing more firepower. “I wasn't sure the guards would have what we need to defend ourselves while getting out.”

Sully grabbed one gun and checked the ammunitions before tucking it in his waistband and grabbing another one.

“What is our escape route?”

After putting her dress back on, the woman slung the backpack on her shoulders before taking one gun. “Two doors down the hallway, there is a storage room. There is supposed to be an outside door.”

“Supposed to?”

The woman grimaced, her eyes turning to ice, and he guessed it wasn't a good sign.

“I'm sorry, sir, but the situation is sketchy, and all available information even more so. Would you prefer to wait back in your cell so I can find an escape and bring your limo around?”

Whoa, she caught fire fast, that's for sure.

“I know how a rescue can be. Now can we move on?”

Without a word, she opened the door, looking around before motioning him to follow her. Less than ten seconds later, they were both in the storage room.

“Shit,” Gabrielle muttered.

“What?” Sully tried to keep his voice as low as possible.

“Escape route blocked. The door has been sealed.”

He examined the area. “What door?”

“According to the plan, there was supposed to be an emergency door in front of this door. Do you see a door?”

He walked to the wall and gently knocked on it. “It seems to only be sheetrock. There may be a door behind it.”

Gabrielle shook her head. “No good. If the door is nailed shut, it would be too tricky and we would make too much noise trying to open it.”

“Do you have a plan B?” She better, because walking out of here all guns blazing was out of the question.

Gabrielle checked around and smiled. “I think I have an idea.”

The alarm was blaring so loudly Gabrielle was unable to hear Captain Thorne’s voice over the noise. Guards were running all around, ignoring them, exactly as she had planned. It wasn’t easy to come up with something on the spur of the moment, with an angry SEAL behind her. As if all of his ops went as expected. She refrained from reminding him that if his own mission would have been according to plan, she wouldn’t be here trying to save his hide.

The smoke became thicker by the minute. The old mattress in the storage room did the job without a glitch. They were in the basement, and since smoke goes up, it was an easy feat. The extra bit of luck was finding a black coverall and cap. It fit snugly on him, but ultimately appeared more like a uniform. It hid his blood-stained pants and shirt, and the cap tucked low on his face hid most of his features and dark short hair. The final touch was her getting back into pregnancy mode, being carried in the arms of this man. As expected, her blonde hair, flowery dress, and imposing stomach drew attention away from the captain. So in complete chaos, they exited the building through the front door.

Gabrielle lifted her head to whisper close to his ear, “Go right around the block. My jeep is parked there. The black one.”

The captain nodded and continued walking. It must have hurt him to hold her weight. She suspected the guards wouldn’t have gone easy on him. In fact, he was lucky not to have been transferred to a more secured facility yet. It was probably in their plans, but if it had been the case, she would have needed more time and definitely more resources

to accomplish this particular goal. The police station holding him had extra cells in the basement but was not as safe as a prison.

From a distance, she detected sirens. Firefighters, no doubt. They would be long gone by the time the station did a head count and saw the two dead guards and their prisoner being gone.

As they arrived at her jeep, the captain gently put her down, and she unhooked the hidden backpack.

Reaching for her keys, Gabrielle unlocked the door and hopped in. The captain sat in the passenger seat without a word. Were all Navy SEALs so temperamental? She knew women with less mood swings than him.

She drove around, making circles to be sure they were not followed. The captain glanced back several times when he was not examining her profile. She didn't see it, but she could sense it all right.

Once reassured they were alone, she headed for the secured house located in a gated community Bea had arranged for them. Gabrielle had already installed all her gear there. Damn the jetlag and other plans, it had become too risky to leave the captain in the police station any longer. There were too many variables.

Once on the highway to Pretoria, she reached for the black bag on the backseat and dropped it on the captain's lap.

“What is it?”

“Civilian clothes, clean and free of blood. And I hope in your size. We will soon arrive at the gates of a secured compound and the guards won't like to see blood on you. Too many questions. As I wasn't sure how badly they would have beaten you, I chose pants and long sleeves.”

Gabrielle couldn't hear what he answered apart from a deep muffled thank you. The man twisted in the tight confinement, but was careful not to bump her or the wheel. He unzipped the coverall and removed his bloodstained shirt. Damn, he was a gorgeous man, with his dark short hair, stubbly square jaw, and intense light green eyes. But it was the darkening bruises on his torso and abs which caught her attention. The guards didn't go easy on him, and he must be in a world of pain. It dawned on her that he'd carried her in his arms for almost a quarter mile without even blinking. She knew Navy SEALs were a tough bunch, but given his condition she felt newfound admiration for the man. She had been in tight spots herself and even if being beaten up was not necessarily the first form of torture for a woman, sustaining a great amount of pain while keeping a level head wasn't an easy feat.

Out of respect, she kept her gaze fixed on the road, but from the corner of her eyes, she could see the tanned expanse of skin of his thigh ... and upper thigh. Damn, the man was riding commando! Even badly bruised and in a foul mood, he could raise her internal temperature in a beat.

Once seated back down again, his muscled thighs clad in dark jeans and a long sleeved T-shirt defining his sculpted chest, his gaze went back to her.

“You said you were sent by the admiral. Why didn’t he send my team to get me?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why you? Where is your team? We’re going to them?”

“No, sailor. I’m your only army.”

Her statement seemed to make him ponder for a moment and he smiled. Too bad his gorgeous mouth dripped with sarcasm when he said, “Admiral Feander assigned a single woman to get me back? You’re *that* good?”

Gabrielle angled her head at him. “I got you out and am bringing you to safety. What other proof do you need?”

“Wow, I insulted you and you kept your cool. Impressive.”

“You think you’re the first asshole to make this type of remark to me? I save people, I don’t change people. I was asked to get you out of trouble and back to your daddy. That’s all, Captain.”

With that comment, the captain fully turned to her. “You were asked, not ordered. Nice choice of words. It means you’re a hired mercenary.”

Hired mercenary. Gabrielle smiled at that thought. She was way beyond mercenary—she was with purpose.

“Captain, you’re making fantastical assumptions, no doubt. I’m no longer a mercenary, trust me.”

“Lady, I only trust who and what I know. And you, I don’t. Unless you’re generous enough to give me more info.”

“Knowing your admiral sent someone to save you isn’t enough?”

“My admiral, as you say, sent a single woman to help and it’s not standard procedure.”

Gabrielle pondered how close he was to the admiral. *Only one way to find out.*

“Are you a friend of Admiral Feander, Captain?”

The man glared, but did not confirm nor deny. Definitely in protective mode.

“I would say your lack of answer is an affirmative. If you’re a close friend of James Feander, he perhaps told you about Purgatory.” Bea hadn’t told her not to tell the captain who she was, after all.

“Purgatory? You mean he wasn’t kidding when he told me about this independent organization, offering rescue services? I didn’t know he was crazy enough to ask that bunch of wannabes for help.”

“Wannabes?” Now Gabrielle laughed. “If only you knew who those wannabes were, you would shit in your pants, sailor.”

The Captain scoffed. “You can fool yourselves, but cute girls are not sent to rescue missions.”

“Mmmm. I haven’t been called a girl in a long time. I think they hit you on the head too many times. You need to take a nap, sailor boy.”

“And even if your group is legit, most of what you do is completely illegal ... even unsanctioned by the government.”

“Yeah, right. As if all you do is legal and sanctioned by your government.”

“It is.”

“Dream on. Or you’re simply deluded, I don’t know. You wouldn’t be the first one to be. Don’t worry, as soon as we reach the compound, I’ll call in the cavalry who will be delighted to take you off my hands.”

“Fuck you, lady.”

“You wish, sailor boy.”

Chapter 2

The air conditioning was blasting out of control and the skin on Gabrielle's back, which was still wet from sweat, was freezing as she answered Bea's questions on the secured phone. At least she had changed from her summer dress to comfortable and dry pants and camisole.

"Seriously, Bea, I don't know why our Intel indicated a door where there was none. A simple mistake, I guess. It wouldn't be the first one. You can't blame anyone of ours."

"I don't like when there are slips. Too many slips and we're bound to fail."

"Well, we haven't failed. I have your package and all is good. As soon as the admiral tells us where he wants him, I'm going back home."

"How is he doing?"

Gabrielle turned her head toward the closed bathroom door, where the shower was still running.

"Okay, I guess. At least after what he went through. Not happy to have been saved by Purgatory or a woman to boot, but he'll recover."

Her boss laughed. "Men. Before I could convince James of our ... unique talents, he was skeptical."

"Well, I hope the Intel the captain retrieved for the admiral is worth his sufferings. Even if he's an ass."

"I hope so, too. I'll contact you as soon as I know how to get you both out. So far, many government agencies were informed of a fugitive and Captain Thorne's face is plastered all over the South African's news. I will pull a few strings, but it may take a little time. Stay put and I'll do the rest."

"No problem. All is good. As soon as I shower, I'll feel like myself again."

"Yeah, especially if it's like the last one you took."

"Low blow, Bea. And I thought you were supposed to be all serious and official."

"My dear friend, I allow myself to be a bit less so when you do your work so well. For the record, I would get even lower for the face I've seen in Thorne's files." Gabrielle's mind hastily made a detour to that handsome face.

"I'm not that desperate, Bea."

“Of course, darling. Keep telling yourself this simple affirmation.”

“Bye, Bea.”

“Bye, hellcat.”

Gabrielle caught herself before throwing the cell phone against the wall. Could Bea be right? Well, not entirely. She was desperate for a vacation. A beach, lots of white sand, a cool, tall cocktail, and a handsome man with hot hands and an empty head. She could stay in South Africa and go to Cape Town to find all of what she needed, which was an enticing possibility.

On that thought, the bathroom door opened to the captain. Her vision caught on the almost unfastened pants hanging low on his lean hips, and a fascinating drop of water sliding down a well-defined, yet bruised chest to mouthwatering abs. Heat pulsed through her abdomen. Captain Thorne stepped out and turned to her.

“By the expression on your face, I shouldn’t say anything, but I’ll risk it anyway. What’s wrong?”

When she finally caught herself and traveled her gaze back up to his face, she frowned. She could have said that licking every inch of his exposed skin would have made her lots better but she refrained.

“Nothing’s wrong. I talked to my boss and she’s contacting your boss. She’s supposed to call me back with instructions for our way out of here. Keep the phone, the admiral will possibly try to contact you soon. It’s a secure line, so if you need to contact whoever, feel free.”

She was walking past him to the bedroom to retrieve her things when he caught up with her and touched her shoulder.

Gabrielle peered up. There was still an annoying half smile, but what she saw beyond it made her hesitate. She knew that expression. The need for connection, tangible and real connection after pain and hardship. And why not flame that fire? She needed to feel alive and connected, even if only for a brief moment, with a stranger. No, not any stranger. With him. With Sullivan Thorne.

The captain stood there, immobile, waiting for a move, any opening from her.

And that’s when she threw her resolutions to the wind and kissed him.

To be continued...