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Written by James Rollins

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BLOODLINE

A Σ SIGMA FORCE NOVEL

JAMES ROLLINS



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PROLOGUE

Summer 1134
Holy Lands

They once called her a witch and a whore.

But no longer.

She sat astride a gray destrier as the black-armored warhorse stepped gingerly through the carnage of battle. Bodies littered the fields ahead, Muslim and Christian alike. Her passage stirred the feasting crows and ravens, chasing them up into great black clouds in her wake. Other scavengers—those on two legs—picked through the dead, pulling off boots, yanking out arrows for their points and feathers. A few faces lifted to stare, then quickly turned away again.

She knew what they saw, another knight among the many who fought here. Her breasts were hidden under a padded habergeon and a hauberk of mail. Her dark hair, cropped to her shoulders, shorter than most men's, lay under a conical helmet; her fine features further obscured by a nasal bar. Strapped to the side of her saddle, a double-edged broadsword bumped against her left knee, ringing off the mail chausses that protected her long legs.

Only a few knew she was not a man—and *none* knew she held secrets far darker than her hidden gender.

Her squire waited for her at the edge of a rutted road. The path wound

steeply up to an isolated stone keep. The hulking structure, hidden deep within the Naphtali Mountains of Galilee, had no name and looked as if it had been carved out of the hill itself. Beyond its battlements, the red sun sat low on the horizon, obscured by the smoke from campfires and torched fields.

The young squire dropped to a knee as she drew her horse to a halt beside him.

"Is he still there?" she asked.

A nod. Frightened. "Lord Godefroy awaits you ahead."

Her squire refused to look in the direction of the stone-crowned keep. She had no such reluctance. She tilted her helmet up to get a better view.

At long last . . .

She had spent sixteen years—going back to when her uncle founded the Order of the Poor Knights of the Temple of Jerusalem—searching for the impossible. Even her uncle did not understand her request to join the Templars, but her side of the family would not be refused. So she had been given the white mantle of the order and folded in among the original nine, hidden away, as faceless as the helmet she wore, while the order grew around her both in number and prominence.

Others of her family, of her bloodline, continued to manipulate the knightly order from within and without: gathering wealth and knowledge, searching for powerful relics from lost crypts and ancient crèches across Egypt and the Holy Lands. Despite their best planning, they'd certainly had their failures. Just a year ago, they'd missed acquiring the bones of the magi—the relics of the three biblical kings, said to hold the secrets to lost alchemies.

She would not let today mark another failure.

With a snap of the reins, she urged her horse up the rocky path. With each passing step, the number of dead grew as the guardians of the keep put up a final and futile struggle to withstand the assault. Reaching the summit of the hill, she found the gates to the keep broken and splintered, battered apart by a massive steel-shod ram.

A pair of knights guarded the way forward. Both nodded to her. The younger of the two, fresh to the order, had sewn a crimson cross over his heart. Other Templars had begun to take up the same habit, a symbol to

mark their willingness to shed their own blood for the cause. The grizzled and pocked older warrior simply wore the traditional white surcoat over his armor, like herself. The only decoration upon their mantles was the crimson blood of the slain.

"Godefroy awaits you in the crypt," the older knight said and pointed beyond the gates to the inner citadel.

She led her destrier through the ruins of the gate and quickly dismounted with a flourish of her mantle. She left her broadsword with her mount, knowing she had no fear of being ambushed by some lone surviving protector of the keep. Lord Godefroy, for all his troubles, was thorough. As testament to his diligence, all across the open courtyard, wooden pikes bore the heads of the last defenders. Their decapitated remains piled like so much firewood along a back wall.

The battle was over.

Only the spoils remained.

She reached a door that opened to shadows. A narrow stair, roughhewn and cut from the stone of the mountain, led down beneath the keep. The distant orange-red flicker of a torch marked the end of the steps far below. She descended, her footfalls hurrying only at the last.

Could it be true? After so many years . . .

She burst into a long chamber, lined to either side by stone sarcophagi, well over a score of them. Sweeping through, she barely noted the Egyptian writing, lines of symbols hinting at dark mysteries going back before Christ. Ahead, two figures stood bathed in torchlight at the rear of the chamber: one standing, the other on his knees, leaning on a staff to hold himself upright.

She crossed toward them, noting that the last sarcophagus had been pried open, its stone lid cracked on the floor beside it. It seemed somebody had already begun looking for the treasure hidden here. But the violated crypt held nothing but ash and what appeared to be bits of dried leaf and stem.

The disappointment showed on Lord Godefroy's face as she approached the pair. "So you come at last," he said with false cheer.

She ignored the knight. He stood a head taller than she did, though

he shared the same black hair and aquiline nose, marking their common ancestry out of southern France, their families distantly related.

She dropped to her knees and stared into the face of the prisoner. His features were tanned to a burnished shade, his skin smooth as supple leather. From under a fall of dark hair, black eyes stared back at her, reflecting the torchlight. Though on his knees, he showed no fear, only a deep welling of sadness that made her want to slap him.

Godefroy drew down beside her, intending to interfere, to try to ingratiate himself into what he must have sensed was of great importance. And though he was one of the few who knew her true identity, he knew nothing of her deeper secrets.

"My lady . . ." he started.

The eyes of the prisoner narrowed at the revelation, fixing her with a harder stare. All trace of sadness drained away, leaving behind a flicker of fear—but it quickly vanished.

Curious . . . does he know of our bloodline, our secrets?

Godefroy interrupted her reverie and continued, "Upon your instructions, we've spent many lives and spilled much blood to find this place hidden by rumor and guarded as much by curses as by infidels—all to find this man and the treasure he guards. Who is he? I have earned such knowledge upon the point of my sword."

She did not waste words on fools. She spoke instead to the prisoner, using an ancient dialect of Arabic. "When were you born?"

Those eyes bore into her, even pushing her back by the sheer force of his will, a buffeting wind of inner strength. He seemed to be judging whether to offer her a lie, but from whatever he found in her face, he recognized the futility of it.

When he spoke, his words were soft but came from a place of great weight. "I was born in Muharram in the Hijri year five-and-ninety."

Godefroy understood enough Arabic to scoff. "The year ninety-five? That would make him over a thousand years old."

"No," she said, more to herself than him, calculating in her head. "His people use a different accounting of years than we do, starting when their prophet Muhammad arrived in Mecca."

"So the man here is not a thousand years old?"

"Not at all," she said, finishing the conversion in her head. "He's only lived *five hundred and twenty* years."

From the corner of her eye, she noted Godefroy turn toward her, aghast.

"Impossible," he said with a tremulous quaver that betrayed the shallow depth of his disbelief.

She never broke from the prisoner's gaze. Within those eyes, she sensed an unfathomable, frightening knowledge. She tried to picture all he had witnessed over the centuries: mighty empires rising and falling, cities thrusting out of the sands only to be worn back down by the ages. How much could he reveal of ancient mysteries and lost histories?

But she was not here to press questions upon him.

And she doubted he would answer them anyway.

Not this man—if he could still be called a *man*.

When next he spoke, it came with a warning, his fingers tightening on his staff. "The world is not ready for what you seek. It is forbidden."

She refused to back down. "That is not for you to decide. If a man is fierce enough to grasp it, then it is his right to claim and possess it."

He stared back at her, his gaze drifting to her chest, to what was hidden beneath hard armor. "So Eve herself believed in the Garden of Eden when she listened to the snake and stole from the Tree of Knowledge."

"Ah," she sighed, leaning closer. "You mistake me. I am not Eve. And it is not the Tree of *Knowledge* I seek—but the Tree of *Life*."

Slipping a dagger from her belt, she quickly stood and drove the blade to its hilt under the prisoner's jaw, lifting him off his knees with her strength of will. In that single thrust, the endless march of centuries came to a bloody halt—along with the danger he posed.

Godefroy gasped, stepping back. "But is this not the man you came so far to find?"

She yanked free the dagger, spraying blood, and kicked the body away. She caught the staff before it fell free from the prisoner's slack fingers.

"It was not the man I sought," she said, "but what he carried."

Godefroy stared at the length of olive wood in her hand. Fresh blood

flowed in rivulets down its surface, revealing a faint carving along its length: an intricate weave of serpents and vines, curling around and around the shaft.

"What is it?" the knight asked, his eyes wide.

She faced him fully for the first time—and drove her blade into his left eye. He had seen too much to live. As he fell to his knees, his body wracking itself to death in ghastly heaves upon her dagger's point, she answered his last question, her fingers firm on the ancient wooden rod.

"Behold the Bachal Isu," she whispered to the centuries to come. "Wielded by Moses, carried by David, and borne by the King of Kings, here is the staff of Jesus Christ."

Fourth of July:
Five days from now

The assassin stared through the rifle's scope and lowered the crosshairs to the profile of President James T. Gant. He double-checked his range—seven hundred yards—and fixed the main targeting chevron of the USMC M40A3 sniper rifle upon the occipital bone behind the man's left ear, knowing a shot there would do the most damage. Festive music and bright laughter from the holiday picnic filtered through his earpiece. He let it all fade into the background as he concentrated on his target, on his mission.

In U.S. history, three presidents had died on the exact same day, on July 4, on the birthday of this country. It seemed beyond mere chance.

Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and James Monroe.

Today would mark the fourth.

Steadying his breath, Commander Gray Pierce pulled the trigger.

1

June 30, 11:44 A.M. EST
Takoma Park, Maryland

Gray Pierce pulled into the driveway with a coughing growl of the 1960 Thunderbird's V-8 engine.

He felt like growling himself.

"I thought the plan was to sell this place?" Kenny asked.

Gray's younger brother sat in the passenger seat, his head half out the window, staring up at the craftsman bungalow with the wraparound wooden porch and overhanging gable. It was their family home.

"Not any longer," Gray answered. "And don't mention any of that to Dad. His dementia makes him paranoid enough."

"How is that different from any other day . . . ?" Kenny mumbled sourly under his breath.

Gray glowered at his brother. He'd picked Kenny up at Dulles after a cross-country flight from Northern California. His brother's eyes were red-rimmed from jet lag—or maybe from too many small bottles of gin in first class. At this moment, Kenny reminded Gray of their father, especially with the pall of alcohol on his breath.

He caught his own reflection in the rearview mirror as he pulled the vintage Thunderbird into the family garage. While the two brothers both shared the same ruddy Welsh complexion and dark hair as their father, Gray kept his hair cropped short; Kenny had his tied in a short ponytail that looked too young even for someone still in his late twenties. To make matters worse, he also wore cargo shorts and a loose T-shirt with the logo

of a surfing company. Kenny was a software engineer for a company in Palo Alto, and apparently this was his version of business attire.

Gray climbed out of the car, trying his best to push back his irritation with his brother. On the ride here, Kenny had spent the entire time on his cell phone, dealing with business on the other coast. He'd barely shared a word, relegating Gray to the role of chauffeur.

It's not like I don't have my own business to attend, too.

For the past month, Gray had put his life on hold, dealing with the aftermath of the death of their mother and the continuing mental decline of their father. Kenny had come out for the funeral, promising to spend a week helping to get their affairs in order, but after two days, a business emergency drew him back across the country, and everything got dumped back on Gray's shoulders. In some ways, it would have been easier if Kenny had not bothered coming out at all. In his wake, he'd left a disheveled mess of insurance forms and probate paperwork for Gray to clean up.

That changed today.

After a long, heated call, Kenny had agreed to come out at this critical juncture. With their father suffering from advancing Alzheimer's, the sudden death of his wife sent him into a downward spiral. He'd spent the past three weeks in a memory-care unit, but he'd come home last night. And during this transition, Gray needed an extra pair of hands. Kenny had accumulated enough vacation time to be able to come out for a full two weeks. Gray intended to hold him to it this time.

Gray had taken a month off from work himself and was due back at Sigma headquarters in a week. Before that, he needed a few days of downtime to get his own house in order. That's where Kenny came in.

His brother hauled his luggage out of the convertible's trunk, slammed the lid, but kept his palm on the chrome bumper. "And what about Dad's car? We might as well sell it. It's not like he can drive it."

Gray pocketed the keys. The classic Thunderbird—raven black with a red leather interior—was his father's pride and joy. The man had gone to painstaking ends to restore it: tricking it out with a new Holly carburetor, a flame-thrower coil, and an electric choke.

"It stays," he said. "According to Dad's neurologist, it's important to

keep his environment as stable and consistent as possible, to maintain a familiar routine. Besides, even if he can't drive it, it'll give him something to tinker with."

Before Kenny could figure out what else to sell of his father's belongings, Gray headed toward the door. He didn't bother to offer to carry his brother's luggage. He'd had enough baggage to deal with lately.

But Kenny wasn't done. "If we're supposed to keep everything the same—to pretend nothing's changed—then what am I doing here?"

Gray swung toward him, balling a fist and tempted to use it. "Because you're still his son—and it's high time you acted like it."

Kenny stared him down. Anger burned in his brother's eyes, further reminding Gray of their father. He'd seen that fury all too often in his dad, especially of late, a belligerence born of dementia and fear. Not that such anger was new. His father had always been a hard man, a former oil worker out of Texas until an industrial accident took most of his left leg and all of his pride, turning an oilman into a housewife. Raising two boys while his spouse went to work had been hard on him. To compensate, he had run the household like a boot camp. And Gray, as stubborn as his father, had always pushed the envelope, a born rebel. Until at last, at eighteen years of age, he had simply packed his bags and joined the army.

It was his mother who finally drew them all back together, the proverbial glue of the family.

And now she was gone.

What were they to do without her?

Kenny finally hauled up his bag, shouldered past Gray, and mumbled words he knew would cut like rusted barbed wire: "At least I didn't get Mom killed."

A month ago, that gut-punch would have dropped Gray to his knees. But after mandatory psychiatric sessions—not that he hadn't missed a few—his brother's accusation only left him iron-hard, momentarily rooted in place. A booby trap meant for Gray had taken out his mother. *Collateral damage* was the phrase the psychiatrist had used, seeking to blunt the guilt.

But the funeral had been a closed casket.

Even now, he could not face that pain head-on. The only thing that kept him putting one foot in front of the other was the determination to expose and destroy the shadowy organization behind that cold-blooded murder.

And that's what he did: he turned and took one step, then another.

It was all he could do for now.

10:58 P.M. SCT
Off the Seychelles archipelago

Something woke her in the night aboard the anchored yacht.

Instinctively, Amanda slid a hand over her swollen belly, taking immediate personal inventory. Had it been a cramp? In her third trimester, that was always her first worry, a maternal reflex to protect her unborn child. But she felt nothing painful in her abdomen, just the usual pressure on her bladder.

Still, after two miscarriages, the panicky flutter in her heart refused to calm. She tried to reassure herself that the other two babies—a boy and a girl—had been lost during her *first* trimester.

I'm crossing my thirty-sixth week. Everything is fine.

She lifted up an elbow. Her husband snored softly beside her on the queen-size bed in the yacht's main stateroom, his dark skin so stark against the white satin pillow. She took comfort in Mack's muscular presence, in the masculine bruise of black stubble across his cheek and chin. He was her Michelangelo *David* chiseled out of black granite. Yet, she could not escape the twinge of unease as her finger hovered over his bare shoulder, hesitant to wake him but wanting those strong arms around her.

Her parents—whose aristocratic family went back generations in the Old South—had only approved the marriage with the strained graciousness of modern sensibilities. But in the end, the union served the family. She was blond and blue-eyed, raised in the world of cotillions and privilege; he was black-haired and dark of skin and eye, hardened by a rough childhood on the streets of Atlanta. The unlikely couple became a poster

for familial tolerance, trotted out when needed. But that poster of a happy family was missing one key element: a child.

After a year of failing to conceive—due to an issue with her husband's fertility—they'd resorted to in vitro fertilization with donor sperm. On the third try, after two miscarriages, they'd finally had success.

Her palm found her belly again, protective.

A boy.

And that's when the trouble had begun. A week ago, she had received a cryptic note, warning her to flee, not to tell anyone in her family. The letter hinted at *why,* but offered only a few details, yet it was enough to convince her to run.

A loud thump echoed down from the deck overhead. She sat upright, ears straining.

Her husband rolled onto his back, rubbing an eye blearily. "What is it, babe?"

She shook her head and held up a palm to quiet him. They'd taken such precautions, covering every step. They'd chartered a series of private aircraft under a chain of falsified papers and itineraries, landing a week ago on the other side of the world, at an airstrip on the tiny island of Assumption, part of the archipelago of the Seychelles. Hours after landing, they'd immediately set out in a private yacht, sailing amid the chain of islands that spread out in an emerald arc across the azure seas. She had wanted to be isolated, far from prying eyes—yet close enough to the Seychelles' capital city of Victoria in case there was any trouble with the pregnancy.

Since arriving, only the captain and his two crew members had ever seen their faces, and none of them knew their true names.

It seemed the perfect plan.

Muffled voices reached her. She could not make out any words, but heard the harsh threat—then a gunshot, as bright and loud as the strike of a cymbal.

It set her heart to pounding.

Not now. Not when we're this close.

Mack burst out of the sheets, wearing only his boxers. "Amanda, stay

here!" He pulled open the top drawer of the bedside table and hauled out a large black automatic pistol, his service weapon from his years as a Charleston police officer. He pointed to the rear of the stateroom. "Hide in the bathroom."

Amanda gained her feet, bloodless and weak with terror, wobbling under the weight of her gravid belly.

Mack dashed to the door, checked the peephole. Satisfied, he opened the door enough to slip out and closed it silently behind him—but not before giving one last command. "Lock it."

Amanda obeyed, then searched the room for any weapon at all. She settled for a small knife used to carve the fresh fruit placed in their cabin each morning. The handle was still sticky from papaya juice. With blade in hand, she retreated to the bathroom but stopped at the threshold. She could not go inside. She refused to be trapped inside such a tight space. The tiny stateroom's head could not contain the enormity of her fear.

More gun blasts rang out—amid shouts and curses.

She sank to her knees, clutching the knife with one hand, supporting her belly with the other. Her anxiety reached the child inside. She felt a small kick.

"I won't let them hurt you," she whispered to her boy.

Overhead, footsteps pounded back and forth.

She stared upward, trying to pierce through the floors to the starlit deck. What was happening? How many were up there?

Then a furtive scrabbling sounded at her door—followed by a faint knock.

She hurried forward and placed an eye to the peephole. Mack nodded back at her, then glanced quickly back up the passageway. Had he found a way off the yacht—or out of desperation simply come back to defend her?

With numb fingers, she fumbled the lock open and began to pull the door, only to have it kicked wide. She stumbled back in shock. A tall, bare-chested black man stalked into the room—but it wasn't Mack.

He held Mack's head in his right hand, gripping it by the throat.

Shiny blood poured down his forearm from the severed neck. In his other hand, he clutched an equally bloody machete. He smiled widely, showing white teeth like a shark, plainly amused by his joke.

She retreated in horror, forgetting her tiny blade.

Another figure stepped around the monster. A pale man in a perfectly tailored white suit. The only color to him was his black hair and a thin mustache above even thinner lips. He was tall enough that he had to bow himself into the room. He also smiled, but apologetically, as if embarrassed by the exuberance of his companion.

He spoke a few sharp words in some African dialect, clearly chastising his companion.

With a shrug, the other tossed her husband's head upon the bed.

"It's time to go," the suited man ordered her in a genteel British accent, as if inviting her to a party.

She refused to move—couldn't move.

The Brit sighed and motioned to his companion.

He came forward, roughly grabbed her elbow, and dragged her out the door. The Brit followed them across the short passageway and up the ladder to the stern deck.

There, she found only more horror and chaos.

The captain and his two crewmates, along with a pair of the assailants, lay sprawled in pools of blood. The attackers had been shot; the yacht's crew hacked, dismembered by the sheer force of the brutality.

The surviving assailants gathered atop the deck or off in a scarred boat tied to the starboard rail. A handful scoured the yacht, hauling out cases of wine, bagfuls of supplies, stripping anything of value. They were all black-skinned, some bearing tribal scarring, many no older than boys. Weapons bristled among them: rusty machetes, antique-looking automatic rifles, and countless pistols.

Pirates.

Under the moonlight, freshened by the evening's southeasterly trade winds, her mind cleared enough to allow despair and bitter guilt to creep in. Out here in the Seychelles, she had thought they were far enough

away from the Horn of Africa to be safe from the modern-day pirates who hunted those waters.

A dreadful mistake.

She was shoved toward the moored boat, accompanied by the Brit. She had read somewhere in her father's briefings about how a few European expatriates had taken to aiding and financing the profitable new industry of piracy.

She stared at the British man, wondering how he had managed to avoid getting a single drop of blood on his pristine suit amid all this carnage.

He must have noted her attention and turned to her as they reached the starboard rail.

"What do you want with me?" she asked, fixing him with a hard stare, suddenly glad that all the papers aboard hid her true identity. "I'm nobody."

The Brit's gaze lowered from her steely resolve—but not out of shame or remorse. "It is not *you* we want." He stared at her belly. "It's your baby."

7:00 P.M. EST
Takoma Park, Maryland

Balancing a bag of groceries on his hip, Gray pulled open the screened back door to his family's home. The smell of a baking pie, rich in cinnamon, struck him first. On his way back from the gym, he got a text from Kenny to fetch some French vanilla ice cream and a few other odds and ends needed for tonight's dinner—the first family dinner since the tragic loss of their mother.

A glance at the stove revealed a large pot of bubbling Bolognese sauce; by the sink, a drying bowl of spaghetti in a strainer. A hissing pop drew his gaze back to the pot. Only now did he note the vigorous boil to the sauce. Unattended and forgotten, red sauce roiled over the lip, dribbled down the sides, and sizzled into the gas burner.

Something was wrong.

That was confirmed when a loud bellow erupted from the next room: *"WHERE'S MY KEYS!"*

Gray dropped the groceries on the counter, turned off the stovetop, and headed to the living room.

"SOMEONE'S STEALING MY CAR!"

Passing through the dining room, Gray joined the fracas in the living room. Overstuffed furniture was positioned around a central stone hearth, cold and dark at the moment. His father looked skeletal in the recliner by the picture window. He'd once filled that same seat, commanding the room. Now he was a frail shadow of his former self.

Still, he remained strong. He attempted to push out of the chair, but Kenny held down his shoulders. He was assisted by a petite woman with a brownish-gray bob, dressed in blue scrubs. Down on one knee, she held his father's hand and urged him to be calm.

Mary Benning was an R.N. at the hospital's memory-care unit. During his stay there, his father had taken a shine to her. Gray was able to hire her away, to serve as a night nurse here at the house, to be on hand when his father had the most trouble. The plan had been for Kenny to keep an eye on Dad during the day, until Gray and Mary could interview and hire a day nurse to cover a full twenty-four-hour shift. It would be expensive, but Director Crowe had arranged adequate compensation, a death benefit, to help cover the costs and keep Gray's father in his own house.

"Harriet! Let me go!" His father yanked his hand free of Mary's, coming close to elbowing Kenny in the nose.

The nurse kept a hand on his knee and gave it a squeeze of reassurance. "Jack, it's me. Mary."

His eyes found hers, a confused look passed over his face, then he sagged as memory washed back over him.

Mary glanced at Gray. "Your father caught you pulling up with the groceries. Saw the Thunderbird. Just got a little panicked and confused. He'll be fine."

Kenny straightened, a stricken look on his face. He'd not really seen Dad get like this before. Shook up, he stumbled away.

The motion drew his father's attention. His eyes got huge. "Kenny, what're you doing here?"

Kenny didn't know what to say, still stunned by the Swiss cheese that was his father's memory.

Mary covered for him, not hiding the truth, only patting his knee. "Jack, he's been here all day."

His father searched their faces, then leaned back in his chair. "Oh, yeah, that's right . . . I remember . . ."

But did he? Or was he only acquiescing in an attempt to feign normalcy?

Kenny shared a glance with Gray, glassy with shock.

Welcome to my world.

"I'd better get back to finishing your dinner," Mary said, standing and dusting off her knee.

"And I'd better finish unpacking," Kenny said, seeking a hasty retreat.

"Good idea and wash up," his father ordered with an echo of his former bluster. "Your room's up—"

"I haven't forgotten where it is," Kenny cut him off, blind to the callousness of such a remark to someone suffering from Alzheimer's.

But his dad merely nodded, satisfied.

As Kenny stepped away, his father finally seemed to notice Gray standing there. The confusion on his face faded, but a stab of old anger took its place. It had taken his father almost two weeks to finally acknowledge and ultimately remember the death of his wife, so, to his mind, the wound was still raw. He also knew the source of that loss. *That* he always remembered. There had been many bad days in the intervening weeks, but what could either of them do? No words could bring her back.

A knock at the door startled them all. Gray tensed, expecting the worst.

Kenny, already headed to the front stairs, opened the door.

A lithe figure stood out on the porch, dressed in black leather and a loose motorcycle jacket over a maroon blouse. She carried a helmet under one arm.

The gloominess of the day lifted at the sight of her as Gray headed to the door. "Seichan, what are you doing here?"

His father interrupted. "Don't leave the lady standing on the stoop, Kenny!" He waved the visitor inside. He might be losing his memory, but he knew a handsome woman when one landed on his doorstep.

"Thank you, Mr. Pierce." Seichan entered, slipping inside, moving with the leonine grace of a jungle cat, all sinew, muscles, and long curves. She cast an appraising glance toward Kenny as she stepped past him—whatever she saw there, she found lacking.

Her eyes found Gray's face next and visibly hardened—not in anger, more like protection. They'd barely spoken since they'd shared a kiss and a promise three weeks ago. The pledge was not a romantic one, only the assurance that she'd work alongside him to expose those who had a hand in his mother's murder.

Still, Gray remembered the softening of those lips.

Was there more to that promise, something yet unspoken?

Before he could dwell on it further, his father pointed to the table. "We're just about to sit down to dinner. Why don't you join us?"

"That's very kind," Seichan said stiffly, "but I won't be staying long. I just need a word with your son."

Those almond-shaped eyes—marking her Eurasian heritage—fixed on Gray with plain intent.

Something was up.

Seichan was a former assassin for the same shadowy group responsible for his mother's death, an international criminal organization called the Guild. Its real identity and purpose remained unknown, even to its own agents. The organization operated through individual cells around the world, each running independently, none having the complete picture. Seichan had eventually turned against it, recruited by Director Crowe to serve as a double agent until her subterfuge was exposed. Now—hunted both by her former employers and by foreign intelligence agencies for her past crimes—she was Gray's partner and his responsibility.

And maybe something more.

Gray stepped close to her. "What's up?"

She kept her voice low. "I got a call from Director Crowe. Came straight here. There's been a kidnapping off the Seychelles by Somali pi-

rates. A high-value American target. Painter wanted to know if you were up for a mission."

Gray frowned. Why was Sigma involved with a simple kidnapping? There were plenty of policing and maritime agencies that could attend to such a crime. Sigma Force—made up of Special Forces soldiers who had been retrained in various scientific disciplines—was a covert wing for DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. Sigma teams were sent out into the world to protect against global threats, not to address the kidnapping of a single American.

Seichan must have read the suspicion in his face. Her eyes bore into his. She plainly knew more but was unable to speak freely in front of the others. Something big was happening. The realization set his heart to beating harder.

"The matter is time sensitive," she added. "If you're coming, there's a jet already fueling, and Kowalski is on his way to pick us up. We can swing by your apartment on the way out. Otherwise, we'll be briefed en route."

Gray glanced at the chair by the cold hearth. His father overheard their talk, his gaze fixed to his son's face.

"Go," his father said. "Do your job. I've got enough help here."

Gray took comfort in that gruff permission, praying it represented some small measure of forgiveness by his father. But his next words, spoken with a harsh bitterness, dashed such hope.

"Besides, the less I see of your face right now . . . the better."

Gray backed a step. Seichan took his elbow, as if ready to catch him. But it was the heat of her palm, more than anything, that steadied him, the reassurance of human contact—like that kiss weeks ago.

Mary had stepped into the room, drying her hands on a towel. She'd also heard those harsh words and gave Gray a sympathetic look. "I've got things covered here. You take some time for yourself."

He silently thanked her and allowed Seichan to guide him toward the door. Gray felt the need to share some parting farewell with his father. The desire burned painfully in his chest, but he had no words to voice it.

Before he knew it, he found himself out on the front porch. He halted at the top step and took in a deep, shuddering breath.

"Are you okay?" Seichan asked.

He ran his fingers through his hair. "I'll have to be."

Still, she continued to search his face, as if seeking a truer answer.

Before she could find it, the squeal of rubber on the pavement announced the arrival of his transportation. They both turned as a black SUV came to a hard stop. The window rolled down, allowing a pall of cigar smoke to waft out. The shaved head of a gorilla followed, chewing on a stump of a stogie.

"You coming or what?" Kowalski called hoarsely.

As much as the man aggravated him, Gray had never been happier to see his brutish teammate. He headed down the steps, only to have Kenny come rushing out after him, blocking his way.

"You can't leave now. What am I supposed to do?"

Gray pointed back at the house. "It's your turn. What do you think I've been doing all this time?"

He shoved past his sputtering brother and crossed toward the waiting SUV and Seichan's parked motorcycle.

She kept beside him, slipping on her helmet.

"Who else has been assigned to us?" he asked.

"We've been ordered to pick up another two teammates, local assets already in the region, with unique skills to help us on this mission."

"Who are they?"

She offered a ghost of a smile as she snapped down her helmet's visor. Her words echoed out from inside, darkly amused.

"I hope you've had your rabies shots."