

CHAPTER ONE

At precisely two o'clock in the afternoon, Sam spotted the woman entering Starbucks and let out a sigh. "Finally. She's here."

With his SEAL training, Henry knew better than to turn around. He gazed into the mirror covering the wall behind their little table. "What do we do now?"

"We wait... and watch." Sam wiggled in her seat. She'd been sitting on the same chair for more than four hours, sipping coffee after coffee, and her butt was sore.

Pretending to scan the information on the laptop in front of her grew more difficult as time passed. Every now and then, she turned the screen to Henry so he could feign interest in their nonsense search.

"Have you figured a way to make contact?" He sipped his coffee and leaned forward. Sam shrugged. "Maybe if we show up for several days in a row, she'll be curious about us."

"Or she'll think we're casing the place to rob it." Henry's dimple winked, then disappeared. "At least we know she doesn't come in until the afternoon. That's more than we knew this morning."

Sam watched Nina walk through the coffee shop, noticing the way she glanced at the patrons with piercing eyes the color of dark-roast coffee. She could almost feel the older woman's authority as Nina checked that everyone had a reason for occupying the tables. She wore her long, nearly black hair in a braid, twisted around her head in a manner that reminded Sam more of a German hausfrau than a Native American. But it didn't take away from her striking beauty—her skin the color of brewed tea; her high cheekbones, generous mouth, and straight white teeth. Her features gave away her true heritage and added to her elegance.

Sam studied her as she disappeared through a door behind the order counter. "She looks intimidating."

"She's the manager of the place," Henry said. "She has to look as if she's in charge."

"What if I applied for a job here? I could learn a lot from her."

"You're too old." He gestured toward the counter. "Look at the baristas. None of them are a day over twenty-one."

"What if I told her I was desperate for a job? Any job."

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Henry glanced at Sam's tan suede jacket and neatly pressed jeans. "You don't look desperate. Why don't you just introduce yourself and tell her the truth? All this lying shit just makes more trouble."

"I tried that once, remember? I didn't lie to you and look what happened." Sam crossed her arms and leaned against the back of the chair.

"You may have a point. I still don't like it." Henry had had this argument with Sam before. He was one of the first recipients of the returned money her father had filched, and it had been quite a fiasco.

At Sam's initial contact, Henry suspected her of playing a game because she did not explain herself well. She'd been looking for Henry's father, a victim of her own father's greed, and she refused to turn the money over to Henry and his sister without first trying to locate the man who trusted her father many years ago.

When Henry told Sam that their father disappeared shortly after he lost his life savings and no one in the family had seen nor heard from him since, Sam contacted Henry's stepsister, Vicki, for her opinion. He had caused quite a scene when he thought they were cutting him out of his inheritance.

Henry dropped his gaze to the table, not able to meet her eyes. He always felt uncomfortable about how they met and didn't know how to make it up to her, but he had a hard time accepting he was wrong.

Sam regretted bringing up their first meeting. "I guess we'll have to agree to disagree. Things may have been shaky at first, but it worked out okay for you and Vicki."

Henry grunted. "It could've gone better."

"True. It was partly my fault, but you acted like an angry jackass." Sam smiled at him, hoping to end the discussion. She didn't want to argue with Henry; she needed their relationship to run smoothly, but she had a hard time being assertive without turning into a shrew. After all, she was paying him to watch her back. She took no pleasure in constantly bickering with him.

Henry returned her smile, his dimple making his face even more attractive. "I'm not proud of what I did, but I'm not ashamed of it, either. You acted like a real bitch."

"It all worked out." More and more Sam had to force herself to overlook the impossible lashes lining his gun-metal eyes and his long, lean body. Right now, the subtle sheen of his black leather jacket over his toned chest was distracting her more than she cared to admit to herself-- or anyone, for that matter--especially Henry. "I thought I came up with the perfect solution."

Henry decided to change the subject. Nothing would be accomplished by rehashing old scenarios. Besides, he wanted to leave Portland behind as fast as possible. He had a bad feeling about the city from the moment they arrived more than two weeks ago.

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But he knew Sam didn't want to hear about his "feelings". He couldn't tell her it was more than a feeling without giving away more than he was prepared to share. Only he and White Cloud, a Native American taxi driver he ran into a few days ago, knew of his "spirit guide," as the man had called it. "I think we need to get out of this town as soon as we can. We don't have time to hang around playing games."

"I agree. It seems Jules and my father are rather certain I'm in Portland." She'd had too many close calls since they'd arrived in the Pacific Northwest. They had been suspected of involvement in a couple of murders and had run across two men who were determined to abduct her to find out where she hid her father's money so they could collect the reward he had authorized. "But we haven't had any trouble for the past couple of days since the police have those lowlifes in custody."

"Doesn't mean others won't pop up."

"We'll handle it when and if it happens."

Henry sighed. "Damn, Sam, sometimes you're so naive."

"Me? Naive?" Sam laughed. "I'm probably the least naive person you ever came across. I know the danger, and I'm pretty sure we can handle it together. That's why you're here, after all."

Nina stepped out, snapping Sam's attention away from her companion, and stood next to a girl making a Frappuccino. She whispered in the girl's ear and took over the blender. The girl untied her apron and scurried through the door to the back.

Wearing a Starbucks cap and green apron over an embroidered white shirt and black skirt, Nina filled the orders with a smooth, competent hand. Aside from the few lines around her eyes and some strands of gray in her braid, nothing about the woman gave away her age.

The door opened and three young men swaggered in, two short and one tall. The expression on her face changed to a wary grimace, but she continued filling an espresso cup without breaking focus.

With their shaved heads and leather vests, the three newcomers looked out of place in the coffee shop. They stopped at the end of the line, behind an older couple deciding on what type of new-fangled beverage they should choose and a young mother trying to keep her toddler quiet in his stroller by rolling him back and forth.

One guy, skinny almost to the point of emaciation, had no shirt under his black vest. His serpent tattoo coiled around his arm and ended with the rattler's head on his neck, the fangs ready to bite. A dark shadow circled his head, giving away the receding hairline he was surely trying to hide by shaving what was left of his hair. Sam didn't recognize the design on his other arm, but it looked like a gang symbol of some sort. The second guy, carrying at least fifty pounds of excess fat, was covered in tattoos from his knuckles to his chin. He had so many, Sam could not make out any specific design—not that she wanted to; she could barely stand to look at him.

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The tallest one of the disgusting crew wore a dirty white T-shirt, the short sleeves rolled up over bulging muscles covered in tattoos. On one arm the American flag, a swastika, and the same symbol as his friend. On the other, a colorful portrayal of a naked woman with her arms reaching up until her hands disappeared under his shirt.

“Trouble,” Henry muttered to Sam.

He watched them in the mirror as the fat one bumped into the stroller and tried to kick it out of his way. The mother moved the stroller closer in, trying to ignore the three goons breathing down her neck.

Henry tensed and started to rise, but Sam put a hand on his arm. “Don’t cause a scene,” she warned. “Too many innocent people around.”

“I might not have a choice.” He sat back but remained ready to spring into action. A buzzing in his head had started when the skinheads walked through the door, and it was growing louder by the second. He knew those three would upset the harmonious order of the universe before too long.

He drummed his fingers on the table as he kept his eyes glued to the scene unfolding in the mirror. Four college-age students vacated a table near the window and hurried out the door. The young mother wheeled her stroller around and left the line. A man in a business suit held the door open while she maneuvered the stroller to the sidewalk. He’d left a steaming espresso on the table next to Sam and Henry as he followed her out.

When the older couple had figured out what they wanted, the woman turned around and sucked in her breath at the trio behind them. Her eyes grew wide as her husband took her elbow and guided her to the corner to wait for their order. The moment Nina placed their cups on the counter, they grabbed them and scurried to the door.

The skinheads were the only customers in line.

Henry could not hear what was said to the barista, but he saw the girl’s hands trembling and her face grow red. He huffed out a breath. “I need a fresh coffee.”

Sam lifted an eyebrow at him. “Don’t cause trouble.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” His lips curved up, his dimple belying the determination in his eyes.

Sam noticed the silence in the room as everyone watched Henry approach the line. He stood at ease and waited for the three men, who each took his time to order and move aside. The skinny one smirked at Henry as he sauntered away.

Henry stared straight ahead, pretending to read the menu posted behind the counter, but his peripheral vision kept the men in sight. Before he could open his mouth to ask for another coffee, he heard rumblings to his left.

The tallest skinhead held a steaming cup in his hand. “What the hell’s this? You got my order wrong, you dumbass half-breed!”

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Then he tossed the hot liquid at Nina and watched with a grin as she jumped back and grabbed at her apron to keep the burning beverage away from her body.

In a flash, Henry was behind the goon and twisted his arm behind his back. With his other arm, Henry held the young man in place by applying pressure to his neck. "Apologize to the lady."

"Fat chance." The guy struggled to break Henry's hold, but Henry simply applied more pressure. "You don't know who you're fooling with, motherfucker. Let me go!"

"Apologize," Henry said again, twisting the man's arm higher, causing him to yelp in pain.

While everyone's attention was on Henry and his captive, Sam kept a wary eye on the two companions. She noticed when the skinny one started to take a step forward to help his friend and scooted from her seat. Before the kid took another step, she was in front of him blocking his way. The kid tried to push her out of his way, but Sam had planted her feet and dropped her weight to make her body into an immovable object. His fat friend tried to get around Sam to reach Henry, so she twisted and elbowed him in the paunch he considered his stomach. He doubled over, clutching at his friend. Sam brushed her jacket back, offering a glimpse of the gun at her waist, and they both jumped back, hands up in front of them.

"Whoa! Are you a cop?" the skinny one exclaimed. "Didn't mean to clash with no cop!"

"I'm not a cop," Sam said.

The fat one snickered. "That means she can't do anything to us."

"That means I can do anything I want." Sam pulled her jacket back to cover the weapon. She didn't want to spook the few remaining patrons in the shop. "It means you two better walk out of here and don't look back."

The fat one started to say something, but his skinny friend grabbed his arm. "C'mon. Let's go."

Sam watched as the sputtering fat guy followed his friend to the door before she turned to Henry. "Did he apologize yet?"

"Not really." Henry jerked the man's arm until he felt the shoulder pop. The man cried out, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, goddammit!"

"Doesn't sound sincere." Henry jerked his arm again. The color drained from the man's face as he squeaked, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean nothing."

Sam rubbed her chin. "I think you should tell her you won't do it again. In fact, I think you should promise not to come in here again."

With his friends no longer around to witness his humiliation, the man shouted the words through gritted teeth. "Okay, okay! I won't come in here again."

Henry looked at Nina. "Do you accept his apology?"

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Nina's ebony eyes glared at the man in front of her. "I just want him out of here. Can't stand to look at his sorry face."

Henry kept pressure on the man's arm and led him toward the door, where his friends waited on the sidewalk. When he pushed him out and let go, the man sneered, "You'll pay for this, fuckwad."

"Looking forward to it." Henry saluted the trio and waited until they climbed into a pickup parked down the street. The tallest guy massaged his shoulder and threw a mean look at Henry as they pulled out.

Meanwhile, Sam stood in front of Nina. "Are you all right?"

Nina nodded and glanced at her stained shirt with a grim twist to her mouth.

"Do you have a change of clothes here?"

"I have another apron, but I'll have to go home and change my shirt. Can't go around looking like a derelict all day."

The other barista, still shaken, said, "I'll see if Jill has left yet. She can take over until you get back."

"That would be good," Nina said with a single nod. "I'll be as quick as I can, but those darn buses don't run as often at this time of day."

"We can take you home," Sam offered.

"No, that will not be necessary, but thank you for your help." Nina stepped to the sink to wring her apron out. "You do not need to involve yourself any further."

A light smattering of applause broke out as Henry moved away from the door. A half smile on his lips, he nodded to his audience and approached Sam. "We need to get out of here."

"As soon as she's ready." Sam looked at Nina. "We'll take you home. No argument."

Nina hesitated before she gave a small nod and went into the back room to retrieve her purse. When she came out, she untied her apron, exposing the brown stains on her once pristine white shirt before she signaled to Sam that she was ready to go.

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