

Embedded

CHAPTER 1

Dakota Judd wasn't a man who questioned decisions once made. He'd had more than enough time to dissect every moment of the incursion. He could've turned a blind eye; after all, it was war. But reliving the raid, in fractured dreams that continued to insinuate themselves into his waking moments, was a burden he'd carry for life. His action sure as shit created an unexpected detour. But with disciplined daily pushups, chin-ups, and laps, his body was still intimidating. He lived by the Ranger credo, "Further, Faster, Harder." That much he could control. Life behind bars, he took one day at a time. Rangers were trained to expect the unexpected, but nothing could prepare him for what was in store from the woman who sat across the metal table from Dakota.

Jean Steele was an African American FBI Agent with high cheek- bones, chestnut skin, shoulder-length brown hair, who wore a professional navy pantsuit. She was an attractive woman, something not lost on Dakota.

They were in the Greeley Federal Penitentiary's visiting room designated for cops and lawyers. No cameras or recorders allowed. Steele removed her sunglasses before starting the interview, revealing sharp, intelligent, brown eyes that locked on Dakota's.

"So, Mister Judd...you've served six years of a seven-year sentence," she said, glancing up from her notes.

Dakota picked up the light scent of J'adore. The perfume his ex- fiancé wore.

"And three months before your early discharge, having been granted early release for exemplary compliance with institutional regulations, you blow it all by stabbing a Black inmate in the thigh, severing his deep femoral vein, leaving him to bleed out in the weight- room, almost killing him. Dakota...you don't look like a foolish man." "Is that a question, or an answer?" Dakota's eyes creased into an easy smile. He hadn't had a conversation with a good-looking woman for a very long time, and was intrigued by her visit and up to the challenge.

"In this case, it was kill or be killed," he said matter-of-factly. "The man was out of his league, and I had no choice."

"They didn't find a weapon on the victim."

"I left it in his leg. I'm sure it's all in your report."

"The Federal paperwork is in process to rescind your early release." Dakota was aware they weren't only going to rescind, they were going to add two years to his original sentence, bringing the life-killing number to nine.

"Why are you here, Agent Steele?" Dakota asked, cutting to the chase. "What did I do to deserve a visit from the Feds?"

Steele held his gaze. "The government needs your help."

"Why the interest?"

"You've had no gang affiliations since your arrest and conviction. That couldn't have been an easy ride."

Dakota leaned back in the metal chair and let her talk.

"The OC Wolf Pack are an anti-government white supremacist militia operating out of Orange County. We've been picking up chatter on the dark web and social media. The Wolf Pack may have a link to California Senator Jack Bradley, who's up for re-election.

"Bradley's constituency leans heavily to the extreme right. He hides their bias like a momma bear protects her cubs. The Wolf Pack are crude. And even though they share similar philosophies with the senator they are to be seen and not heard. That's where Blackfox Elite Protection fits in. We think Blackfox is providing the money used to fund Bradley's re-election and a growing list of homegrown militias."

"What's their MO?"

"Blackfox recruits ex-military, retired cops, FBI, and guns for hire. It's an elite private security force that has no compunction employing known felons. They're supported by a group of wealthy right-wing patriots...their description. Blackfox is getting fat on government contracts, assisted in part by the CEO's tight relationship with the senator who's the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, to the tune of forty-five million in the last quarter."

Agent Steele had definitely piqued his interest.

"Aren't you gonna ask where I stand?"

"If I thought you stood with them, I wouldn't be sitting here. Neither would you."

Dakota didn't argue the point. "Where do I fit in?"

"We need someone outside local law enforcement."

"And outside of the FBI," Dakota intuited.

Steele nodded. "A few of our retired agents still have friends in high places. We're aware of leaks. We need to shore them up. You've got the bona fides. Your skill set, your attack on a commanding officer while serving in Afghanistan. Your exemplary record before the assault charges, your silver medal. That, and now, stabbing a Black inmate three months before your release, should make you a rock star with the skinheads in quadrant-D.

"We need someone to cozy up to the supremacists who have ties to the Wolf Pack in Orange County and a probable link to Blackfox, our main target. Best-case scenario, you infiltrate Blackfox upon your release, and deliver their plans."

"Why?"

"The Alt-right's first armed insurrection on the U.S. Capital failed, but shook the world. We want to shut these militia groups down before there's a second attempt that succeeds."

"Why would I sign on?"

"That's up to you. The Army is about to rescind your pardon and add time to your release date for attempted manslaughter. When you get out...you'll be handed over to the United States Probation Office, where they'll dog you with years of probation and a host of rules that if not followed, will stack on more prison time. You'll be living in purgatory."

"I don't respond to threats," he said without attitude.

"We're offering you a lifeline."

"I'm sure you'll understand, Agent Steele. I've got trust issues with the government."

"I understand, and Blackfox will understand. I'll be your handler. You won't have to deal with the suits."

"You're wearing a suit."

"I'll have your back. Infiltrate Blackfox. Become our eyes and ears, and you walk away a free man. Your conviction, expunged. Pension reinstated. You can work, vote, get married, have kids. A normal life." Steele pulled a contract out of her attaché case and slid it across the table.

"How do I explain you?"

"I work at your law firm." Steele hands him a contact card. It read, Jean Clarkson. Associate at Peluso, Costa, and Litto, Attorneys at Law. "It passes the sniff test."

Not the way Dakota thought his day was going to unfold.

"Take some time," she continued. "Read the fine print. I already had a conversation with your representative, Joseph Peluso, and sent him a copy of the contract. It guarantees your future for services rendered."

"What did he say?"

"He was inclined to accept, but wouldn't give me a definitive answer until we spoke. Said it was your call."

"Sounds like Peluso." Dakota Judd lifted the paperwork, maintaining eye contact, trying to get a read on this federal agent before diving into the contract that might just be the answer to his prayers. He held the life-changing document in his hands, but his mind drifted on the scent of J'adore. The contract was fifteen pages of legalese that protected the government from any liability in the execution of said agreement. Shorthand for: If Dakota signed the contract, he was agreeing to risk his life in service to the government. If successful in the mission, he'd have his life back. He'd be a free man with no one looking over his shoulder. If he failed, well, he'd be back in the slammer, or he'd be dead. Dakota straightened the pages, looked deep into Steele's eyes, and nodded his assent.

Steele handed him a pen.

Dakota signed on the dotted line.

"Good," Agent Steele said. She slid the contract into her attaché case and pushed away from the table. "I'll be in touch." Steele started toward the door and then turned on her heel.

"And Dakota...try and stay alive for the next eight weeks."