***June 5, 2015—Bishop, California***

The first thing Staff Sergeant Donald Lind felt was a hazy sense that he did not belong here.

Not that he knew where *here* was.

The second thing Donny felt was a crushing headache.

Wherever he was, it was not where he belonged. The antiseptic indoor air had a chill to it, and the fragrances it carried reminded him of wounds and infections, of guys bleeding out, of a particular man who looked into the Sergeant’s eyes with the kind of desperation he’d seen too many times and asked him, “Is it bad?”

His eyes blinked open.

What he saw wasn’t the aftermath of a battle. It wasn’t a battlefield at all, no urban zone outside the wires. It was a hospital. And not a field hospital either. It was a civilian hospital.

With a couple of guys standing at the foot of the bed.

The length of their hair and their lazy eyes told him they were civilians. One of them had a mole high on his cheek. His dark eyes and black hair could have made him a descendant of Sicilian fishermen. The other one, distracted by an iPhone he held, looked a little older, an African-American man with gray peppering a perfectly shaped natural. They wore suits, the Sicilian’s crumpled like he wore it round the clock, and the other guy’s neat and pressed.

The Sicilian nudged the other one. Then both of them looked at him, the black guy closing down his iPhone and slipping it into a pocket inside his jacket.

Donny cast about through the pain throbbing in his head for a recollection of them. He found none.

“Welcome back to the land of the living,” the Sicilian said.

Donny blinked at him. He started to speak, but found that his throat was clogged up and so dry they might have been feeding him sand. He cleared his throat.

“Who are you?” he asked them, the sound of his voice a thunderclap in his head.

As Donny winced, the Sicilian stepped around to the side of the bed. Donny lifted his left hand and found that an IV was stuck in the back of it. Tilting his head to follow the tube up to a hanging, plastic bag brought another wave of pain behind his forehead.

The Sicilian poured a cup of water from a pitcher at the bedside and held it out to Donny.

He used the hand without a needle to take it. The cool water flooded his gullet and surged into his stomach like it was opening up passages long neglected.

“Thanks,” he whispered. His throat didn’t resist, and the pain in his head only responded vaguely to the whisper.

The Sicilian moved back around to the foot of the bed next to the other guy. From the flat expressions in their faces, it was clear that they weren’t here just to pour water for him. But Donny had no idea who they were.

In fact, with a rising sense of panic, he realized that he didn’t know how he’d gotten here, or what had happened to deliver him to a civilian hospital with a hammering headache.

“I’m Agent Bracco,” the Sicilian said. “This is Special Agent Lester. We need to ask you a few questions.” Bracco stared at him a moment. “If you’re up to it,” he said.

Donny looked around the room for anything that might give him a clue as to what had happened to him. The last thing he remembered was moving through a corridor—a white corridor. Could it have been here, at this hospital? He’d been moving through, and he remembered wanting to get out of it. Wanting to escape from something. Or someone.

But it was only a foggy memory. Like the memory of a dream that was growing fainter and fainter with the incursion of reality.

Bracco was talking about someone with a Hispanic name, wanting to know what Donny knew about Mexico—about Sinaloa.

“How did I—” Donny said. But his head’s response to his voice was a squeezing vise. He whispered, “How did I get here?”

Bracco stopped talking. Both of them looked at Donny with those flat, inscrutable expressions, eyes that gave him nothing back.

Lester said, “*How did you get here*?”

Donny looked into the brown eyes. Still flat. Unmoved. Accusing.

The two agents looked at each other. What passed between them wasn’t exactly compassion.

Bracco turned back to Donny. “Never mind that. We need to know about your relationship with Roque Isidro.”

Donny stared at him. The name Roque Isidro was vaguely familiar to him, like the name of some lower tier celebrity. But he couldn’t place it. “Who’s Roque Isidro?” he said.

Lester waited. The expression on his face took on impatience.

“Our sources,” he said, “put you in an operation with Roque Isidro about four weeks ago. In Sinaloa.”

Donny couldn’t remember what happened four hours ago, much less four weeks ago. And he remembered less about Sinaloa than he remembered about how he’d landed in this hospital. That is, exactly nothing.

Maybe if he let these guys keep talking it would come back to him.

Lester said, “We’re hoping you can give us some details about what happened. You know, clear things up. We’d really like to report that no Americans were directly involved. That this was all Roque Isidro’s doing.”

Bracco’s eyes shifted. There was something going on between the two of them. Some question about their mission here, or the way the interview was supposed to be conducted. Donny had seen it before when the objectives coming down to the troops on the ground weren’t what they should have been. Top-down strategies designed by some guy with no experience in the kind of operation he was sponsoring, no skin of his own at risk, a guy just looking to make a name for himself.

That thought set off a sequence of memories flitting through Donny’s head. He was transported to Iraq, rolling through the streets in a Humvee. A guy was driving—Caczka was his name—and he was talking about a scene in the movie *Anchor Man*, reciting the lines and all of them laughing when the roadside bomb went off and everything changed.

Donny blinked away the memory.

Bracco was expecting a response. But Donny didn’t even know what the question was.

“What?” he said.

Both of them glared at him. The failing student. A pupil who couldn’t pay attention.

Impatience simmering just under the skin surrounding his eyes, Lester said, “I said, ‘Let’s start with Graystone.”

“Start with Graystone?” Donny wondered if he meant Graystone Services, or if there was some other Graystone these guys might be interested in. Graystone Services was a Private Military Company—a PMC—that contracted with the US government and others. He’d come across some of the guys in Iraq. The company had contracts with the Department of Defense to do work Washington didn’t want their soldiers involved in. Most of them were ex-military, a lot of them former Special Ops or Green Berets, SEALs—guys who had rotated out but either enjoyed soldiering too much or couldn’t find anything better, and signed on with the contractor for better pay and missions that might be for Uncle Sam, or might not.

But Donny didn’t know what it had to do with him.

Bracco and Lester gave him no clues.

Lester cleared his throat, sighed. “Why’d you leave them? More money in it if you branched out on your own? Was that it?”

They were saying he’d worked for Graystone. That he’d left them and gone off to Mexico on his own to work with this person named Roque Isidro. Could it be true? He had vague recollections of helicopter rides with guys who didn’t look like regular Army. But that had all been in Iraq.

Hadn’t it?

“What do you think I did?” he whispered.

Bracco stepped around. “We know you were there, you sorry—”

“Matt!” Lester came up next to Bracco. “Chill.”

“If you know,” Donny said, “why all the questions—Matt?”

Bracco’s jaw clenched, the knots at its edges flexing. “Agent Bracco, to you.”

“I don’t know anybody named Roque Isidro,” Donny said. His head responded with a squeezing ache.

“Oh, here we go. I told you,” Bracco said to his partner. He wandered over to a chair and plopped down into it, crossed a leg and stared at Donny with his head inclined to one side.

Donny dropped his voice to a whisper again. “I’ve never been to Sinaloa.”

Lester inspected the IV bag, the monitors behind it, and eyed the tube that ran to the needle in Donny’s hand.

“That’s not the information we have,” he said. “We have documents and eyewitnesses that make you the leader of the squad in that village. We have phone records and correspondence between you and some of your men. And Isidro.”

The scene in that chopper kept coming back to Donny. It was the only thing in his memory that might match up with Graystone, the only set of guys that might be private military that he could recall.

But the truth was, he could recall very little since his last deployment. He knew he’d been out a long time—he felt it in his mind, the weariness of stressed days and nights replaced with a kind of languid dread. He remembered other hospitals and doctors. And he remembered that one corridor in particular, wandering in it, searching for something and running from something—someone.

It occurred to him that if he could remember so little, what they were saying might be true. That chopper trip could have been after his deployment. The guys with him might have been private military. He could have been to Mexico. Could have been to Sinaloa. That’s how vacant his memories were.

“What happened there?” he said to Lester.

The Special Agent’s eyes narrowed a fraction. Measuring Donny. His lips parted to speak, but before he could, Bracco stood. “This is going nowhere. I’m going to see what his doctor says about this memory loss story.”

“At least tell me what you think I did?” Donny whispered.

Bracco came up next to Lester. “It’s not what we think. It’s what we know. We know you were there. You were the guy in charge. We gave you the benefit of the doubt. War record and all. But what you and your guys did—you’ve got to pay for that.” He slapped Lester on the arm. “Come on.”

After two steps toward the door, Bracco stopped. Lester leaned over Donny, peering into his eyes.

Donny said, “What did I do?”

Lester’s gaze lost some of its intensity. He straightened. “I’d like to hear your side of it, Sergeant Lind. I really would.”

“What?” Donny said. “What was it?”

One eyebrow raised, Lester said, “Taking kids.”

“Special Agent Lester,” Bracco said. He gave a nod toward the door.

“Kids?” Donny said.

Lester nodded.

“Let’s go,” Bracco said.

“I don’t see it in your eyes,” Lester said. “You don’t have that kind of cruelty in you. That’s my take.”

Donny’s head fell back, and the insides of his head were a jumble of throbbing jelly, settling in an agonizing mass. He looked at the ceiling. Square tiles lined up in perfect rows, filled with dotted impressions in irregular patterns like millions of tiny bullet holes.

He wondered if he could have done it. If he could have been so desperate that he’d do something to kids.

Here, it didn’t seem possible. Here, in the brightness of this room, with the smells of disinfectant and iodine in the air. But if the darkness inside him rose up, if he’d been in the heat of battle, he knew he would have been capable of setting aside kindness or pity.

Bracco came up next to Lester. “Special Agent, this is going nowhere.”

Lester held up a hand. “Sergeant Lind, you’re remembering, aren’t you?”

Donny turned to him. Lester’s eyes were a deep brown, the pupils in the center of them the shining black of cooled lava.

Remembering? No, not remembering. But he knew that darkness lived deep inside him. He’d felt its presence all his life. And he feared the way it might be able to warp him.

But kids? Was it possible?

He looked away from Lester and shook his head.

“All right,” Lester said, standing away. “Have it your way.” Without another word, he joined Bracco and they left the room.

Their steps receded down the hallway. Firm steps. Righteous steps.

And now the darkness inside him rose up. As if thinking of it gave it power it surfaced, fingering into his mind and limbs with a will to drive his humanity away.

He tried focusing on the brightness around him, the ordinary things in the room—on the handle of the door, a crisp, silver lever, on the rail running along the ceiling and a curtain hanging from chains that could be drawn along to hide him, on a whiteboard where someone had written times and numbers and a nurse’s name. But the bright and familiar things in the room didn’t avert the darkness. It crept through his mind to cloud every thought with terror, to shadow everything he saw. He felt it seep into the flesh of his face, drawing down his mouth and cheeks, sharpening his brow, turning the frustration of not remembering what had led him here, into an aggravated rage.

He filled his lungs and tried to imagine that inhalation brought brightness inside him, and that what he exhaled was not just his breath, but darkness. Where he had learned this, he did not know. But as he forced himself to continue the exercise, he felt the darkness grudgingly ceding territory within him, until it was tamped down into those hidden places to wait for the next opportunity to rise up.

Could he have given it free rein in Sinaloa? Had he allowed this Roque Isidro to tap into it?

A shadow fell across his doorway. He turned as a woman entered, and the pull of gravity on his brain activated the pain again.

She wore the colorful smock and pants of a nurse.

Her name tag said, *Almario*.

With a smile that lit up her face, she said, “I’m glad to see you awake.”

She came to his side, started inspecting the monitoring gadgets behind him.

“What happened to me?” he said.

She froze for a moment, and seemed to catch herself and offered him another smile. Her teeth were perfect lines of white, her lips full. She had dark eyes that were slightly upturned at their outer edges, skin coppery and hair as black and shiny as the feathers of a raven. He put her in her mid-twenties, Filipina or part-Filipina.

“What do you remember?” she said.

“I don’t want to play a game,” he said. “I want you to tell me what’s going on.” At the sound of his voice, his headache flared up again. He put a hand to his head.

“You fell again,” she said. “This time you hit your head. Not what a guy with an injury like yours needs. Do you remember the fall?”

Donny stared at her. What did she mean by *fell again*? How many times had he fallen?His memories were a jumbled mass, like puzzle pieces dumped out of a box into a pile. But this nurse was familiar. Was it because he’d fallen so many times he was a regular here? She had a good and caring face, skin that made him want to touch it. Other faces came to him too, but only in flickering, disordered visions.

And he remembered pain.

“Your head hurts,” she said. It wasn’t a question. “Let me check your vitals, then we’ll get you something for that.”

Out of the pocket of her smock she drew a plastic clip and put it on his fingertip.

“Get me my clothes,” he said.

The nurse didn’t break her routine. “You don’t like the hospital gown? It’s very stylish.”

Donny grabbed her arm. “I want my clothes.”

She tried to yank her arm away, but he had a good hold on it. “Stop that,” she said.

“I need to get out of here.”

“That’s not possible.” She wrenched her arm out of his grip.

“Give me something for this headache and get me out of here.” He swung his legs around and started to sit up, but his head seemed to weigh tons.

“Stop it,” she said, and she took hold of his legs and tried to get them back under the covers.

He let her.

“Here,” she said, and handed him a paper medicine cup.

The leftover water that Bracco had poured him washed down a couple of pills. Donny looked into her eyes.

“Kim,” he said.

How he knew that was her first name, he couldn’t imagine. But it seemed to startle her. She returned his gaze.

“I have to get out of here,” he said. “Can you help me? Please?”

“Listen, Houdini, you’re here for a reason. You’ve got an injury and this new medication we’re—”

“How did I get here?”

She removed the plastic clip from his fingertip and made some notes on an electronic pad. “Dr. Hillenberg will be in to see you in an hour or so. Maybe it would be best if you talked with her.”

Donny thought a doctor wouldn’t do him much good if he was taken to a jail cell after discharge.

The nurse brought a tethered device to his head and inserted the tip into his ear. In a few seconds it beeped, and she removed it and inspected it, then ejected a sleeve from the tip.

“All right,” she said. “You sit tight and let that medicine work. You’ll feel better soon.” Then she pointed a finger at him. “And no more grabbing nurses.”

She turned to leave.

“Kim?”

“Yes?”

“What time is it?”

She squared to him again and checked her watch. “It’s a little past six.”

He thought for a moment. Looked at the drapes drawn over the window. Back to Nurse Almario. “What day?” he said.

“It’s June fifth. See?” She pointed to the whiteboard, and the penmanship there that spelled out the date was familiar too. He guessed it was Kim’s. “Now rest, okay?” she said.

“What year?”

She took a step toward him.

Nearly within reach.

“It’s 2015, Donny.”

“2015?”

She nodded. “All year long.”

The throbbing pain in his head was lessening. Whatever she gave him worked quickly.

“Could I just have a little more water?”

“Sure.”

She was nearly to the table when he seized her arm.

“Let go,” she hissed.

He spun her around to put her back to him, and used her weight to help him into a sitting position while he pinned her to his chest. His head swam, dizziness making the room swirl and tilt.

He had an arm around her neck. It held her to him, but didn’t choke her. “Not a sound,” he said.

The IV needle was tugging on the back of his hand. He held it in front of her.

“Pull that needle out of my hand, will you?”

“Pull it out yourself, you bully.”

He squeezed her neck in the crook of his arm. Just for a moment.

“Do it,” he said.

“Let me get some gauze and a bandage.”

“I said, pull it out.”

She did. Not gently, either.

Blood oozed out of the puncture.

“Now will you let me get some gauze?” she said.

“No,” he said. “We’re going to close that door, and then you’re going to get me out of here.”