Drowning Identity

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Defense Date: April 9th, 2019
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Valora Hendricks slowed her jog to a walk as she neared the training center, wiping the sweat and flyaway hairs from her forehead. She took a moment to check her heart rate, counting the beats with her fingers at her throat while staring at the smart watch wrapped around her left wrist. Her run averaged out to about five miles and it had taken her just over twenty-two minutes to complete.

Satisfied with her efforts, Valora stepped off the dirt path to do some cool down stretches. She tightened her ponytail, before bending over to stretch out her hamstrings. This part of the workout was her favorite; the methodical rhythm and comforting routine relaxed her. She pressed her hands against the soft grass, allowing the smooth blades to cool her skin. Her pale fingers shone brightly against the grass, twin spotlights in the sunshine. She forced her eyes to study the lawn instead of the deep grooves and lines running along the backs of her hands and up her forearms.

From her vantage point near the track, Valora could see thick expanses of forest on her right and the large training facility to her left. She knew many people hated that the base had such poor sight lines, but she had never liked being stuck out in the open. This was part of the reason she’d always liked traveling to cities. The constant action gave her something more to focus on than being stranded in the middle of nowhere and the mountains offered a form of serenity that she found comforting. The crisp air of pine trees and the cool mountains were refreshing. It had been nearly a year since her last visit to a city and she found herself appreciating the tranquility of nature a little more. People always told her she needed to relax more, but enjoying the peace had never been much of a pastime for her before the accident, and she wasn’t sure she could manage anything more than breathing in the fresh air on her daily runs.
The thoughts caused a bubble of anxiety to form in her chest. It was a reminder that she was not the same person she was before and this was something she was not quite willing to accept. She wanted to get her life back. She wanted to move on from hospital visits and therapy meetings. Being the Agent she was before was the only way she could think to heal and with her first mission looming, now was not the time for an identity crisis.

With a forcible shake of her head, Valora turned her thoughts back to her stretches and her surroundings. She transitioned into a different stretch and focused on loosening her biceps and triceps. A breeze kicked up, flinging her hair over her shoulder and into her face; the strands briefly clouded her vision, making her skin crawl; it reminded her of being blinded by soot.

The wind brought with it the echo of other activates on the base. She could hear the distant bark of military dogs training near the kennels about half a mile away. Trainer’s hollered praises followed joyful barks, making Valora’s heart pinch. A memory forced its way to the surface. She closed her eyes against it, but there was no stopping the cascade of bittersweet emotions from wedging themselves beneath her ribs. Liam’s dog, Angie, was a bright spot in this world of fighting, lying, and death. The Belgian Malinois was on the small side, but she had nothing but fire inside her: Valora had seen the girl chase down a moving van and pull a grown man from the driver seat through the open window. The bitch had never much cared for Valora, but that dog would have given her life for Liam and that was the one thing the two could agree on.

The thought of that dedicated little monster sitting in a kennel, waiting for Liam to come back to her made Valora’s chest tighten and she realized she needed to get away from the noises and the memories before she started crying: the last thing she needed was for people to see her
all weepy. She already had the title of “Agency’s Biggest Fuck-up.” She didn’t need to add “emotionally unstable” to her list of attributes.

With those thoughts, she considered her workout finished. She wasn’t really done with her stretches, but figured pulling a muscle later was better than standing out there under the constant assault of memories. Her heart rate had settled closer to a normal pace anyway. No point in starting something else now, Valora thought, looking for any excuse to get out of the monotony of lifting weights. Another half hour surrounded by her fellow Agents seemed especially tiresome when coupled with her stinging eyes and wearied mind. No, it was definitely better to cut her workout short for the day. She had more important things to worry about than lifting mind-numbing weights and thinking about a dog that would sooner bite her than lick her.

She couldn’t afford to be distracted, since she had just been cleared by the therapists and had been assigned her first mission since she was in the hospital.

She started toward the training facility, telling herself she wasn’t running away from her problems, but instead told herself that she needed to get ready to meet with her teammates and prepare for what could be the most important mission of her life. She wasn’t supposed to meet for another forty-five minutes or so and knew they wouldn’t be there until they absolutely had to be, especially since the Agents’ barracks were on the other side of base, so she knew this was a thin excuse.

As she walked her shirt stuck to her back and she forced down a cringe. As much as she wanted to get moving, she couldn’t handle the feeling of sweat on her skin a moment longer. She loathed the feeling of being sticky; it reminded her of being covered in blood.

The stink of sweat and the clang of weights greeted her when she entered the building. She was thankful she couldn’t hear the echo of dog barks from inside the sturdy walls. Nearly
fifty Agents were doing various exercises and training techniques throughout the oversized gym. A large variety of exercise equipment was spread around the large, rubber-floored room, along with large racks of dumbbells, weight plates, and medicine balls. Two large sparing rings rested against the wall opposite of the door she had just walked through and two people were wrestling in each of them, with trainers keeping a vigilant eye on each. She could hear the grunts and curses echoing against the gray concrete walls and she resisted an eye roll. Why did people have to be so loud when doing a simple exercise? The shouting echoes scraped across her back.

She quickly weaved between the exercise equipment and rumbling agents. She couldn’t help but feel like everyone was staring at her scars as she walked by. She forced herself not to cross her arms and to ignore the peering glances, suddenly wishing she had worn a long sleeved shirt, despite the hot weather. Pushing her way into the women’s locker room, she was met with stark walls and gloomy lockers. She let the door fall closed behind her, blocking out the noise from the other room. The discomfort ebbed away with the door between her and most of her peers. She was grateful to see the locker room was mostly empty with most people done or finishing up their workouts for the day. She could hear the showers running and moved around the lockers toward the back part of the room. The fresh smell of soap met her as she rounded the corner. A row of eight bathroom stalls and three showers rested against the back wall. One shower was vacant and she rushed to her locker for a towel, a bar of soap, shampoo, and conditioner. After yanking her hair free of the ponytail, she undressed quickly, unwilling to give anyone the opportunity to take away her chance of scrubbing the remnants of her workout from her body. She wasn’t sure she couldn’t stand another moment of sitting in her own filth. If she wasn’t already on thin ice with the agency, she was sure she would have fought someone over that remaining stall. She unceremoniously tossed her workout clothes—off-white sweatpants and
a matching tank top—onto a plastic bench that rested against the wall opposite the shower curtains, hung her towel onto a hook nearby, and turned on the water. She jumped beneath the stream before it had a chance to warm up, welcoming the shiver that ran down her spine.

She stood with her back to the water, her head tilted up to soak her sweat-damp hair. The water weighed it down until the dark strands reached the middle of her shoulder blades. It had been much longer before the incident last year, nearly reaching her bottom. Medics had had to shave large chunks from her skull in order to properly suture the head wounds she’d sustained. Several more inches had burned off from the fires. Squirting shampoo into her palm, Valora scrubbed the sweat and dust from her hair, massaging her scalp with her fingers. She let her fingertips run over the raised bumps along her skin, shadows of the sutures that had caused her skin to pucker. She was thankful she no longer had bald spots, but it was still patchy, the uneven lengths really obvious, especially when wet. She ran her fingers through the slippery strands as she rinsed the soap from her scalp. The shorter strands fell free before the rest, causing her fingers to shake. She had thought about shaving it all off several times over, but she couldn’t force herself to cut it back to an even length. It seemed like taking a step back to her time in the hospital, a situation she vowed to never be in again.

*It’s odd,* she thought. *Caring so much about a dead thing on your head.*

People cared a lot about dead things. Her mind shot back to Angie waiting patiently for an owner that was gone from this world. She knew that kind of hope was painful: the disappointment of realizing that someone was never coming back, but still expecting them to walk through the door at any moment.

Sometimes she wished she didn’t care so much.
Once the soap was free, she covered the black strands with a thick layer of conditioner, letting that cook while she lathered the bar soap under the now warm water. Starting with her chest and shoulders, she methodically washed her body from the top down. She tried to ignore the unevenness of her skin, but it was impossible to disregard the multitude of scars that covered her body. Deep rivets crisscrossed her flesh, a result of being a dartboard for heavy pieces of shrapnel and debris. The marks extended to almost every section of visible skin. A deep line ran from her right hipbone towards her bellybutton where she had nearly been disemboweled by broken shards of glass. Small nicks peppered her stomach and chest like confetti; they were pinkish marks against her tan-white skin. From hands to back to feet she was marked with the pervasive reminders of her mistake. Disgust heated her stomach, her fingers curling in response. It was hard to move forward when her body was a battlefield of memories.

I deserve this, an insidious voice whispered. Her lips moved silently with the words. I deserve worse.

Valora felt a sharp pain in her palms and had to think hard to force her nails from her skin. She busied herself with rinsing the conditioner from her hair so she wouldn’t start clawing at her marred flesh. She spent a few minutes watching the soap-clouded water swirl down the drain before turning the water off and snatching her towel from outside the curtain.

She wrapped the towel around herself and peeked out from between the curtain and the shower wall. Valora hated the curious and pitying looks she got whenever people spied the true extent of her scars. Most of the marks could be concealed with clothing, and her face was mostly unmarred, but she couldn’t hide the thick scar that ran from the inside of her left nostril down at an angle and bisecting her upper lip. She felt her lip curl at just the thought of the ugly line.
She could hear only the echo of two or three female voices in the dimly lit space and felt it was safe enough to venture back to her locker. Snapping the curtain back, she gathered her belongings and moved between the rows until she reached her locker. She traded her dirty workout clothes for a fresh pair of white sweats and a long-sleeved shirt. Valora didn’t have the standard black gear she wore when she wasn’t training or resting with her and she knew the outfit would seem bizarre considering it was the middle of summer, but she had learned her lesson after her first trek through the training area where the fluorescents had aggressively spotlighted her marks. To top everything off, she slid on her favorite light blue jacket. The oversized material reached just past her wrist to the center of her palms and the hem hung past her rear end. She was sure no one could see her scars through the thick material and, most importantly, it was Liam’s before he died. It was the only thing of his she was able to save before they cleared out his belongings and moved a new recruit into his room.

Well, that and Angie.

The thought of the dog once again made her chest ache with guilt. Valora knew that Liam would want Valora to take on the responsibility of the dog, but she wasn’t sure she could do it. Carrying a jacket around was one thing, but looking into the eyes of the only other being that loved Liam just as much as she did was something she wasn’t sure she could handle. Despite all her injuries, that was the one pain she knew she wouldn’t survive.

Before leaving the locker room, Valora put her hair in a bun at the top of her head, uncaring that it was still very wet and that beads of water were sliding from the nape of her neck to soak into the back of her shirt. She had better things to do than comb and dry her hair anyway. She left the locker room and focused her energy on the upcoming mission to pull her mind away from her negative thoughts.
She took stairs to the third and final level of the training building and searched for her meeting room. Whenever the Agents got assigned a mission they reserved a meeting room for them to compile their ideas in one private area. Of course, everything had to be approved by their superiors, but it was nice to have the space to think and talk in private. There were around twenty of these rooms in the two levels above the training center. All the rooms were the same at about 10X10 feet in size, with a small round table in the middle that sat eight people at the most, although that was pushing it and Valora has always been glad she had never been assigned to a team of that size. The claustrophobic atmosphere of these rooms made her twitchy in the best of circumstances, let alone when there were eight people crammed into the small space. Most missions only called for teams of four or five, so it was more than big enough. Each room was also equipped with up-to-date computers that were able to store and process all of the mission information, as well as allow them to use the internet and access satellite imaging without being detected or tracked. Each large monitor sat on a separate desk off to the side of the round table and was able to hook up to a projector at the back of the room. Maps and schematics were provided as well. Valora had spent many hours in these rooms with Liam and other team members. The memories warmed her insides. She grabbed onto those feelings and held onto them tightly, desperate for something besides the constant bombardments of regret and shame. She swallowed hard, as if the action would keep the feelings where they were in her heart, instead of letting them dissipate into emptiness.

Valora walked past several rooms before reaching the one to which she and her team had reserved. She had expected to be the first one to the room, but was surprised to see the lights were already on and Callie Lewis, another agent, perched behind the computer screen. Even though she could only see the back of her head, Valora recognized her instantly with the
oversized, bright orange headphones covering her ears. She had no idea how her friend had managed to get a hold of them; the Agency had very strict dress codes and that included all wearable technology. The headphones paired well with the orange scarf wrapped around her neck and the brightly colored bands that dangled around her wrists. Both were a stark contrast to the black uniform they all wore when they weren’t training or exercising. The girl was a walking rule breaker and it was both nerve-wracking and amusing. It surprised many people at how well she and Callie got along. It surprised her sometimes too. Valora was never one to brush off the orders of the ISA and always dressed strictly to code. She could remember many times were Callie had sucked her into shenanigans that still cause her anxiety even to this day. Despite her cavalier attitude, Callie had a way of making sure things worked out.

She simultaneously wished that her friend had been on her team the night of the accident and was grateful that she wasn’t. If she had been there maybe things would have gone differently. Or she would be dead too. The thought made Valora frown. The warmth that had filled her moments before was replaced with cruel emptiness. She suddenly realized she wasn’t ready to talk to her friend and deal with the avalanche of questions she was sure to have.

After a few deep breaths, Valora forced herself to smile as she opened the door and took a step instead. Callie didn’t move when the door closed behind her. She could hear the loud bass of music thumping from her headphones from across the room; the woman wouldn’t be able to hear a bomb go off. She noticed papers spread about the round table resting in the middle of the room, as well as maps of city streets, buildings, and even sewage networks. Valora studied all the paperwork. Her friend was as industrious as ever.

After a moment, she pulled a chair from the round table over to where Callie was sitting in front of the computer. The blonde’s wristbands jangled with each click of the keyboard. It
wasn’t until she sat down that Callie looked away from the computer. She shoved her
headphones off her ears; they fell to rest around her neck. With a squeal loud enough to make
Valora wince and a wide smile, Callie threw her arms around her neck in a tight hug.

“You’re going to need hearing aids before you’re thirty-five if you keep listening to
music like that,” Valora said, coughing on Callie’s hair. She returned the embrace for a moment
before pulling away and smiling at her friend. Her blonde hair, which had been long enough to
reach the small of her back the last time Valora saw her, was cut into a chin-length bob. The pale
strands seemed nearly white under the fluorescent lights. The look suited her. She stood about
four inches shorter than Valora’s 5’7” frame and was rod-thin. With her bright pink lipstick and
wide gray-blue eyes, she certainly didn’t look like a seasoned Agent, but Valora knew she was
one of the strongest and most intelligent people in the ISA. She was a computer genius, able to
hack into and manipulate almost anything. Valora had been on two other missions with her and
each time she had been amazed by what the woman was capable of. The thought still sometimes
irritated her.

They stared at each other for a moment in silence before Callie jokingly shoved Valora
on the shoulder. “I’ve missed you. If I didn’t know better, I would say you’ve been avoiding
me!”

She felt a twinge in her chest; her stomach dropped to her knees. Callie was mostly
joking, but Valora couldn’t help but feel chastised. She tugged at the sleeves of her jacket, using
the fabric as an anchor. She would have denied the claim if it hadn’t been true. The smile
stretching her cheeks thin felt unnatural, but she didn’t let down the charade, figuring that
smiling through the pain was better than talking about it any day. She said in as much of a joking
tone as she could manage, “You’re one to talk. I seem to remember not getting a single visit from you while I was in the hospital.”

That earned Valora another gentle shove. “That’s not fair! You know I was on a mission during that time. I wasn’t even in the country, let alone on base.”

“Excuses, excuses.” Valora smirked at her friend, who promptly went on a long-winded explanation of her absence while Valora was in the hospital, as well as all the trouble she had been causing while Valora recovered. Despite her best efforts, she found herself laughing with the fiery blonde as she described how her trainer had caught her trying to wire a computer up to ISA security cameras so she could watch streaming sites online.

Callie’s face got more serious once she finished her story. Valora felt her pulse speed up in response. Oh right. This is why she’d been avoiding her. She knew Callie was going to ask about that night, about how Liam died, how Valora messed up, which was something she barely managed to do with the therapists she was forced to see, let alone the brightly colored woman in front of her. She didn’t want to see Callie’s sparkly eyes dull from listening to her sob story. No, she definitely did not want to have this conversation. She even considered leaping from her chair and making a run for it instead of facing the impending conversation.

“How have you been?” Callie asked in a kind voice. “So much as happened to you in the past year.”

Valora’s lips tightened. “I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?” Callie gave her a look that said she knew Valora was lying and would not be accepting that as an answer. Valora gave an exasperated sigh. “It sucks Callie. Everything sucks. What do you want to hear? I don’t think you are going to like whatever it is I’m going to tell you. You’ve heard all the rumors…”
“I want to know how you’re doing. Don’t say all the same crap you tell everyone else, Val.” Callie’s eyebrows squished downward as she stared at Valora with a concerned expression. “I haven’t talked to you in over a year. I have been giving you your space, but now that we are working together again, I think it is important that you tell me how you’re doing. You’re my best friend. I want to know how I can help you.”

A bubbling anger rose from her belly. Liam was her best friend. Swallowing the heat in her throat, Valora said, “There’s isn’t anything to tell. I fucked up. My partner died. I nearly crippled myself. There’s nothing else to say. Liam’s…he’s gone and no amount of talking will bring him back.”

“It won’t change that it happened, but it might help you come to terms with it.”

Valora grinded her teeth. “No it won’t. Talking with the trained professionals didn’t help me ‘come to terms with it.’ What makes you think talking to you will?”

Her words came out in a snarl, and she saw Callie flinch slightly at her tone. Guilt immediately swamped her, drowning out the rage. Dammit, she thought. It would have been so much easier to stay angry.

With a deep breath, she mumbled, “I’m sorry. That was uncalled for.”

Callie smiled as if she had already forgotten Valora’s nasty words. She wondered if the woman could really bounce between her emotions that quickly or if she was simply better at putting on a good show. Either way, Valora envied her skills.

“I get it, Val. You can talk about it when you’re ready. I’m here for you,” said Callie in a cheerful tone that didn’t quite match her words.

“You sound like the therapists,” Valora grumbled. She hated it when Callie said things like that. It made the conversation feel clinical, something she did not want to associate with
bright orange headphones and a gaudy scarf. Once again, she was amazed this perky woman ever made it into this line of work. She was way too kind and cute to be surrounded by so much violence. The ISA had a personal interest in the bloody and corrupted, and Valora suddenly wished Callie were completely ignorant of this life. On top of not wanting to relive what has become the worst mistake of her life, she also didn’t want to soil Callie’s view of her. Valora knew Callie loved her, but she wasn’t so sure she would be able to after hearing about the circumstances of Liam’s death, as well as the destruction of nearly an entire city block. The more logical part of her brain told her that Callie would love her no matter what, that she understood that mistakes happen, but she just couldn’t get herself to talk about it with the fruity blonde. Her heart beat a tattoo against her sternum.

She felt her lips part as Callie sat with puppy eyes across from her, waiting patiently. Valora knew from experience that if her friend was silent long enough she would eventual start talking. She wanted to find a way to tell her the truth without showcasing how badly she’d messed up. Maybe if she made herself look as good as possible, Callie would back off. She didn’t think she could handle it if she saw Callie’s kind eyes morph into scowls of disgust. The feeling made her throat thick. She hated it. It felt like a weakness and she already had plenty of those.

She grabbed the sleeves of her shirt, tugging them further down over the scars lining her fingers, balling the fabric around her hand entirely. “I…” she began. Callie leaned forward expectantly when Valora started talking. Suddenly rushing across base to the kennels and getting bitten all to hell by Angie seemed like a better option than telling this story. Cotton coated her mouth, but she forced the words out anyway. “Liam and I—”
The sound of the door swinging open interrupted her, a saved-by-the-bell moment she thought only happened in movies. The air left her lung violently, and she felt she could fall to the floor with relief. Valora released her sleeves, running her palms along her pants to remove the sweat that had gathered there, and turned to see that it was the rest of her team. Almost. Her partner, Deacon Sholes, had yet to arrive. Based off his continued tardiness during their training exercises, she didn’t expect him there for another twenty minutes at least. She dreaded their upcoming time in the field with this mission. He wasn’t what she would call the “reliable type.”

Valora forced her thoughts away from Deacon, ignoring the heat in her throat. Instead she focused on the rest of her team. Callie, herself, and eleven other Agents were the only females at the ISA that didn’t work a desk job. This wasn’t surprising considering the ISA was composed mostly of men; their strength, size, and power appeared more desirable than the female form in fieldwork.

Link Griffin moved behind Callie and glanced over the paperwork she had spread out. He made a comment about her being an overachiever and she responded by jovially smacking him in the stomach. He didn’t react except for a tiny twitch in the corner of his lips. They had been working together for over five years and it was clear they had formed a deep bond. She knew Link was very protective of Callie, something for which she was glad. She and Callie were good friends, but there were many times when Callie was placed on different teams and since Valora hadn’t been in the field at all for the past year, it was comforting to know there was someone out there that cared about the woman just as much as she did.

Link was a massive man, hovering at around 6’6” and two hundred and sixty pounds. It was always amusing to see Callie and him together because of the stark contrast in appearance and personality. He was the picture of a military man with his buzzed hair, tall posture, and strict
observance of Agency dress code; the total opposite of the tiny blonde sitting obsessively behind the computer. Valora found herself feeling jealous of their partnership. She was sure Callie could handle Deacon’s nonsense way better than she could.

Despite her flood of jealousy, Valora couldn’t help the amusement that would bubble inside her whenever the two participated in their playful bickering. It was amazing to Valora that the two got along, but they were actually a cohesive team. She supposed it was no different from Callie and her getting along so well. Opposites attract and all that. Callie was a genius on a computer and could hack into almost any system given ten minutes and a couple of granola bars. Link could barely type his name into a computer, but he was one of the most skilled fighters she had ever seen. Hand to hand combat was a natural strength of his.

The Agency was good at that: pairing people with strengths and weaknesses that complimented each other, though she had yet to figure out how Deacon “Jackass” Sholes was her compliment in anyway, especially in the field.

August Bell, the fourth member of their team, threw himself into a chair opposite Callie, Valora, and Link. He didn’t have a designated partner because he was a medic. Every team, no matter the mission, had a medic. It was because of this protocol that she was alive today. It had been too late for Liam, but if a medic hadn’t found her and kept her from bleeding out, she was sure she wouldn’t be standing here. The thought made her arms prickle uncomfortably. She burned to scratch at the lines on her wrists.

August ran fingers through his mud colored hair, a habit that caused him to have a perpetual case of bed head. Even with the messy hair, he looked freshly washed and his clothes looked crisp, as if they had just come out of the closet. He was dressed in the same black gear as everyone else. Valora suddenly felt very self-aware. A chill ran down her back; the wet hair
wasn’t helping. She tugged at her sleeves again; suddenly wishing she had taken the time to go back to her room to pick up her mission gear like everyone else. She felt out of place. For the first time, she was worried someone could see her scars through the light colored fabric covering her thighs.

   After a few minutes of casual conversation, August finally asked, “So where’s Sholes?”

   Valora felt herself stiffen with anger and embarrassment. She was going to punch her partner in the nose next opportunity she had. “Who knows?” she said in as casual a voice as she could manage. “He hasn’t been on time for anything else. Why would he be on time now?”

   “Being late for a jog or a workout is one thing,” August replied, “but being late for this is a serious problem.”

   Valora wanted to snap at him. What did he care? He was just a medic. She was about to open her mouth to say as much, but Callie spoke first.

   “I agree,” she said. “He really needs to be here.”

   Valora felt like everyone was sending her accusatory glares, as if she were at fault for his tardiness. “What am I supposed to do about it? I’m not his mother!”

   “And let’s all thank God for that!” Deacon came into the room, letting the door close loudly behind him. He leaned against the wall opposite her instead of sitting in one of the vacant seats on either side of August and gave her a snarky wink. He was lucky there was a table between them or Valora might have punched him for that alone. His hair was mussed and he had large bags under his eyes. He looked as if he needed the wall to hold himself up and she had the horrible thought that he might be drunk. “If you were my mother,” Deacon continued, “I don’t think I would have made it passed infancy.”
“Probably because I would’ve chucked you off a roof to escape the utter stupidity that surrounds you,” Valora snapped. She chewed on her own teeth, frustration and embarrassment filling her limbs. She felt her cheeks redden. Callie sent her a surprised look. Valora knew it was because she was never one to outwardly demonstrate her emotions like that. But she had also never been partnered with Deacon Sholes before either.

“Your words cut me deeply,” he said dryly.

Valora gave him a look that could have peeled paint. He had the nerve to smile at her. She was sure he was drunk then. The man liked to play with fire and she was definitely burning.

Link cleared his throat, drawing her eyes to him. Callie, who was staring wide-eyed between her and Deacon, didn’t say anything. She silently thanked her for that. She didn’t think she could handle the embarrassment of being told to calm down in front of these people. She was one of the best; she should be the one giving orders and being the bigger person. Not orange-headphones-loud-music Callie.

“Okay team,” Callie said, turning her attention to the piles of paperwork in front of her. “Thankfully, our target is flying into the Springs, so we don’t need to travel far. In fact, we can stay on base until a few days before. We have a little over three weeks to prepare for this mission. Our target is expected to arrive at the Colorado Springs airport on June 30th. It may seem like a lot of time but its not. We have to do all of the leg work ourselves since we don’t have anyone under us to help with the preparations. I know this is kind of a ‘baby’ assignment for some of us—” Valora saw her eyes dart to her for a moment. “—but it is still important and it will require all our time and focus.” Her eyes landed on Deacon this time, and Valora had to fight back a laugh. “I will only need two days to the get cameras set up and all that fun stuff. We might want to plan three to four days to make sure we know the environment. Otherwise,
everything else can be done here. I know we have been working a ton as partners, but we’ve also
got to be cohesive as a whole team. Since some of us are new to each other…” Callie paused and
everyone turned to stare either at Deacon or Valora, who shot her friend a nasty look. The blonde
winced before continuing. “Since some of us are new to each other, I want to make sure we are
all on the same page by the time we head out.”

Deacon spoke up next. “We should establish our skills and what roles we are going to
play. We should assume he will be on guard. Suspicious. He isn’t going to just let some strangers
walk up to him. We are going to have to be clever if we want to find out where he is hiding the
codes and who he is working for.”

Surprise shot through Valora. She almost didn’t believe that he had said something so
reasonable and well planned out, as well as that he had read the paperwork ahead of time to
know anything about their target.

“As I am sure you all know,” he continued from his spot on the wall. “I’ve been labeled
an assassin by the ISA. That means I’m a sharp shooter and skilled sniper. I also have
considerable skills in knife work and hand-to-hand combat.” Valora had never heard these things
before and she certainly had never seen them during training. She had been thinking of him as a
lazy, conceited jerk since she met him, and she was so clouded by her anger and dislike of him
that she forgot that he was in the ISA for a reason. The agency wouldn’t let a deadbeat loser into
the mix.

“If you’re a sniper, we can put you on the rooftops to give us a visual as things are going
down,” Link said. “The rest of us can be on the ground, ready to confront the target and intercept
the codes.”
“Where are we going to do this?” Valora asked. “Are we going to try to catch him while he is on the way to his hotel? To the bank? We need a starting point.”

Callie stood and quickly shoved papers around to better reveal the maps she’d laid out on the table, pointing at the various locations as she spoke. The rest of the group all leaned forward intently. “That’s why I pulled these out. My sources say he will be landing at the Colorado Springs airport at 1:00 p.m. He will have a car waiting for him to take him to his hotel that is between twenty-five and thirty-two minutes away, depending on what route he takes. From his hotel he is only ten to fourteen minutes away, again depending on route, from Integrity Bank and Trust. That is where we think he plans on either using the codes directly or meeting with someone to pass them off.”

“It’ll be hard to get anywhere near the airport. Security now-a-days is too tight,” said August. He ran his fingers through his hair. “We’ll have to try to catch him somewhere around here.” He gestured to the map, indicating a part of the Springs where the target’s hotel rested near Highway 25.

“The problem is we have no way of knowing what route they are going to take between the airport and the hotel.” Callie sat down again and began typing vigorously at her computer. “There are at least three alternate routes, and probably more than that. The only way to intercept him before the hotel is to do it at the airport.”

“What about the hotel?” asked Deacon.

“What about it?”

“Security isn’t going to be as tight at the hotel, right? We can set up there?”

Callie nodded.

Deacon grinned. “I have an idea.”
“Where could he possibly be?” Valora snarled after ten minutes of waiting for her partner to show up.

“He said he’d be here,” Callie assured while typing distractedly at her computer. Her bracelets jangled; Valora imagined throwing them out the window. The blonde’s orange headphones rested around her shoulders, but the music was still playing loudly enough that Valora could make out the music. She pictured them joining the bracelets.

“And we all know how good his word is,” snapped Valora, shoving back from her chair to pace the width of the meeting room. With Callie and August sitting on either side of the table, two extra chairs crowding the room, and Link leaning against the wall behind his partner there was barely enough room for her pacing. With everyone in the space, it felt particularly cramped today. She didn’t understand how she managed not to scream at anyone when they where there two days ago.

*I guess I didn’t,* she realized after remembering her snarled conversation with Deacon. *Clearly, these damn rooms just need to be bigger.*

“Hendricks!” Valora paused her pacing to stare at August. “Sit down. You’re giving me a headache.”

Hooking the leg of the chair with her foot, she pulled it out and slumped into the seat. She crossed her arms, pressing her nails into her ribs. “He came up with this stupid plan. He chose to meet today. You’d think he’d manage to be here on time.”

“Val, what’s your problem?” Callie asked.
“My problem is that a member of my team can’t be bothered to show up on time.” It took a considerable effort to not shout at Callie. *It’s not her you’re mad at,* she reminded herself. Her nails dug deeper into her sides.

“He’s only a few minutes late. Maybe his training lasted longer than planned or something.”

“Or he’s sleeping off his hangover.”

“That’s not fair, Valora.” Callie stopped her typing to look her in the eyes. She always knew her friend was serious when she used her full name. “He’s earned his place here, just as the rest of us have.”

“It’s no excuse to be unprofessional.”

“And missing Liam is not an excuse to treat Deacon poorly!”

Valora felt the blood drain from her face. Her hands dropped to her sides, hanging limply. She sat up straighter, her shoulders tightening the way they do when she’s in the sparring ring, preparing for a battle. When she spoke, her voice was hoarse. “Shut up.”

“Hendricks.” Link said waringly, moving to stand behind his partner.

“Shut up,” she said more loudly, standing up from her seat. She liked the height advantage over the other woman. She wanted to intimidate her, scare her, show her that no matter what good friends they were, she would never be Liam. “You have no right to bring him into this.”

“I have every—” Callie began, her voice rising to match Valora’s.

“No you don’t. You weren’t there. You didn’t lay there bleeding and broken while buildings burned around you and your best friend slowly died at your side.” Her voice was heavy from holding back tears. She swallowed thickly, but the feeling didn’t go away. “You didn’t
wake up in a hospital alone with the knowledge that you were only there because you fucked up more than anyone thought possible. You don’t have any right to say those things to me. None of you do.” She turned to glare at the rest of her team. A stony silence blanketed the room.

It was Callie’s turn to go pale and Valora felt an angry warmth fill her insides at the sight. “Val, I didn’t mean to—”

“No one ever means to.” She got a sick pleasure when her friend flinched at her cold tone. She almost smiled, but the feeling vanished, when Link rested his hand on Callie’s shoulder and she reached up to grab it.

Valora chewed on her own teeth for a moment, glaring at her teammates through her titled gaze. They avoided eye contact. She wanted them to face the brunt of her glare, to be burned by it. Instead, they were cowards.

A hand landed on her shoulder; she had to force herself not to duck away from the touch. She turned the full force of her stare on Callie, who’d gotten up to comfort her. Suddenly, the silence in the room felt thick and suffocating. She didn’t want comfort. She didn’t want sympathy. She wanted to be angry and to be justified in her anger. She wanted to be told it wasn’t her fault.

She pushed away from the table and from Callie. “I need some air.”

“Valora, the meeting.”

“I’ll be back in five minutes,” she tossed over her shoulder. She grabbed the handle and would have slammed it behind her if Deacon hadn’t been blocking the way.

She didn’t think it possible, but her mood darkened.

“Excited to see me, Hendricks?” Deacon smirked at her, shoving his way passed her. She swung the door shut and leaned against the frame. He set two black garment bags on the table,
shoving some of Callie’s paperwork aside to make room. Her mood softened, causing her hands to shake at the sudden release of anger. She crossed her arms again, determined to hold on to her frustration for as long as possible.

“You’re late.”

“I am.”

“What’s your excuse this time?” Valora raised an eyebrow at him, mimicking his cocky expression.

He turned to face her and gestured grandly at the garment bags beside him. “I had to pick the lady up a gift.”

Valora frowned in response. He smiled irritatingly at her and she desperately wanted to throw him out the window too.

“What are they?” August asked. “New uniforms?”

“In a sense,” Deacon responded. “They’re for our mission. Those on the ground can’t exactly wear mission-issued apparel, can they? They need to blend in with normal folk.”

Valora rolled her eyes. “We’ve all been on missions before. We know what needs to be done.”

Deacon grabbed the garment bag on top of the pile and shook it at her. “Then get over here and try this on. I’m sure the wall can hold itself up just fine.”

Pushing away from the wall, she snatched the black bag from his hands. His grin was infuriating. While holding the top of the bag with one hand, she unzipped it with the other, exposing an outrageously revealing dress. The bright blue material stopped at about knee-length, with the front in a deep V with a thin strap wrapping behind the neck, which left the back completely open. It was so skimpy the garment bag engulfed it.
“No.”

“No?” Deacon repeated, pushing away from the table and snatching the dress from her hands.

“No. No way. I’m not wearing that.” Valora stepped away from dress, inching closer to the door. The backs of her hands itched, each of the scars burning.

“Why not?” Deacon’s tone was quickly switching from arrogant to angry. If Valora hadn’t been so stressed, she would have grinned that she had finally managed to get under his skin.

“I’m just not. You are going to have to think of something else.” Her hands frizzed tightly. Callie stared at her in concern and slowly moved around the table to stand beside Deacon. She suddenly felt trapped and she wished she hadn’t tried to storm out of the room earlier. At least then they would still be seated in a circle.

“You agreed to this, Hendricks,” he snapped, shaking the bag at her.

Her anger spiked. “I agreed to your dumb plan. I did not agree to seducing our target!” she yelled. “I said I would get close to him to snatch the documents.”

“How else are you going to get close to him?

“Sneaking up on him.” She tossed her hands in the air. “You know, stealth, surveillance.”

“You don’t think,” Deacon said slowly, as if to a toddler, “he won’t be on guard. We need a distraction.” He shook the dress again and tried to shove the bag back in her hands.

She shoved it away from her. “I’m not wearing it. And what makes you think this is going to work? Maybe our target doesn’t like whores.”
“Val!” Callie admonished before gently taking the dress from Deacon. “Why won’t you wear it? It’s pretty.” Valora remained silent as Callie removed the dress from the bag and walked over to place the dress against her front. Her hands shook. “You’d look very nice in it.”

“And distracting!” Deacon interjected. “Which is the point!”

Callie shot him a glare over her shoulder. “Stop it, Deacon.” She always called her teammates by their first names, which annoyed Valora to no end. It was informal and far too personal for her liking. “Val, why don’t you at least try it on?”

Dragging the dress away from her chest and clutching the material in her fist, Valora leaned forward so only Callie could hear her. “It shows my back,” she whispered through clenched teeth. From the corner of her eye, she could see the rest of her team staring with combinations of confusion, pity, and anger; she wished she could sink into the floor.

“So?”

“So,” Valora said slowly. “My body isn’t exactly in the best…shape…for that.”

The blonde raised her eyebrows in confusion, her face saying, “What the hell does that mean?”

Gritting her teeth, she breathed, “My scars.”

Callie’s mouth formed an O. “They aren’t that bad, are they?”

“They’re that bad.”

“What?” Deacon said. “What is it?” He was bouncing his leg during their conversation, a clear sign of his impatience.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not going to wear it,” Valora said for the whole room to hear. “We are going to have to think of something else. I can grab the bag without this dress.”
“Again,” Deacon said through a ticking jaw. “He is going to be on high alert. What imbecile is just going to let you snatch the case from behind? I guarantee he won’t let go of that thing unless we do something to get his mind off of things.”

Callie turned to face the group, her brows furrowed from deep thought. “Unfortunately, Val, we do need some sort of distraction. Something to pull his attention away from what he’s doing.”

“If I wear this dress, my tits aren’t going to be what’s distracting.”

“What man wouldn’t be distracted?” Deacon said. She expected to see a snarky smile spreading across his face as he eyed her up and down, but his mouth stayed in a firm line and his eyes were locked on hers. “Of course they would be distracting,” he continued gesturing uncomfortably at her chest.

“My-my-never mind.” Valora threw the dress at Deacon, who caught it from the air. “It doesn’t matter. I’m not wearing it. Figure something else out.”

“This will work, Hendricks.” Deacon’s voice was the calmest she had ever heard it. She almost couldn’t believe the man could sound so reasonable. “I’m sure of it.”

Valora started shaking her head violently, but Callie started talking before she had the chance to argue some more. “I’ll do it.”

She felt her eyes get wide as she stared at her friend. No. No, this was much worse. Worse than she could have thought. “You’re on tech. Monitoring the cameras and stuff.” She tried to keep her voice strong but it came out strained.

Callie smiled softly at her, gently resting her hand on her shoulder for the second time that morning. “I’ll do it, Val. Be the distraction. You can still grab the case.”
Deacon was nodding his head, staring at Callie in a clinical manner. “Have you been directly in the field before?”

Callie huffed and snatched the dress away from Deacon. “Don’t ask stupid questions. Of course I have.”

“What about the cameras?” It seemed to be the only thing Valora could manage to say. Her heart pressed heavily against her sternum.

Callie thought for a moment before saying, “Link, do you think you can monitor the surveillance equipment if I get it set up for you?”

Valora shot Link an imploring look, praying he would do something to stop her. She sighed heavily when he shook his head.

“Why not?” Callie asked.

“If you’re going to be on the ground, then so am I,” he said gruffly.

Callie shook her head, but didn’t push the matter. Instead, she turned her attention to the remaining team member. “August? What about you?”

“Yes,” he said after a brief pause. “I can. Just make sure to set it up properly.”

“Watch it,” Callie said in response to his joke. She turned to Valora. “See. This will work.”

“I don’t like it,” she said.

Callie looked hurt. “You don’t think I can do it?”

“It’s not that, it’s just…” she trailed off under Callie’s intense stare

Deacon clapped his hands together. “Perfect! It’s settled. Want to go try that thing on?”

She looked at the dress in her hand. “It might be too big. Valora’s taller than me.”
Smiling widely, Deacon slung his arm around her shoulder. Valora secretly hoped Callie would punch him in the stomach for touching her. She was disappointed. “Don’t worry. I’m sure we can find something.”

Callie shrugged his arm off her and walked towards the door. Valora didn’t move from her path, instead forcing her to walk around her. “It’ll be okay,” her friend whispered as she walked by.

Valora blinked, but just watched her friend leave the room, letting the door swing shut behind her. Once she was gone, August, Link, and Deacon began discussing strategies behind her. She barely heard them.

“She’ll be okay,” August called, causing her to startle. “Snap out of it and get over here.”

Instead she left the room, slamming the door behind her.

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She had just wanted to leave in a huff, but now that she was out of the training building she wasn’t sure where to go. Going back to her stark room wasn’t an option: Callie was sure to find her there. She wanted to be alone.

It wasn’t long before she found herself following the echo of dog barks. The dirt path she was on opened up to a fenced in field, backdropped by a medium sized building filled with kennels. Valora had only been over here with Liam on a few occasions, waiting patiently outside the fence while he ran Angie through her exercises. They would have the same grins on their faces as the animal-agent teams ran around the field, up over ramps, through tunnels, and excitedly sniffed out practiced explosives. She found it incredibly dry and hated waiting for the hour and half it took Liam to finish, but it had made him so happy she’d never had the heart to tell him she didn’t want to come.
Valora slowly approached the fence, glancing around the field. Two German Shepherds and one Belgian Malinois were working with their Agents; their barks and laughs mixed together. She eyed the Malinois carefully, but she was sure it wasn’t Angie. The dog had a far too pleasant look on its face to be that cranky beast. She wondered if she had been reassigned a partner too.

Before she was aware of her actions and could decide it was a bad idea, she found herself walking around the fence to the building’s entrance. Despite the building’s size, it was only large enough to hold ten dogs at a time. The kennels were spacious, about eight feet long and 6 feet wide, with enough room for a bed, water and food dishes, and extra space to play with some toys. The other half of the building was dedicated to feeding rooms, cleaning equipment, and storage for training supplies.

There was a small catch fence around the door, just in case a dog got loose, it couldn’t go running across the base on its own. The chain-link rattled loudly, alerting both man and animal to her presence. The dogs barked in warning before their handlers silenced them. The trainers watched her, but did not stop her from entering the building. Her neck itched under their curious glares.

She thought she would be happy to have a door between her and prying eyes of the other Agents, but what lay inside may have been much worse. Seven suspicious animals stood in their kennels, heads low, and eyes locked on her distrustfully. They were trained to be leery of strangers. Valora swallowed uncomfortably before walking by the kennels to examine the labels attached to the kennel doors that marked the dog’s name and breed.

Avery: German Shepherd

Katrina: German Shepherd
Freddy: Belgian Malinois

Valora read each tag as she walked from kennel to kennel, but she recognized Angie before she read the nameplate. She was huddled in the corner of her kennel, hackles raised, and was letting out a low growl to warn Valora away. A toy was shoved in the far corner of the cage, collecting dust. Her heart ached when she saw her untouched breakfast in her food dish, while all the other dogs’ bowls were empty. The red-brown dog had lost weight since the last time she saw her. A rush of pity cooled her anger from earlier.

Sitting down in front of the cage, Valora said, “I miss him too.”

A low growl was the only response.

“Don’t worry. I’m not gonna bother you.” Of course, that appeared to be little comfort to Angie as she let out a warning bark when Valora scooted closer. “Don’t bother with that. I’m not afraid of you.”

Angie’s glare screamed, “You should be!” They spent a few moments just staring at each other.

“Have you been this unreasonable with everyone?” she said when the silence was suffocating. The bitch remained stoically still, teeth bared. “You’re going to have to move on, you know. Let someone else work with you.”

A line of drool dangled from a canine tooth. She thought it looked like a tear.

“Liam’s gone, Angie.” She crouched lower, flattening her ears back at the sound of her name. “I know you think you are being brave by waiting for him, but he’s not coming back.” It felt weird to say it out loud; she realized she hadn’t truly admitted that to herself either. “Not ever.”
Another pause stretched between them. Only the sound of clicking toenails and the scrape of dishes against concrete surrounded them. It seemed as if all the other dogs had decided to ignore her presence; Angie remained rigid and untrusting.

“Do you have a new partner yet?” Eyeing the dog’s stiff posture and aggressive growling, she guessed not. “You’re lucky. They didn’t waste anytime reassigning me. I wish I could bark and growl to keep everyone away.” She almost laughed when Angie barked menacingly. “I can’t do that though. My job is slightly easier to fill than yours.” The dogs were expensive and difficult to train. Agents might be too, but people were easier to come by.

Valora eyed the dog up and down, scanning her thin legs, strong back, and tucked tail. Other than a slight notch in her right ear she looked completely intact. “You faired bettered than I did,” she said. “I came out of that explosion looking like a shattered window.”

Angie paused her snarling to lick away the drool that had accumulated around her lips. That is when she noticed the V-shaped slash bisecting the dog’s lip. She touched the divot on her own face. A lump clogged her throat for a moment.

“I don’t know how to do this,” Valora said after a while.

“This…this mission seems like so much and dealing with my teammates seems impossible. It’s a nothing mission. Low caliber. Why am I freaking out?” A stony silence was the only response.

“There is just so much in my head and my heart and I have nowhere to put these feelings.” Suddenly the words were rushing out of her without much thought on her part. She felt distant, as if she were floating from above, watching her body break down. “I am just stuck dealing with it. Stuck pretending that I am okay. Stuck trying to prove to people that I can still do my job.” Her eyes felt hot.
“I’m not sure I can. I feel like a fraud. Callie and everyone are putting their faith in me. What if something goes wrong? I can’t lose——” she cut herself off, taking deep breaths to compose herself. She would *not* cry. She would *not* be weak. Never again.

“I’m not the same person as I was with Liam. I can’t pretend that it doesn’t matter if something goes wrong anymore. And I can’t control what happens. And now Callie is going to…” Her rant trailed off, but the echo of her voice surrounded them. She hadn’t realized she’d started yelling.

The smell of smoke clouded her mind for a moment, but she forced herself back the present; her eyes cleared. Angie still kept her distance, distrustful eyes still watching Valora, but the growling was no longer a constant rumble.

Their eyes locked and Valora felt that a moment of understanding passed between them. She pulled her legs to her chest, resting her head on her knees. Still watching Angie, she let herself relax and her mind go blank the first time in a long time.

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The sun had set by the time Callie found her. “I thought I might find you here.”

Valora didn’t lift her head from her knees, but said, “No you didn’t.”

“You’re right.” Callie plopped down beside her. “What the hell are you doing here?”

This time she did lift her head. She stared at Angie, who after a few hours of stoic growling decided to cautiously move to her bed to glare at Valora. “I was mostly avoiding you. I needed to be alone.”

Callie was silent for a few moments. “I’m sorry for what I said.”
“I forgive you.” An elbow pierced her ribs. “Ouch! Okay. I’m sorry too.” She turned to smile at her friend. The orange headphones were around her neck, of course. After a moment her smile faded. “I wish you weren’t going to be in the line of fire.”

“The line of fire!” Callie laughed. “Val, this is a cut and dry mission. Show up, snatch the codes, get out. No one is going to be in the line of fire.”

“You don’t know that. I know better than anyone how badly things can go wrong.”

Callie slung her arm around Valora’s shoulders and pulled her into a side hug. “Things can go wrong, but that’s the exception not the rule.” She squeezed her gently. “Besides, with you on my team, I am certain everything will go smoothly.”

Studying the scars on her hands, she didn’t know what to say. *I’m not sure anyone should put their faith in me anymore.*

“Callie, you know what happened—”

“And I don’t care.”

“What?”

“I don’t care.” She pulled away from Valora to stand over her. She resisted the urge to glare at her for doing the same thing that she had done earlier. That was her move. “What happened was unfortunate, but it’s done and you can’t keep dwelling on it. I don’t care what happened because I know you are a great Agent and I know you and Link and August and, yes, even Deacon, will keep me safe.”

Valora stood up to face her. “We will do our best, but we can’t control everything.”

“That’s life. That’s the job. Get over it.”
She was stunned into silence. *Get over it? I can’t just get over it.* Instead of voicing her thoughts, Valora took a deep breath and said, “You’re right. I’m overthinking it.” Callie still watched her with suspicious eyes, so she forced a smile and said, “Did the dress fit?”

She was hoping that Callie would take the question as her acceptance of the plan. She was relieved when her friend smiled. She sighed dramatically. “No. It was too big. I was swimming in it.” She shoved her gently with a mockingly accusing tone.

“How is it my fault?”

“Because you’re freakishly tall and muscular.”

Valora crossed her arms in an attempt to hide her self-consciousness. She felt like her scars were shining through her clothes in the darkness. “I’m not tall and muscular. You’re just abnormally small.”

“Agree to disagree.” Callie smiled. “Good. She linked arms with her and walked her out of the kennel building. “Wanna get dinner? Link said they have mac and cheese tonight.”

Unhooking their arms once they were outside, she shook her head. “Naw. You go ahead. I’m going to go back to my room. Get some rest in before my trainer smacks me for not sleeping enough.”

Callie snorted. “Vincent has a point you know. You need to rest.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Turning as if to walk in the opposite direction of Callie, she waved. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See ya.”

Once Callie was out of sight, Valora turned and walked back in to sit with Angie. She sat until her back cramped and her butt went numb from sitting on the cold concrete floor. She sat there until the first rays of light peeked through the windows.
Callie called them into a meeting a week later. Valora, of course, was the first one there and Deacon was ten minutes late. The four of them were already seated and Valora was ready to put a hole in the wall by the time he walked through the door. Sitting between Callie’s jangling bracelets and Link’s massive form was making her twitchy on top of it all.

“Okay, what’s the news, blondie?” Deacon said when he casually entered the room.

Before Valora had a chance to snarl at him, Callie put a hand on her leg from under the table and said, “I’ve got intel on our target.”

“Really?” Deacon sauntered to a chair, pulled it, and flopped into it carelessly. “Why didn’t you put that in the message? I might have bothered to be here on time.”

“She did put it in the memo,” said Valora slowly. Her teeth hurt from her clenched jaw. Callie shot her a look that told her to remain quiet. She was sure the team was quite sick of their bickering, so she leaned back in her chair with arms crossed. Her nails pressed into her ribs, still sore from the punctures from a week ago. She feared the bruises might never fade as long as she was still partnered with Deacon Sholes.

“It was in the memo,” Callie repeated. She sounded irritated, something Valora was not used to hearing. It brought her pleasure to know that someone else was finally bothered by her partner’s antics.

“Oops,” Deacon said dryly, picking at his cuticles with exaggerated purpose.

Callie’s smile looked forced, but, much to Valora’s disappointment, she didn’t comment on his poor attitude. “Mistakes happen. Anyway, I got it confirmed where our target is staying. I found records of him reserving a room at Hilton Garden Inn in Briargate. It is under an alias, but I back searched the information he gave to the receptionist and it’s him.”
“You’re sure?” August asked. It was clear he had come straight from a training session with his sweat-damp hair and rumpled, gray workout clothes. She had not been so lucky to be able to work off her energy before being shoved into the tiny room. Her legs ached for a run.

“One-hundred percent.” Callie flipped her laptop around for the group to see. One half of the screen showed a map of the Colorado Springs area and the other had a complete blue print of the hotel. The team leaned closer to get a better look at the images. Callie gestured to the screen as she spoke. “It is a thirty-two minute drive, depending on traffic, from the airport to the hotel and it nine minute ride from the hotel to the bank. Based off of this information, I think we were right to go with Deacon’s plan of setting up at the hotel. That would be the best place to intercept him.”

“Great!” He stood and clapped his hands once. “I was right. Can I go back to training?” Valora eyed his jeans and button up shirt, with a raised eyebrow, but decided not to comment on it. “What’s the catch?” she asked Callie. She knew her friend well enough that she wouldn’t have called them in here if it were that cut-and-dry.

“The catch is I am not totally sure on when he will get to the hotel…or if he is going to the bank or the hotel first.”

Deacon sat back down with a huff. “Well that does put a wrinkle in things, doesn’t it?”

“How are we going to fix this?” August asked. “We need a way of ensuring where and when he shows up.”

“His flight gets in at 1p.m.” Callie flipped the computer towards her to swipe through different webpages and documents before turning it back around to the group. She’d pulled up a flight log to replace the hotel blueprint. She pointed at the side with the map, where she had highlighted the most likely route from the airport to the Briargate area. Like I said, it’s a thirty-
two minute drive, give or take, and we have to take into account him unloading, collecting baggage, and getting a rental car. My estimates put that around 24 minutes if everything goes smoothly for him.” She laughed a little to herself. “It’s an airport though, so I would bet on longer.”

“What’s our timeframe then?” August asked.

“I wouldn’t expect him to be in the target zone until around 2:15p.m.”

Valora leaned forward, thinking. “That’s not the problem though. We plan on being there at least two days in advance to set everything up and establish a perimeter. The issue is picking which location to set up. We don’t have enough resources to do both locations. We’re stretched thin as it is. And if he goes to the bank before the hotel and passes off the codes, we’re screwed.”

“So we need a way to ensure he shows up at the hotel first,” said Deacon. Once again Valora was caught off guard by his participation in the conversation. She keeps forgetting that he is a trained Agent of the ISA. Too bad he doesn’t act like it.

“And how do we do that?” she asked, her tone drawling and bored, mimicking his attitude from earlier. Deacon raised his eyebrow tauntingly and Callie pinched the side of her leg under the table. She flinched at the sharp pain and sent her friend a wounded look, who didn’t have the decency to meet her eyes. She would get her back for that later, she decided.

“Can we contact the bank and have them close early?” Link asked. He was sitting beside Valora with his massive arms leaning on his knees. His gray shorts and t-shirt seemed to be stretched to the seams.

Callie perked up at his comment, flipped the laptop back around, and began typing rapidly. “That’s not a bad idea. We could probably get them to close for the entire day, which will make our lives much easier.”
Valora was amazed when she saw the corner of his mouth tip up. She wasn’t sure she had ever seen the man smile. Or show any sort of emotion beyond stoic disinterest.

“There is no guarantee they’ll do it,” commented August. He looked particularly tired and disinterested in being here. Even more so than Deacon, which surprised Valora. She supposed it must be frustrating to be constantly called into meetings when his main purpose is to make sure people don’t get hurt.

“They’ll do it,” said Callie. “We’re a government agency. They’re not going to say no to us.”

“And if they do?”

“I have my ways.” She pulled her headphones from around her neck and to place them over her ears, typing rapidly and quickly moving between pages. Valora watched her eyes dart across the screen.

She smiled. “I think this means the meeting’s over.”

One by one they filed out of the room.

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The team met frequently outside of the meeting room for the rest of the week and up until two days before they planned to set up at the hotel. The team building exercises were tedious, boring, and seemed particularly useless when her partner didn’t show up. Both her trainer and Callie kept telling her to be patient and trusting, but she still wasn’t sure how she could put her faith in someone in the field when they couldn’t even be bothered to show up to training. They seemed really under concerned with his unreliability, which she found troublesome for the upcoming mission.
Ultimately, there wasn’t anything she could do about it. No amount of complaining was going to get her a new partner and she needed to complete this mission with minimal issues if she wanted to regain her status within the agency. There was a lot riding on this.

By the time June 28th rolled around, two days before the target was scheduled to arrive, Valora was tense and irritable. Everyone, including Callie, had been keeping their distance from her snappy attitude and rude comments. She felt slightly guilty for being so hostile, but she couldn’t seem to keep the angry tone from her voice.

That morning they met at the barracks’ mess hall and walked together to the garages. Deacon actually managed to show up on time, something of which she didn’t believe the man was capable. A black Jeep Wrangler JK was waiting for them at the garage with bags of their gear nearby. Valora wasn’t sure which team member had arranged for this stuff to be gathered ahead of time, but she had a sneaking suspicion it was Callie. The woman was a compulsive planner.

Silently, they packed the bags into the back of the vehicle. Link volunteered to drive, which meant Callie got shotgun. Valora wasn’t sure who made up those rules, but she felt mutinous when she ended up squished between August and Deacon in the back seat. “I still don’t see why I had to end up with the hump,” she grumbled as they went over a bump on the dirt path leaving the military base. Deacon’s elbow poked her in the kidney.

“’Cause you’re the smallest,” said Callie distractedly from the front seat. She was fiddling with a tablet, trying to pull up a map on how to get to the hotel.

“No, you are. So by that logic, you should be sitting here.”

“I’m the navigator. I have to tell Link where to go.”
“That’s bullshit. The tablet is doing all the work.” Valora gestured at the device when an animated woman’s voices told them to continue on the current road for another two miles.

“See?”

“What’s your point, Val?” Callie glanced over her shoulder at her.

“My point is that you’re full of shit.”

The blonde rolled her eyes. “Would you like to trade places?”

“Since you offered…”

“No,” said August. “We are not stopping just to rearrange seats. It’s a twenty-five minute drive. Suck it up, Hendricks.”

Valora glared at him, but he didn’t melt like she had hoped. Deacon sighed dramatically.

“I liked it when you get all demanding like that, Bell. You should take charge like that more often.” This time Valora elbowed him in the ribs. He set a glare her way, but she only smirked at Callie, who had been turned in her seat to watch her teammates bicker.

“Shut up,” said August. “All of you. We have a lot to do when we get there and I don’t want to have to stitch all of you up when you decide to kill each other.”

“What did I do?” asked Callie, blinking at him innocently.

“Your tiny ass is in the front seat.”

“Ha!” Valora laughed triumphantly. Her vile mood began to lessen. She hadn’t realized how much she missed this. The camaraderie was something she’d missed. Even with Deacon there to sour the mood, she felt lighter than she had in a long while.

Callie stuck her tongue out at them before putting her headphones over her ears. Her music was loud enough to be heard over the radio. August rested his head against his window, closing his eyes, and Deacon sat stiffly, with his leg bouncing the entire ride. Resisting the urge
to smack him and tell him to hold still, she watched out the front window, as the mountain trees and dirt roads gave way to houses and pavement.

Going down I-25 was not as painful as she expected it to be with minimal traffic and only one accident they had to move around. Just like August said, they arrived in less than thirty minutes.

They pulled up to the hotel, but didn’t park under the front canopy. Instead they pulled around the back and fell out of the Jeep. Even though it was a relatively short drive, Valora had felt cramped and claustrophobic the entire time. Not having Deacon’s elbow in her side was a huge plus too.

Link and Deacon began a trip around the building, checking for any suspicious activity and began establishing a clear perimeter. Callie went inside to talk to the managers, let them know they were there, and check them into the room. They planned on commandeering the security cameras that were already in place as well as adding some new ones to make sure there were no blind spots in and out of the building. Valora eyed the surroundings as her and August unpacked the back of the car.

The off-white building was not as big as she was initially expecting. It was long; clearly large enough to house hundreds of guests, but it only had three stories. There was a sign at the back of the building that matched the bright red letters she saw on the front as they drove in: Hilton Garden Inn. With a tin green roof and average landscaping, Valora could tell this was not a high-end establishment—definitely not what she was used to with her past missions. She was used to wealthy criminals and large gang like systems with many rings of influence. She was used to months of preparation and training, followed by several more months of set up and infiltration. Callie wasn’t kidding when she called this a “baby mission.” Valora had thought that
this was her way of getting back into the ISA’s graces and becoming a top dog again. Looking at this average building, she suddenly wasn’t so sure.

The area around the building wasn’t very populated, with a large span of grass and road between it and the buildings across the street from it. Deacon would have his work cut out for him if ever did have to take a shot. *Hopefully, he’s as good as he brags he is.*

After a few minutes, Callie returned with several key cards and a smile. “We’re in.”

“Good,” said Deacon as he rounded the corner. Link was right behind him. The man had a habit of showing up right at the beginning of important conversations. She wasn’t sure how he managed to be so lazy and unreliable, but still never miss any of the important stuff. “The nearest building I think I can use is right across the street. It’s a little far, but I’ll have good sight-lines.”

“And if you need to take a shot?” asked Valora, looking at him from the corner of her eye as she picked up a bag and slung it over her shoulder.

“I can manage.”

“He’s not going to have to take a shot,” said Callie. She pulled her computer bag from the front seat, while the others gathered the rest of the bags. “Now lets get going. We have a lot to do.”

***

They got two rooms between the five of them on the first floor of the building. This was strategic for several reasons. They needed to be on the first floor for safety reasons—easier to get in and out, faster response to emergencies, that kind of stuff—the two rooms were to ensure that no one was suspicious of so many people cramming into a single tiny room with two queen beds. Only the manager and a select few employees knew about the ISA’s business at the hotel, so the fewer people concerned about their activities the better.
Despite the two rooms, they all went into the first one together, setting down all the equipment and mentally preparing for the next two days of set up. With all five of them in the room, Valora felt particularly claustrophobic. It was almost as bad as the tiny meetings rooms back on base. The two white-sheeted beds took up most of the space, with a small nightstand sitting between them. Directly across from the beds rested a table with a large television on top. To the left of the TV was a desk with a tiny lamp that looked like it came straight from the 1980s. The other side held a tiny round table with two bright red chairs on either side. The bathroom was just inside the main door. Deacon was already inside there, no doubt snatching all the free toiletries. She was going to be pissed if he took the shampoo and conditioner, leaving her and Callie with nothing but bar soap.

Almost as soon as they set their stuff down, Callie cleared the surface of the desk and began setting stuff up. She unfolded two laptops, hooking several cables to them, and typing rapidly. She pulled out a small gray box next; it had a collapsible antenna that she lengthened to its full height. Valora wasn’t sure what it did, but she was sure it had something to do with hacking into the security cameras. She took a step forward with the intention of asking Callie what all this stuff did—she figured she should improve her skills on different areas, maybe make her more valuable to the agency—but Link leaned over her before she had a chance and mumbled something in her ear. Callie shook her head and mumbled something incoherently. She yanked out some more cables, shoving hair from her face. With her moving at this rate, it wouldn’t be long before it would be impossible to talk with her at all. Once she was in the zone, she was basically deaf.

Deciding she couldn’t stand another moment in the tight space, Valora left Callie and the others to tinker with all the electrical equipment to explore the layout of the hotel. Even though
she studied the blueprints beforehand, she felt it was important to personally experience the cramped hallways and tacky décor.

The inside of the hotel was equally as dull as the outside: beige tiles, beige walls, and beige furniture. The only real color in the place was the fake flowers that adorned nearly every available surface. The front desk sat directly across from the doors, ensuring that the staff saw every person that walked in and out. Valora noticed that there was no doorman, clearly a result of this being a lower-end hotel. She wondered if there was a way they could still station Link at the entrance someway. They needed someone to monitor when the target entered and to ensure he didn’t make a run for it in case things went south. Looking around the modest hotel, she was suddenly concerned that a doorman might be too conspicuous. If that wouldn’t work, then maybe a security guard? She was suddenly glad they got here a couple days early. This could have been a major problem if they had only planned for one day of setup and preparation.

The center of the lobby was home to an intricate tile design, with darker tiles circling the lighter ones. Atop the design was a large tan couch, with a circular table in front of it. To the left and right of the couch were blue chairs, acting as end caps for the space. She found it quite ugly.

The couch faced the eating area; a space sectioned off by glass French doors that were propped open with those cheap plastic doorstops that just sat on the ground. Five round tables, with four chairs each, rested in the middle of the room while square tables lined the walls and rested along the windows. They gave a lovely view of the parking lot. A long counter took up an entire wall across from the doorway. It was empty except for a large juice machine and a coffee maker. The rest of the countertop must be filled in the mornings for their “Complimentary Continental Breakfast” as was indicated by the large words painted on the wall above the counter.
Two hallways branched off from the lobby with an elevator in the center. Each hallway led to a stairwell, with rooms lining the walls on both sides. The upper levels looked the same as the hallways below: plain and boring.

The building seemed pretty empty. Valora didn’t run into any people checking in or out and the hallways seemed very quiet. The only person she saw on the upper levels was a cleaning lady. She barely paid her any notice, just let herself into a room to change the sheets and clean the floors. It was a good reminder to make sure they put the “Do Not Disturb” cards on their doors. The last thing then needed was for some poor person to walk into their rooms and see what a mess they made of the place.

Finished with her perusal of the third and final floor, Valora took the elevator back down stairs. She noticed a camera in the corner, making a mental note to ask Callie if she was aware of that one too. With a ding, the doors opened to the lobby where she was surprised to see Link, dressed in a gray-blue electricians jumpsuit, at the top of a ladder installing new cameras. Callie stood at the base of the ladder, dressed similar and wielding a clipboard. Even from across the room, Valora could hear her barking at Link while he frowned and growled back. Smiling, she crossed the room towards them, first glancing around to make sure there weren’t too many people that would see their interaction.

“It’s not that hard, Link.” Callie was tapping her foot. “Just hook the camera into the existing wiring.”

“You say that like it’s easy.” She could see his jaw grinding as he spoke.

“It is easy! I already told you what to do and all the necessary cables are already in the ceiling.”
“Why aren’t you doing it, then?” Valora asked, drawing their attention to her for the first time.

Callie sighed exaggeratedly and waved her clipboard in the air. “I would if I could! Even with the ladder, I’m not tall enough to reach the ceiling.”

It looked like Link was suppressing a grin. Valora did the same when her friend huffed and stomped a foot like a toddler. “I see. Sorry,” she said. “All set up in the room?”

“Yes.” Callie looked at her clipboard, which appeared to have a list of all things she planned to get done. Dread crawled up her throat when she saw the list go to a second and then a third page. The woman was insane if she thought all of that was getting done in three days. “I got a feed on all the existing cameras, but I found a few blind spots. We’re fixing that now.”

“Did you get the elevator?” Valora asked, but immediately put up her hands in surrender when Callie sent her a murderous look. “Right. Of course you did. What was I thinking? What are the others doing?”

Callie rolled her eyes. “Don’t know. Don’t care. They were irritating me so I told them to go be ‘useful’ somewhere else.”

“Which means they’re probably dicking around.”

“Exactly.”

“I guess I better go put an end to that.” Valora waved to Callie and silently wished Link good luck before heading down the hall to their room.

The room was transformed in just the short amount of time. The desk was completely covered in electrical equipment, along with most of the floor around it. Two laptops were out, with many wires and boxes running between them and into wall outlets. The television was on, but instead of playing one of six boring channels, it was split up into many squares, each box
showing a different camera feed. At the bottom of the screen were three black boxes, clearly meant to be available once Callie got the new cameras installed. The woman really was a miracle worker. It looked like all of the bags were emptied, the contents either in use for surveillance or tossed haphazardly onto the beds. She was sure the boys where to blame for that. Callie never did anything “haphazardly.”

The room was empty, so she went next door, knocking loudly. August answered the door. “What’s up, Hendricks?” he asked, before turning around and walking back to one of the beds. She followed him in. The room was set up exactly the same as the other one, but she noticed that someone had already laid out a sleeping bag and a pillow on the floor by the window. Valora almost laughed at the set up. No one could share a bed apparently.

“Just putting an end to any shenanigans or tomfoolery that might be afoot.”

August sat on the end of the bed closest to the door and was going through his equipment. He had all the standard gear that all Agents got, but he also had a massive medical kit, filled with enough supplies to completely stock an ambulance. She knew from personal experience that a large amount of the supplies would be strapped to his person. He needed to have enough stuff available to keep someone alive until they could get him or her to a proper treatment area. It looked like he was taking inventory of everything.

“Was that a joke?” August said with mock seriousness. Valora sat on the other side of the bed while he spoke. “I never thought I would live to see the day that Valora Hendricks actually told a joke.”

She almost cracked a smile. “Shut up. I’m hilarious.”

“Not lately, you haven’t been.” He paused his cataloging for a moment to look at her. She felt the hair on the back of her neck prickle. She sensed a serious conversation coming.
Her shoulders tightened, the marks there burning. Her throat burned too. “How would you know? This is the first time we’ve truly interacted in over a year.” His eyes bore into her so she busied herself by picking up and examining various medical supplies. Though none were very interesting, it was better than facing his intense stare. August and her had been on several missions in the past and she might have even considered him a friend at one point. But things changed. People died and it wasn’t just Liam who didn’t come out of those explosions. Valora would never be the same and these people needed to start figuring that out.

“That’s my point. We haven’t talked in a long time.”

“You’re not my therapist. None of you are and all of you need to stop acting like it.”

August looked like he wanted to say something more: his mouth parted and his hand twitched as if he were going to put his hand on her shoulder. Her glare seemed to have changed his mind because he simply shook his head and said, “I was just saying that it’s nice to hear a joke or two. You’ve seemed less tense the last couple of days, is all.”

Valora felt some of the tension drain from her shoulders, but her suspicion didn’t lessen. She eyed him carefully, but he just went back to his supplies, methodically packing them into bags. After a moment she said, “I think its being in the field again. I feel more like my old self.”

“Good,” August flashed her a grin then snatched a roll of medical tape from her hands. “Now stop messing with my stuff. I had it all organized.”

Valora was glad that he didn’t try to continue the conversation. “Sorry. So where’s my partner?”

“He said he was going to check out his sightlines from the building across the street, but I expected he would be back by now.”
“What do you think he’s really doing?” she asked, picturing him in a bar somewhere already well on his way to being drunk.

“Hell if I know. I’m not too worried about it right now.”

“Hmm.” Valora felt her mood darken for a second time since entering the bedroom. August looked up, giving her an encouraging nod. “Don’t worry. He’ll be back well before the mission goes down.”

“He better be,” she said, standing up to leave. “For his sake.”

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The day the target was supposed to arrive came simultaneously too quickly and not quick enough. Valora was going stir crazing in the hotel. With Callie running around like a mad woman getting everything setup, there wasn’t much left for anyone else to do except sit and wait. Deacon had been AWOL since her conversation with August two days before, but he came knocking at Callie’s and her door at 5:30 in the morning, baring two trays of coffee and a box of donuts. Valora had been awake for hours already, but Callie looked ready to murder someone when the whole team came barging into the room.

“What could you possibly want at butt-o’clock in the morning?” she snarled, snatchiing the cup of coffee from him. She was still in her pajamas, her hair a raggedy mess. It wasn’t very often that people got to see Callie so mussed. Valora was used to the post-shower-and-coffee version of her friend, but it brought her endless joy to see her snapping at Deacon.

Deacon, of course, was oblivious to anyone’s frustration. “It’s mission day!” he said with exaggerated cheeriness. “Rise and shine! Time to take down the baddy.”

“Our target doesn’t even get in the Springs until one o’clock!” Callie sat in one of the awful red chairs, cradling her coffee like a child.
“As you have told us a billion times.” He set the box of donuts on Valora’s bed. It irritated her even though she knew every other surface was covered in Callie’s equipment. He plucked a chocolate frosted one while saying, “I figured we could take the time to go over the plan. Just to be sure.”

“The rest of us have already done that. If you had been here you would know that,” she said, snatching a donut of her own. As much as she disliked him, she wasn’t going to turn down donuts.

Before Deacon had a chance to say anything, August said, “Yeah, where have you been? There was some stuff that we could have used your help with.”

He raised an eyebrow in August’s direction. “I was busy.”

“Doing what exactly?”

“Polishing his horns, I bet,” Valora said, after Deacon was silent for several moments. She could sense the tension rising between the two men.

August smirked and didn’t further the conversation. Callie, who had been silently drinking her coffee during this exchange finally said, “You want to go over the plan? Great. Let’s do it. Val, you start.”

She gritted her teeth, but said, “1300 hours: our target’s plane arrives…assuming there are no delays.”

“Approximately 1400 hours: he arrives at the hotel. Step one: Deacon get’s visual of car,” said Callie.

“Step two…” began Link. For the next several hours, they went through the plan step-by-step, until there were no hiccups or hesitations by anyone. By the time one o’clock rolled around, the team had a plan for almost anything that could happen.
Valora felt a heavy weight in her stomach. The rehearsal didn’t much ease her anxiety. She kept reminding herself that this was a “baby mission” as Callie would put it.

*We are prepared*, she told herself. *We are over prepared. Nothing will go wrong.*

*Nothing will go wrong.*

***

Valora was already sweating in the light pink sweater and jeans. The turtleneck scratched her neck and she tugged at the collar uncomfortably. The jeans felt tight, too restricting for her comfort.

“What’s taking you so long?” she called to the bathroom where Callie was currently getting ready with whatever obnoxious dress Deacon had picked out for her. She bent over to tie the laces of her white Chuck Taylors. She wiggled her toes uncomfortably beneath the canvas and rubber, regretting her decision to leave behind her standard issue boots.

“I’m getting ready. It takes time!” Callie called back.

“It’s a dress. It should just slide on. There isn’t even a zipper!” She could hear her friend’s laugh through the shut door. “Hurry up!”

“I’m almost done with my makeup.”

“Makeup?” Valora murmured to herself. Even though she used to play that role in missions, it had been so long since she had been in the field she had almost forgotten about the ridiculous amount of preparation it took. After another two minutes went by without Callie opening the door, she called, “I’m sure you look fine. Deacon is already across the street and Link is at the front doors. We gotta move, Callie.”

The door opened and Callie emerged, hands on hips, to glare at her angrily. “I’m done. You happy now?” This was a completely different dress from the one Deacon had initially
brought her. Instead of a light blue piece of lingerie with no back and plunging neckline, this was a dark blue that looked almost black with a sweetheart neckline. The hem stopped just before her knees. It was modest, but still beautiful. Her skin was smooth and glowing. Valora’s heart tightened at the sight and she tucked her hands in her armpits.

“See,” she said. “You look fine.”

Callie rolled her eyes. “Of course I do.” She did a mock spin. “Now go get August. I want to go over the security cameras with him one last time.”

Valora checked the time with her phone. She didn’t usually have the thing out, but it was going to be her prop for the day: a toy to match her girly outfit. “It’s almost 1:30. We’re cutting it close.”

Callie turned to type at one of her laptops. “We have plenty of time. Besides, Deacon will have a visual well before he even gets in the parking lot. I already know what kind of car he rented and informed Deacon. Now go get August.”

Glaring holes in the back of the blonde’s head, she stood and marched out of the room, and knocked on the neighboring door. August answered immediately. “Callie wants to—”

“I figured,” he interrupted and marched to their room.

Valora opened the door for him and said, “I’m getting in position don’t take too long.”

They ignored her, too focused on the screens in front of them. Callie was talking quickly as the door shut behind her and she went into the lobby. The entrance was almost as empty as the previous two days. Making herself comfortable on the ugly blue chair that faced the doorway, she spied Link, dressed in a security guard’s uniform. He played the part believably, with his back straight, his eyes on a constant swivel. He stood at an angle so he could see through the
doorway and into the parking lot as well as see most of the lobby with only a slight turn of his head.

Doing her best to lean back in the chair and look relaxed, she placed one side of headphones in her ear. The other side was filled with a hidden communication device. This way if she talked, it wouldn’t be too suspicious to anyone walking by. She pretended to play with her phone, only every now and then glancing around the lobby. Her goal was to look like she was waiting to meet someone. She felt stiff and uncomfortable though, as if this was the very first time she was in the field. Her foot kept bouncing on its own accord.

*Nothing will go wrong.*

“Check in.” Callie’s voice came so suddenly through the earpieces that she nearly jumped.

“In position,” she said immediately.

“Check,” said Link. It was mumbled and Valora barely saw his lips move from her position across the room.

“Check. Have visual of lobby. Thermal is working. Traffic is moving along, but no sign of our target yet.” Deacon’s voice was serious and low. Valora had never heard him sound so severe.

“In position,” said August. “I have visuals of everyone. Hendricks, loosen up some. You look like a board.”

She felt her shoulders tighten even further. “Shut up. Where are you, Lewis?” She didn’t feel comfortable calling Callie by her first name. It seemed too personal, too close for the situation at hand.

“In the room still. I’ll head out once Link has a visual.”

“That’s our guy,” August said. “Stay on him.”

“Done. He is turning into the parking lot. Get ready, Griffin.”

Link stiffened, keeping a watchful eye on the door. From her vantage point, Valora couldn’t see much outside, just two poles of the overhang and some plants on either side of the door. She briefly saw a bright red car pull through before being obstructed by foliage.

“Got a red Chevy Cruze,” said Link. This time when he spoke he grabbed his police radio and talked into it. It was just a prop, but it was smart. Link had always been good at playing these different roles in the field. She used to be good at it too. She tugged at the collar of her sweater.

“That’s him,” said Deacon. “Thermal shows no one else in the car. I only have you guys and one front desk employee in the lobby. Confirm?”

“Confirmed,” Valora responded, eyeing the lobby just to be sure. Having thermal was a brilliant idea. Not only did it allow them to have a clear image of everything inside the hotel, but also in the buildings around them. She hated that it was Deacon’s idea.

“It looks like all he has is a briefcase and a small carryon. Clearly he doesn’t plan on staying long.” Deacon’s voice was steady, but fast. She found it stressful and her heart started beating at a rapid rate. She had the urge to run. She wanted out of this building. It already felt like the walls were closing in on her. The ceiling could collapse at any moment. Her gut tightened; she had to force herself to keep her relaxed position.

“Have visual,” said Link. “Walking quickly. Entering in three, two…”
The automatic sliding doors opened and an unassuming man entered the building. He was of average height, probably around 5’11”, with light blond, almost white, hair and a strong receding hairline. His light gray suit was a size too small and Valora could see a stain on his burnt orange tie. His black shoes were in desperate need of a polish. Sweat coated his face and neck. Every few seconds he would let go of his carryon and pull a well-used cloth from his pants pocket to dab at his forehead. He looked like he was moments away from passing out. This was the man that they had been studying for weeks. This was Mitchel O’Connor.

To say he was underwhelming was an understatement.

“Doesn’t exactly seem like the hardened criminal type,” Valora murmured.

“Approaching desk.” Link looked stiff; ready to pounce at any moment. She could tell that he wanted to tackle the man right then and there. Even though that would be easier in the short term, the ISA didn’t want these people to know they were involved until they had already recovered the bank codes. Valora wasn’t sure why they couldn’t just snatch them and run, but it wasn’t her job to ask questions. She followed orders. Things tended to work out. Usually. Her heart pinched.

Nothing will go wrong.

“Heading out,” said Callie. The room door opening and shutting sounded through the earpieces.

“I have eyes,” she said, watching the man closely. She almost completely abandoned her phone, just staring blatantly at the man. “He seems nervous. And moving quickly.” Now that he was closer to her, Valora could see more clearly the signs of tension in the man’s body. His face was clean-shaven, but Valora could see red marks where the blade had slipped. Veins bulged from the back of his hands where they gripped the luggage and briefcase. There were clear sweat
marks beneath his arms. He kept his eyes trained to the floor and a few feet in front of him. His eyes didn’t roam in the slightest and Valora began to question whether Callie was going to be enough of a distraction. It seemed as if a bomb could go off and the guy wouldn’t stray from his intended course. “Lewis, you better intercept him quick.”

“On it,” her friend whispered. The blonde suddenly appeared from around the corner, her heels clicking against the shinny tiles. She held a folder filled with fake papers under her left arm and had a suitcase similar to the target’s in her right hand. She walked with purpose, eyes locked on O’Connor. If the room had been more crowded, she was sure everyone would have their eyes locked on her. She looked confident, beautiful, and powerful. Valora felt the brief sting of jealousy, but it faded as Callie got closer to the target.

The man at the desk smiled as he handed him his room key. He took it without a word and turned directly into Callie. It worked so perfectly it was almost comical. The folder full of papers went flying the man lost hold of his carryon and Callie dropped the replacement briefcase. O’Connor maintained a tight grip on his own.

“Oh my goodness!” Callie said. “I’m sorry.”

The man behind the desk rushed around to help pick things up. She bent over to help pick up some papers at the same time he was leaning over to retrieve his carryon. When she stood back up her forehead collided with his nose. A groan of pain came from him as he dropped the briefcase to hold his nose with both hands. Blood ran between his fingers. Callie rubbed her forehead briefly, before fluttering around the man with fake worry.

He was trying to wave her off, but she continued to fret over his nose. His eyes were watering enough that Valora was sure his vision was blurred. Standing, she moved around the chair to hover behind the man. At the same time, Link moved forward to “help” as well.
“Are you alright sir?” he asked. Large globules of sweat were running down the back of the man’s neck as these people hovered around him. Blood dripped onto his tie, a similar color to the stain already present. He pulled the sweat rag from his pocket and pressed it against his nose. Valora wrinkled her nose in disgust. He was clearly getting flustered.

Good.

Link used his own body mass to corral the people away from the luggage and to block the target’s view of Valora. O’Connor was frantically trying to wave everyone off saying, “I’m fine. Really. I’m fine,” over and over again, but Callie and Link were not deterred. His eyes were darting around frantically, especially to the front door. He clearly wanted to make a run for it.

Valora grabbed the man’s briefcase, leaving the replacement one lying on the floor in a pile of paperwork. Her fingers were sweaty as she gripped the handle. “Got it,” she whispered as she calmly walked toward the elevators. At the end of the lobby, she took a hard right, heading towards their rooms. She could still hear Callie and Link talking to the man through her earpiece but it sounded like they were getting ready to move on.

“I’m so sorry again,” Callie said. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I’m fine.” The man’s voice was shaking.

“Is this your bag, sir?” asked Link.

“Yes, and…and the briefcase.”

She used her room key to get inside. August was sitting at the desk in front of the television, watching the events closely. “Callie did good,” he said.

“She did,” she said, setting down the briefcase. “Everything went really smooth.”

She could feel her heart starting to settling and the rock that had been in her stomach since that morning finally started to lighten. They made it through with no problems.
Nothing went wrong. Nothing went wrong. She repeated it like a mantra in her head, trying to convince herself it was true. Nothing went wrong.

Then Deacon said something that made her go cold.

“I have something on thermal.”

“What is it?” asked August. He turned away from Valora to watch the monitors.

“Where’s O’Connor?”

Her hands started to shake.

“Five bodies. Maybe more. Two heading towards the hotel, one in the parking lot, and it looks like someone might be in this building with me. Our target is heading toward the back of the building. Maybe an emergency exit?”

“I got him,” said Valora, leaving the briefcase with August as she left the room. She moved through the halls, glancing both ways to ensure he wasn’t behind her.

“I don’t see anyone on the cameras.” August’s voice sounded suspicious through her earpiece.

“They’re there,” Deacon stated. “Moving quickly. I can’t tell what they’re doing through thermal, but its odd.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. Could just be regular people,” said August. She hoped he was right.

“Maybe. But their movements are suspicious.”

“Hmm.” August’s sigh was heavy. “Hendricks, what do you have?”

She shoved through the backdoors of the building, the exit sign glowing above her. There was no one outside. A rusted dodge neon rested to the left of the door, but no one was inside and
everything seemed quiet. “Nothing. He’s not out here and he wasn’t in the hallways. He must still be in the building.”

“That or he had someone waiting to collect him.”

“I still got these guys in my sights. I don’t like it.” For the first time since she met Deacon, he sounded nervous. It made her palms sweat.

“I say we get out of here then.” August turned away from the monitors and pressed his fingers into his earpiece. “Lewis. Griffin. Did you get that?”

“We copy,” said Link. “We’re doing one last check of the lobby.”

“What about O’Connor?” asked Valora. She reentered the building, letting the door clang shut behind her. Her walk to back to the room was slow and cautious. “I don’t like that loose end.”

“Our mission wasn’t O’Connor,” said August, though his voice sounded heavy. “It was to get the briefcase, which we did.”

He was right, but the uncertainty, weighed heavily in her stomach.

“We’re clear,” said Link. “Heading back to room.”

“Good,” she breathed to herself, but they heard her anyway.

“We’re fine, Val—”

“Shit!”

At Deacon’s curse, Valora was dashing down the hall. She caught sight of August running toward her when a loud crash echoed through the front windows. They shattered, raining glittery shards all across the lobby.

Hotel staff began screaming, racing out of the front of the building in terror. “Get down!” Valora screamed, waving her hands at the people. “Everyone down!” People dove for cover; a
cloud of panic filled the room. Honking horns and screeching tires sounded through the broken windows. She saw a rusted gray van tear out of the parking lot. She tried to get the license plate, but it was too late.

Turning her attention back to the lobby she saw that Link was on the ground, Callie beside him. The target was nowhere in sight.

“What happened?” Valora yelled, running toward Link. There was radio silence from Deacon. “Everyone check in.” Her throat scratched around the words.

“Check,” said August. Still nothing from Deacon.

She heard heavy breathing through her ear piece and was about to repeat her order when she caught sight of Link.

He pushed himself up, unwrapping Callie’s arm that had been around his collar. His body blocked everything but her black heels. He went to his knees, staring at his partner. She wasn’t moving.

“Check,” he whispered.

She waited patiently for Callie’s voice to follow his. There was nothing.

Her heart froze in her chest. Slowly, her feet dragged her across the tile. She peered over Link’s shoulder; a pool of blood was leaking a river through the grout lines. Blonde hair was matted pink and large chunks of skull littered the floor.

She stumbled away from the sight, a strangled gasp choking her. She felt August’s chest; he grabbed her arms to keep her from falling. Trembling hands came to her mouth, but her lips were numb.

“Callie?” She didn’t move. Link’s shoulders began to shake. “Callie!”
Deacon suddenly appeared through the front doors, feet crunching on glass, and panting heavily. His eyes were rapidly scanning the room; his sniper rifle was slung over one shoulder. He looked disheveled, eyes large and frantic, squinting around the room, but his body remained rigid, focused as he scanned their surroundings. After a moment he said, “I think we’re clear.”

“Why aren’t you at your post?” asked August as he moved Valora to the side to begin his examination of the body. It was pointless. She was gone and they all knew it.

“I came to help.”

“Bullshit,” snapped August. He knelt by her head, his knees soaking with blood. Following ISA protocol, he pressed two fingers to her throat. For a moment, she envisioned that he would say there was still a chance, that she wasn’t totally lost. That she wasn’t trying to avoid chunks of her skull as she walked across the tile.

After a moment he shook his head. Glancing at his watch, he said, “Callie Lewis. T-O-D: 2:48 p.m. from bullet to the head. We should call this in.”

Valora rocked on her feet, the world tilting around her for a moment. The scent of smoke choked her; her face burned from nonexistent flames. A quiet hum filled her ears.

Swallowing painfully, she glanced around at the cowering people, wide-eyed and waiting for help. Sirens echoed in the distance and for a second she wasn’t sure if they were real or in her head. With a few forced breaths, she willed her vision to clear. She coughed before saying, “We need to evacuate the area.” Her voice was hoarse. Without waiting for a response, she walked over to a group of people hovering behind the check-in desk. She pulled her badge from her back pocket and said, “I am an Agent of the ISA. Follow me.”

She turned to lead them to the back of the building, away from the broken glass and body. She saw Link, now standing, watching her. She couldn’t be sure, but she thought she saw a
tear slide down his face. After a moment, he followed her lead, guiding people out of the building. It wasn’t long before the police showed up and began systematically knocking on doors, kicking them in if needed.

It was almost an hour before the building was confirmed clear. The local police had what they needed and the case had been transferred to an ISA superior. It was a welcome distraction and she could almost convince herself that everything before that was a horrible dream.

Until she walked back into the lobby.

Someone had put a jacket over Callie’s head, but the blood still leaked lines through the tiles. August was standing nearby talking on the phone. From the pieces she could hear, he was reporting what happened to their superiors. Valora dreaded what that would mean for her when they got back. Ice pierced her heart.

Before she knew it she was standing over Callie’s body. Her steps were sticky with blood. She knelt beside her friend, staining her pants red. Without much thought, she pulled the jacket away from her head. She stared in horror for a moment; there was nothing left of her face. Bringing a shaking hand to her mouth, she forced the tears in her chest down. She flinched when the copper scent of blood finally reached her.

The world tilted.

The smell of nonexistent smoke was more overwhelming now. For a second the lobby disappeared, replaced by soot coated bricks and smog clouded skies. She shook her head, returning her mind to the present. That hadn’t happened in a long time.

Standing quickly, she knew she needed to get away before she completely freaked out.

Strong hands landed on her shoulders. She startled, turning and swinging an arm on instinct, but stopped before striking August in the chest. He backed a step away from her.
“Sorry,” she whispered. “I…I’m still on edge.”

“We all are,” he said, his voice calm. “You okay?”

She looked at the ceiling, swallowing hard. The shattered glass twinkled like fairy lights. At first she tried nodding, but it wasn’t long before it degraded into a shake. “Yes,” she lied. She looked at Callie’s broken feet; the blood didn’t reach her shoes. This wasn’t supposed to happen. When she looked away from the body, August’s sympathetic eyes bore into her. She scowled in return. “This isn’t my first rodeo, Bell. I’m fine. People die.”

“She was your friend,” he said. His lips parted as if he was going to say more, paused when he saw Deacon approaching.

“People die,” she repeated. “It shouldn’t have happened, but it did. I’m fine.” Death follows you, whispered an insidious voice in her head. She ignored it, stoically keeping her face sharp.

August scowled, glaring over her shoulder, where she knew Deacon was standing. “I want to know exactly what happened. Any suggestions, Sholes?”

Valora turned to see Deacon standing opposite of her, staring blankly at Callie’s body. Anger suddenly fueled her; she didn’t want him looking at her.

He raised an eyebrow at August. “How would I know?”

“You were across the street,” August began. “You had thermal. You were supposed to be our eyes and ears. You warned us about the strange people on the ground. And then Callie get’s shot and you don’t know what happened?”

“I only know what I saw,” Deacon growled defensively. “I told you everything that was going on.”

“Why did you come running down here?”
“Because I saw everyone hit the floor and I came running to help.”

“You broke protocol.” August crossed his arms.

Valora thought through the events as the men argued. Her mind was racing. “Where is your gun?” Her voice was a whisper at first. She cleared her throat, saying it again louder.

He raised his eyebrows at her as if she had said the stupidest thing in the world. He shook the shoulder that the rifle was slung over and said, “Are you blind?”

This time she spoke through gritted teeth. “Where is your sidearm?” Her neck tightened when she looked him in the eye. He rolled his eyes, reaching for his handgun, but his hand found nothing. His holster was empty. Valora watched his face carefully when his yes widened in shock and he frantically looked down where the pistol should be. His body was stiff. Rage built in her chest replacing the shock and grief, if only briefly. Before he had a chance to say anything, she moved closer to him. “Callie got shot. Can you explain that?” Her voice was sharp, accusatory. For a moment she let her anger fuel her and she forgot her professional facade. With effort, she pulled her fury back inside.

His eyes widened even further for a moment, but he quickly smoothed them back into his arrogant persona. “What are you suggesting, Hendricks? I was doing my job. I thought they might be setting up explosives or something.”

She ignored his question. “Why would ‘these people’ you ‘saw’ shoot Callie if they were just going to blow the place up?” The rage scraped her voice raw.

“I know I have skills, but I’m not psychic.”

“You had one job.”

“If you are going to accuse me of something, why don’t you just say it?” He closed that last foot of distance between them, towering over her.
The tension was rising between them and August quickly intervened. “Calm down, Val. She swung in his direction, glaring holes at him. “Don’t call me that,” she said in a low voice. Her eyes burned suddenly. She was not going to cry. “You don’t get to call me that.”

His eyes quickly softened, the lines of his jaw apologetic. It made her angrier. His lips parted, but she halted whatever he was going to say. Instead she turned to Deacon, her mouth tightened in a snarl.

“This is your fault.” The words came out surprisingly calm, considering the rage of emotions flying through her.

“What?” He glanced at the rest of the team, his eyes searching over her shoulders.

“You heard me,” she growled, her voice scratching her throat. She wanted to hurt him. “Callie would still be alive if it weren’t for you. If you didn’t shoot her, then she got killed because you were too busy dicking around.” August suddenly inserted himself between her and Deacon, blocking her view of him. She tried to step around him, but he held her in place.

“You need to calm down.” His voice was firm but gentle.

She stared him down for a few moments before taking a step back, throwing her hands in the air. “Fine, protect him,” she snarled. “He needs it.”

She turned her back on both them, pressing her hands into her ribs. She dug her nails in hard, trying to compose herself. Her throat itched from the stench of burning rubber and decay. She knew it wasn’t real. It was more important than ever that she got out of this building.

After a few deep breaths she turned back around. “You guys got this handled?”

“Yes, but—”

Not letting August finish she snapped, “Good. I’m going to check the perimeter again. I’ll be back in a minute.”
Without another word, she walked with measured steps through the broken glass and outside. Her shoes made a sucking sound as Callie’s blood dried against the soles. Once she was sure she was out of sight, she ran.

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Once outside she realized there wasn’t anywhere to run. The buildings were scattered across open fields with wide sidewalks and few trees. She missed the cities. She missed the forests on base. She missed…

So she just ran. She ran as fast as she could away from the building. The ground still shook beneath her. It was so violent she would pause and watch the grass, observe their movement. They would be still other than the slight bending of a breeze. It was her heart that was crumbling, not the world around her.

She still smelled smoke. She choked on it. She ran from it.

Eventually she tumbled against a building: the rough brick of a liquor store. It was the end cap of a small strip mall. The smell of cheap Chinese food temporarily covered the stench of burning flesh. She let herself fall to the pavement, her sweater ripping as it snagged on the rough wall. Her knees landed on hard concrete; pebbles pierced her skin through her jeans. Her body folded over on itself, her face in her knees. She smelled Callie’s blood.

“Oh God, no,” she whispered. Images flashed across her eyes, blurry, burned, and painful. Her ankle throbbed.

“Oh God, no.” she screams. Liam’s eyes continue to stare at her, even as the life drains from his body. It coats her, painting her nails an ugly maroon. Her hair clings to her cheek, smearing her face with the sticky liquid. She wishes it were her blood. Oh, how she wishes.
Her tears fall. The bloody drops splatter on Liam’s chest, little dark spots against his ash coated t-shirt. His blood mixes with the tears. Her mangled ankle drags in the dirt as she tries to pull him to her.

“Liam,” she sobs, pressing her forehead to his shirt. His warmth has already left him. Not even his smell can linger.

Gaspng, Valora pushed away from the ground, pressing her back against the wall. Her heart hammered painfully against her chest. She dug her nails into the concrete. She used her feet to push herself back up the wall. Her scars burned along the backs of her hands. Her neck itched, not from the sweater this time. A sharp pain shot through her ankle. The world smelled like fire.

“I can’t keep this up,” she whispered, mouthing the words more than saying them out loud. “I can’t keep doing this.”

She thought of Liam lying broken and burned while the world collapsed around her. She thought of Callie, pretty in her dress, but suddenly faceless.

She twisted the hem of her sweater in her fingers, gorging holes in the delicate fabric. Being an Agent again was all she wanted after Liam died. Now she wasn’t sure she wanted anything at all.

Then she thought of Angie sitting alone in a kennel, back tight and teeth bared.

A loud gasp broke through her gritted teeth and she released her grip on the clothing. Her body trembled violently.

She folded her head into her knees, waiting for the tears to come.

They never did.