

CHAPTER 1

April, near Camp David, Maryland...

The jarring pain in Dakota Sinclair's left leg was getting worse. That is, if she let herself think about it. She didn't. Of course, she wouldn't. Nor, would she marvel at the fine old trees, beautiful forest blooms, the scent of pine, or the beauty of the azure blue sky, though she was always alert to every little change in the environment. Like her pain, if it didn't signal danger, she ignored it. If she didn't, she would have to admit the pain was excruciating, like having a tooth pulled without the benefit of Novocain. There was now no doubt about it. She was in deep trouble. Yet, she fought against the pain, against reality, against the passage of time.

Time was running out.

Moderating her pace to a slower jog, which, for her, was still faster than most professional athletes could boast, she kept pacing her time in her head. She rounded a curve on a rocky, dirt road that led to her cabin. The gravel incline slowed her stride even more. Grimacing at the thought of not being able to run four miles, when six months earlier she could run ten miles without breaking a sweat, she steeled her determination. However, that was then. That was before the fall that landed her in the hospital for a month with compound fractures of her right tibia, left fibula, patella, and in therapy at a convalescence center for another two months. At thirty-five, bones did not mend as quickly as when she was fifteen or even twenty-five, but nothing seemed to be the same anymore. The challenges were not even as great, but the incline she once ran every day, with relative ease, seemed to be fighting her today. Yet, words like 'giving up' or 'failure' were never in her vocabulary.

She pushed herself harder, breathing deeper, calmer, and faster. One more bend in the road, she thought, and then she would be there. Albeit in record time, she expected more of herself. Still, it was a challenge from which she would not shrink. If she could just push herself a little more, then she would be able to mend the broken parts of her life. The parts she had controlled as easily as she controlled her body.

As she breached the crest of the hill, she saw a familiar male figure leaning against a white, custom-made BMW. Designer shades covered his startling, deep-sea blue eyes. His practiced pose alone stopped many women—and men—in their tracks. To call William “Bill” Chandler, Code Name: The Stallion, handsome was a gross understatement. He was awesome. Drop-dead gorgeous, in fact—a Matt Bomer clone. His face and physique graced many high-fashion magazines, billboards, television commercials, and full-length motion pictures. An entrepreneur of high magnitude, his adult movie production company, line of men’s clothing, and magazine, *Risqué*, were extremely popular in Europe and Asia, where he was known in high-fashion houses as Chandler. More often, however, his picture in the buff appeared in *Stallion*, his top-of-the-line gay trade magazine that sold above the market and had broken sales and circulation records. His own line of greeting cards, featuring him nude, was giving Hallmark heartburn. Dakota slowed her pace as she neared her cabin to begin the cool down cycle of her twice-daily routine.

Absently checking her specialized wristwatch, she noted, with non-visible concern, she had missed her goal for today by three minutes.

“You’re pushing too hard, Dakota.” Bill watched her pace in a circle-eight, breathing deeply, with her hands on her hips.

“Too hard? What’s your definition of too hard?” She huffed out and then took in air sharply, shook out her limbs, and began to jog in place. She swiveled her head, feeling neck muscles stretch and bones creak. She did not need Bill monitoring her activities, reminding her, yet again, she was not meeting her goals. “I’ve got work to do.”

“Too hard is when you haven’t given yourself time to deal with what happened. Your parachute got hung up in the trees on a night helo

jump in A-stan and you fell forty feet. No one could have predicted the wind shift at that low altitude. You were badly hurt. Too hard is when you haven't taken time to look at other options." He moved in front of her, blocking her path. "Too hard is when you don't communicate with people who care about you. You haven't answered your satphone since you left rehab months ago."

Dakota glimpsed Bill, stepped away from him, and continued her cool-down cycle, stretching from side to side, with deep-knee bends. She inhaled and bent over, hands resting on her knees, her flat stomach continuing to concave and convex in rapid succession. Whom was she trying to fool? Certainly, not Bill Chandler. His insight was too sharp and he had known her far too long and well. He had seen her at her best and now, she was not anywhere near adequate. No. She had to face facts, but in private and not in front of him or anyone else.

"There are no other options. What happened was my fault. I've jumped hundreds of times, in all kinds of weather, and at night. I trained as a SEAL and survived Basic Underwater Demolition (BUD/S) training. I lost my edge; something that a warrior can never do. It's not something anyone can give back to me. I have to do this my way—on my own."

"Without any help, as usual, I see." His voice was devoid of emotion, although a maelstrom brewed inside him. He turned his head toward her and noted the determination etched on her face, along with the beauty...and the pain.

Dakota wiped the sweat from her brow, using the sweatband on her wrist. "You didn't drive all the way up into these mountains to play psychiatrist. What's on the agenda?" She glared at his shade-covered eyes.

Bill lifted the expensive designer shades to the top of his thick, raven-black head of hair and returned her stare. There was no way to soften the blow he was there to deliver. She wouldn't appreciate it if he did. Dakota Sinclair did not abide warm and fuzzy or anything sugarcoated. She'd sooner spit in his eye. "You're off the Mid-East/Arab/Israeli assignments. You will be heading the Southern Africa team for a company called CompuCorrect International."

An expletive slipped from her lips, as she turned her back to him, raised her head to the clear, blue heavens, and slowly paced. She was not afraid of much, but she was afraid this would happen. “That’s a desk job. I could phone this in from here.”

“That’s the word, Dakota.” He extended a jump drive toward her. “Unless otherwise advised, you’re still on light duty medical leave until further notice. Your new cover dossier is outlined on the drive.”

She stared at the small device, as if it were a poisonous snake, before she reluctantly took it from his hand. “I’m going to talk with—”

Slowly, Bill shook his head. “I’ve already tried, but my legal skills, on your behalf, weren’t persuasive. I have to admit that I’m not disappointed about that.” He studied her carefully. “Take the time, Dakota. You have been at the top, as a team leader, for a long time. Longer than most. You’re the best expert on criminals and insurgents in Arab markets. You would be invaluable at HQ. Maybe it’s time to evaluate what you want to do with the rest of your life. From now on, answer your damn satphone.”

Dakota had no response. His statement cut her deep in every muscle and sinew of her body. She turned and walked up the grassy area toward her cabin. As she closed the door, she heard Bill’s car roar to life and speed away. Anger gripped her, as she flung the jump drive across the room into a chair, and then paced the open-concept living quarters. The cabin—a two-thousand-square-foot, A-frame, post-and-beam structure, with an open loft bedroom situated on a wide catwalk, and two baths—could only be described as fashion challenged. It was rustic in its interior design and sparsely furnished, yet still did not look like anyone’s home. Then again, it had never been intended to be a home. It was just a place to hang her hat when she was in the country. Most of her life was lived OCONUS—outside of the continental United States—in places a lot less comfortable or hospitable than this. Finally, she stopped pacing, sat on the single sofa, and cupped her face in her hands, resting her elbows on her thighs. She was recruited in her senior year in college when she was twenty-one. *Where had the time gone?* Washed up at thirty-five. Next stop would be out the door. Then what?