

Chapter 1

The voice in my head returned when I stopped taking my meds. My caseworker said the voice was part of my condition—PTSD-induced schizophrenia—but I call him Mercury, the winged messenger of the gods, and a damn good friend. For years, he was my biggest ally in combat and helped me predict the future. I'm not talking about very far into the future. Sometimes minutes, sometimes seconds, and sometimes just enough to see it coming. Mercury would draw my attention to small changes in air density, the faint sounds of rustling cloth, or the weak electrical charge of someone lurking nearby.

He saved my ass more than once and, as is always the case with gods, there were those who believed and those who didn't. Believers fought and lived and died beside me without ever disrespecting Mercury. Non-believers sent me in for evaluations. My docs didn't believe in gods, they believed in meds. They told me they were smarter than my abandoned deity, so I took their advice until one day everything went wrong and good people died.

I was resting in a dark jungle when I reaffirmed my faith in that ancient divinity. Prama, the hotel owner, was drawing lazy circles on my chest with her finger when Mercury spoke to me in a voice loud and clear and slightly panicked.

Mercury said, Dude, you better think about your future real fast cuz it's coming. Can you hear it?

I raised my ear off the sweaty pillow and listened to the noises coming from a ways down the road. Tin doors squeaked open, truck springs creaked, boots hit the ground, voices issued commands. It

wasn't hard to predict the future. Sixty seconds from now at the hotel up the lane, soldiers would throw doors open, drag sleepy eco-tourists from warm beds, shove them against the wall, push a photo in front of them, and bark in whatever tribal dialect they speak in that corner of Borneo, "Have you seen this American?"

They were searching for the perpetrator of something.

I hadn't perpetrated anything, but I was pretty sure I knew who had.

Prama was about to speak when someone pounded on my door. Four thumps, all rapid and demanding. The way MP's bang on doors. My heart stopped until I heard Agent Tania whisper-shout, "Jacob. Damn it. Wake up!"

That clinched it. I knew who the perpetrators were.

My eyes rolled to the ceiling and I thought about life and death and love. I'd thought I was dead twenty-three times and didn't care much for the experience. I'd never been afraid of it. I'd killed all the people who tried to kill me. Plus a bunch more who were thinking about it. I didn't want to check out on account of some hajji with an AK-47. But I thought I'd left all that behind.

My job at Sabel Security had become a matter of careening from one ill-conceived, spur-of-the-moment crusade to the next. Death had been more remote when I walked point in Kandahar. If all I cared about was life and death, the choice was obvious: re-enlist.

But then there was the love part.

"You gone answer door?" Prama said.

It was the love part that kept me on the job. I was in love with my boss, Pia Sabel. Tall and strong and built like a tiger. She was the kind of woman a man like me would die for.

Well. Theoretically.

Romance with her was so remote I may as well crush on a movie star. To her I was just one of the staff.

Tania pounded on the door again.

I extricated myself from under Prama's naked body and savored the scent of the jungle motel's ancient battle with mildew. A glance at the clock didn't tell me much. 3? 4? I snapped on the light and

blinked at the mirror until my reflection came into focus. I looked like hell.

I yanked the door open and Agent Tania, sleek and exotic, glared at me, her nostrils flaring.

She was the real love in my life. I'd fallen in love with her when I'd pulled her from a burning Humvee in Nuristan Province. She refused to date me until after we'd both left the Army. It lasted fourteen glorious months. Then I blew it.

"I hope you're not paying for that." Tania pointed her nose past my shoulder.

"HEY!" Prama said.

"Wait, the hotel lady?" Tania half-asked. "Really. Never mind. Just MOVE."

"Yeah, I heard them down—"

Tania was already sprinting away. "Get the translator, we leave thirty seconds ago."

I kicked my t-shirt in the air, pulled my boxers up, and slipped into my shirt on its way down. Five seconds later, I had my trousers on and scooped a handful of ammo into my cargo pocket. I zipped my travel bag closed and kissed Prama on the lips while I pulled my Glock from under the pillow.

I said, "Happy birthday."

"Best birthday yet," Prama said. "Jacob Stearne come back next year?"

"Wouldn't miss it," I lied and bolted.

Tania tossed our duffels from the second-floor walkway into the alley below. Ms. Sabel, an Olympic athlete, caught them with ease and stuffed them into the back of our rented SUV.

Bujang, our translator—a pocket-sized Borneo local who was attending Georgetown when we hired him—looked a little stunned and sleepy when I dragged him out. He scratched his head and watched the women as if it were a tennis game. I picked him up and tossed him to Ms. Sabel. She broke his fall, landed him on his feet, and spun back so fast her ponytail hit him in the face.

The bang of an explosion echoed in the street, far side of the building. Tania and I vaulted the railing together. Ms. Sabel slipped into the driver's seat and racked the seat back. Tania lunged across Bujang. I took shotgun. Slinging our SUV through the mud, Ms. Sabel navigated the alley by moonlight before turning onto a jungle trail. Surrounded by dark green leaves and darker green shadows, the jungle was so thick that anything could lurk an arm's length from our shoulders.

We thudded through ruts and potholes, across a muddy rice paddy, and onto a cart path while tree branches slapped the truck like a drum roll. Finally she found an actual road, a single lane of soft mud. The back end slid wide when she made the turn and I shot Ms. Sabel a *slow down* glance that she ignored.

"This road goes to Bandar Udara Yuvai Semarang," Bujang said.

"Do they have an airport?" Ms. Sabel shouted over her shoulder.

"It's in Indonesia," he said.

"Shit." She slammed on the brakes, revved the engine, slipped the clutch, broke the back tires loose, and spun the truck around in the lane. Mud and bugs splattered in our open windows, bringing the smell of shredded leaves with them.

"What happened?" I said. "I thought we were here to donate a school."

"Later," Ms. Sabel and Tania said in unison.

I shot a glance at Bujang. He shrugged.

Apparently, whatever happened since Prama poured me that first drink involved Ms. Sabel pissing off two of the three countries claiming parts of Borneo. Maybe she'd offended all three, but I wasn't going to ask about Brunei.

"Where does this road go?" Ms. Sabel asked.

"Gunung," Bujang said. "It's a national park."

"Where'd we leave my jet?" she asked.

"Marudi, on the other side of the park."

"How far?"

"Four hours."

"It's only a hundred freaking miles to the coast," she said.

Bujang waved his hands at the dark, twisting road before us.
“Four hours.”

She took his estimate as a challenge and pushed the pedal down. I checked my seatbelt and gripped the A-pillar’s grab handle. We slipped around corners, climbed up mountains, flew down slopes, bounced our butts through dips and bumps for over an hour before a hint of light began to creep through the murky, overcast sky.

“Bad news,” Ms. Sabel said with her eyes on the mirror. “Lights.”

I craned around to peer between the stacked duffels and caught a glimpse of cone-shaped lights moving through the trees in the dark valley below. Three vehicles by my count. They could carry four to six guys each, meaning twelve to eighteen hostiles.

Odds like those represented a serious tactical problem.

I signed onto this mission because it was supposed to be a Sabel Charities trip. A simple fly-in-fly-out deal where my only mission was to keep Ms. Sabel safe from over-enthusiastic admirers and the occasional kidnapper dumb enough to try something with the young billionaire. But once again, I’d underestimated how much trouble she could find in the middle of nowhere.

I glanced at her to gauge how deep a hole we were in. Her solid biceps, visible through her skintight Under Armour, flexed and strained through every shift. Her legs tensed and contracted as she worked the brakes and clutch. Her eyes, intent and determined, never lost their laser-focus on the curves ahead.

Mercury said, I don’t know what she did in the Kayan village last night, bro, but these guys want your heads.