

1

HACK SHIRAZI BRACED HIMSELF IN THE OPEN DOOR OF the helicopter and gazed across San Francisco Bay at the crowded ballpark. Wind and engine noise buffeted him. The evening sun bisected his field of vision. The check had cleared, so he was going to deliver the Rambo. But they were running late, which put the failing gold light square in his eyes.

He shoved the banana clip into the Kalashnikov. “On my mark.”

In the helicopter flying alongside them, the second team positioned themselves in the doorway. They swept over the bay toward the city. Whitecaps foamed on the surface of the water, five hundred feet below. In the pilot’s seat, Andreyev held tight to the controls.

The Giants’ ballpark was filled to capacity. People jammed the stands and covered the field from home plate to the centerfield stage. The two Bell 212 choppers would fly beyond it, circle back, and make their run at the target from out of the sun.

Andreyev radioed their man on the ground. “Rock and roll.”

IN THE STANDS BELOW, Rez Shirazi put a hand to his radio earpiece. “I hear you.”

Rock and roll was just about all he could hear. It echoed from the bleachers along the foul line, where beer-marinated rednecks whooped to the beat. From the teeming field, where sunburned college girls sang along with the saccharine lyrics. From the corporate hospital-

ity suites on either side of him, where venture capitalists sipped mojitos and dipped five-dollar tortilla chips in mango chutney salsa.

Shirazi shook his head. Ersatz rock and roll—drowned in country-western cheese sauce. Tasteless, drippy American cheese.

Through his earpiece, he heard his brother Hack. “Four minutes. Mark.”

Rez clicked the timer on his watch. “Mark.”

On the stage, near towering speakers that amplified their cornpone accent, a choir of backup patriots was woo-woosing, while a singer in two-thousand-dollar cowboy boots wailed about the trials of the common man.

*You can take my work, you can take my cash . . . but if
you won't shake my hand, I'll light a fire up your—*

“Ass,” Shirazi said.

The surrounding suites were jammed. People crowded the interiors and filled rows of seats on the balcony. But Rez's suite was empty: no food, absolutely no drink, no loiterers. He stepped onto the balcony and checked their gear. The CO₂ canisters were in place. The zip line was secure. It was a stainless steel aircraft cable, clamped through a forged eyebolt and anchored to the girders that supported the upper deck of the stadium. He glanced at the video camera, then over the edge of the balcony. The drop was substantial.

Andreyev's voice crackled through the radio. “I can't see her on video. Is she there?”

ON CUE, the door to the suite opened. Noise flowed in from the hallway outside. Tasia McFarland stormed in.

“Rez, they're following me. Get rid of them. I can't do this with all these people harassing me.”

His nerves fired at the sight of her. “She's here.” For a millisecond his skin itched and his ears thundered. “Oh, brother.”

In his ear, Hack sounded sharp. “What's wrong?”

Tasia already had the climbing harness cinched around her hips. That was no mean feat. She was wearing a magenta corset, which trailed back into ruffles that dragged on the floor. Beneath it she wore ripped jeans and turquoise cowboy boots. The top half of her looked like Scarlett O'Hara halfway through a striptease. The bottom half looked like she'd escaped a cage fight with a rabid badger.

Behind her, people streamed through the door. Stadium security men. A makeup artist. A wardrobe assistant. The soundman.

She spun on them. "Stop hounding me. You're turning my head into a beehive. I can't think. Get out. Rez, get them *out*."

Rez put up his hands. "Okay. Chill."

Her eyes gleamed, jade bright. "Chill? This is an event. This is a supernova. I'm at the shore of the Rubicon. And these"—she waved at the entourage—"these vampires are filling my head with static. They're filling the score with noise and I won't be able to hear what I need to hear to protect myself out there. Get them *out*."

In his ear, Rez heard the director in the control booth. "Crap. Is she melting down?"

"You got it." Rez gestured the entourage back. "You heard the lady. Everybody out."

The makeup girl pointed at Tasia in dismay. "Look at her. She's been playing in the crayon box."

Rez pushed the girl toward the door.

The security men glowered. "This breaches protocol."

"It's not a problem," Rez said. "We've done the stunt a dozen times."

The soundman shook his head. "Her radio mike, she—"

"I got this." Rez ushered the last of the crowd from the suite.

The soundman shouted over his shoulder. "It's on your head, man."

"I'm the stunt coordinator. It's always on my head." Rez shut the door.

"Lock it," Tasia said.

Rez flipped the bolt. Tasia stalked around the room,

glancing at corners and the ceiling, examining the shadows. Her ruffles trailed behind her like a peacock's plumage.

"I used to think fame was a shield. But it won't protect me. It's only made me a target," she said.

Rez glanced at his watch. "Celebrity's tough."

"Tough? It's a life sentence. And life's a bitch, and I'm a bitch, and then you die. Like Princess Di."

Over the radio, Andreyev said, "Three minutes. We are inbound, beginning our run."

"Roger," Rez said.

In three minutes a computer program would set the special effects sequence in motion, and Tasia would make her grand entrance as the helicopters overflowed the ballpark. And she was blowing a damned cylinder.

"And I'm not camera shy. But there's an eye in the sky, watching me. Satellites, NSA, paparazzi. On TV, online, whenever I turn my back. I'm in their sights. Fawn in the headlights. Doe in the brights. Do, re, mi, fa, so long, suckers."

She stalked out the plate-glass doors onto the balcony and stared down at the forty thousand people who filled the ballpark. The music bounced off the glass, distorted echoes of the Star-Spangled chorus.

Rez followed her outside. "Let's get you rigged. It's going to be fine. It's just a stunt."

The breeze off the bay lifted her hair from her neck like swirls of caramel smoke. "It was a stunt in the movie. But in the movie, the star didn't do this. You know why?"

Because she's sane. "Because she's not you."

Because the star wasn't as ravenous for stage time as Tasia McFarland. Because the star wasn't brave or wild enough to hook herself to a zip line and fly forty feet over the heads of the crowd as fireworks went off from the scoreboard, singing the title song from the movie.

Bull's-eye was the latest in a series of action films that featured guns and slinky women. *Long Barrel. Pump Action.* The stuntmen had their own names for these movies. *Handguns and Hand Jobs. Planes, Trains, and Blown Brains.*

But the flick was a hit, and so was "Bull's-eye," the song. Tasia McFarland was top of the charts. And she wanted to stay there.

"Movie stars don't do their own stunts because they don't know jack about life and death," she said.

Her eyes shone. Her makeup looked like an overstimulated six-year-old had applied it after peeping at *Maxim*.

"Stop staring at me like that," she said. "I'm sober. I'm clean."

Too clean? Rez thought, and his face must have shown it, because Tasia shook her head.

"And I'm not off my meds. I'm just wound up. Let's go."

"Great." Rez forced encouragement into his voice. "It'll be a breeze. Like Denver. Like Washington."

"You're a lousy liar." She smiled. It looked unhappy. "I like that, Rez. It's the good liars who get you."

In his ear, Andreyev's voice rose in pitch. "Two minutes."

Tasia's gaze veered from the empty suite to the heaving field. She squirmed against the tight fit of her jeans.

"The harness feels wrong." She pulled on it. "I have to adjust it."

A carabiner was already clipped to the harness. Rez reached for it. She slapped his hand. "Go inside and turn around. Don't look."

He glared, but she pushed him back. "I can't sing if my crotch is pinched by this damned chastity belt. Go."

And she thought that adjusting her panties in full view of a stadium crowd was the modest option? But he remembered rule number one: Humor the talent. Reluctantly he went inside and turned his back.

Behind him the plate-glass doors slammed shut. He spun and saw Tasia lock the doors.

"Hey." Rez shook the door handles. "What are you doing?"

She grabbed a chair and jammed it under the handles.

"This isn't a stunt, Rez. He's after me. This is life and death."

ON THE FIELD, sunburned, thirsty, crammed on a plastic chair surrounded by thousands of happy people, Jo Beckett sank lower in her seat.

The band was blasting out enough decibels to blow up

the sonar on submarines in the Pacific. The song, “Banner of Fire,” was hard on the downbeat and on folks who didn’t love buckshot, monster trucks, and freedom. The singer, Searle Lecroix, was a pulsing figure: guitar slung low, lips nearly kissing the mike. A black Stetson tipped down across his forehead, putting his eyes in shadow. The guitar in his hands was painted in stars and stripes, and probably tuned to the key of U.S.A.

The young woman beside Jo climbed on her chair, shot her fists in the air, and cried, “*Woo!*”

Jo grabbed the hem of the woman’s T-shirt. “Tina, save it for the Second Coming.”

Tina laughed and flicked Jo’s fingers away. “Snob.”

Jo rolled her eyes. When she’d offered her little sister concert tickets for her birthday, she figured Tina would pick death metal or *Aida*, not Searle Lecroix and the *Bad Dogs and Bullets* tour.

Despite her taste in music, Tina looked like a junior version of Jo: long brown curls, lively eyes, compact, athletic physique. But Jo wore her combats and Doc Martens and had her UCSF Medical Center ID in her backpack and her seen-it-all, early thirties attitude in her hip pocket. Tina wore a straw cowboy hat, a nose ring, and enough silver bangles to stock the U.S. Mint. She was the human version of caffeine.

Jo couldn’t help but smile at her. “You’re a pawn of the Military-Nashville complex.”

“Sicko. Next you’ll say you don’t love puppies, or the baby Jesus.”

Jo stood up. “I’m going to the snack bar. Want anything?”

Tina pointed at Lecroix. “Him. Hot and buttered.”

Jo laughed. “Be right back.”

She worked her way to the aisle and headed for the stands. Overhead, sunlight glinted off metal. She looked up and saw a steel cable, running from a luxury suite to the stage. It looked like a zip line. She slowed, estimating the distance from the balcony to the touchdown point. It was a long way.

A second later, she heard helicopters.

* * *

ANDREYEV PUT THE BELL 212 through a banking turn and lined up for the pass above the ballpark. The second helicopter flanked him. The sunset flared against his visor.

"Ninety seconds," he said. "Rez, is Tasia ready to go?"

He got no reply. "Rez?"

He glanced at the video monitor. It showed the balcony of the luxury suite.

He did a double take. The doors to the suite were jammed shut with a chair. Rez was inside, rattling the doorknob.

On the balcony Tasia stood with her back to him. She reached around to her back pocket, beneath the extravagant ruffles that trailed from her corset.

"Shit. Shit. *Shit*," Andreyev said.

From the door of the chopper, Hack Shirazi shouted, "What's going on?"

Andreyev yelled into the radio. "Rez, she's got a gun."