

Chapter 1

February 28th, international airport outside of Belize City

Sam Crocker sat in the boarding area, waiting for his flight to Cartagena. Feet propped up on a window ledge, he listened to the rings over his secure satellite phone as he eyed the ground crew fueling a commercial jet. He was tired. He was pissed. Nothing had gone the way he'd planned since leaving the Belizean resort where he'd assisted a Security Specialist International team consisting of Conn Redmond, DJ Poe, and Tweeter Walsh—and Interpol agent Dawn Wilson—on an undercover operation.

Maybe this call would set him on the path toward achieving his goals.

“Redmond.” The abrupt voice of his old Marine buddy growled in his ear. Conn, SSI's man in Central and South America, had left Belize immediately after the end of the op.

“Hey, Conn—” Sam kept his voice low and atonal so as to make his conversation more difficult to overhear. The boarding area was crowded and no one seemed to be paying attention to him. But he'd spent too many years in deep cover assignments for the CIA's National Clandestine Service to take a chance someone might listen in, and old habits were hard to break, especially when said habits had kept him alive and mostly whole.

“—it's Sam. Need your help.”

“Anything.” His buddy's immediate response was a relief. “Whatcha need?”

“To be put in touch with Tweeter Walsh—and Ren Maddox.”

For the umpteenth time in the last two and a half days, Sam rubbed a finger over the cheek the petite, but fiery Dawn Wilson had slapped. While the little Brit packed quite a wallop—the redness from the blow had taken hours to fade—it was the emotional impact of meeting her that still bedeviled him. No woman had ever gotten under his skin and lodged herself in his gut the way the little hell cat had. Maybe it was the way she handled a submachine gun like a seasoned Marine or the fact she swore like a sailor. Lord knew, she packed a lot of honor, courage, and strength into her tiny body—and, fuck, what a body. He'd been able to tell she was curvy even through the dark, Goth-like disguise she'd worn. She was a pint-sized package of trouble—trouble he hungered to explore more fully.

Immediately after reporting into his CIA handler, he'd gone on the hunt for Dawn. He'd been one step behind her ever since.

Earlier today, he'd finally tracked Dawn's Interpol Incident Response team to the Belize Defense Force headquarters. There, a man by the name of Ron Lloyd, an officious asshole, refused to tell Sam where Dawn was or relay a message. Every territorial instinct Sam possessed told him the fucker wanted Dawn for himself and saw Sam as competition for the little Brit's sole attention. He was right.

Sam's lips quirked upward as he pictured what his next meeting with Dawn might be like. He planned to storm all her defenses, a tactic guaranteed to ruffle her fur. After which, he would wear the little Brit down until he had her purring like a kitten and cuddling up next to him.

But before he could make a move on Dawn, he had to take care of some unfinished business.

“Why now?” Conn asked. “You need to give Ren time to adjust to you being one of the

good guys. Tweeter's post-operation report on Belize will go a long way in helping the situation, but I'm not sure Ren's quite ready to forgive and forget. I know Vanko isn't."

After working deep undercover for so many years, being painted as a bad guy was par for the course. But still, Sam wondered how many times he'd have to tell Maddox that Maddox's wife Keely hadn't been in any danger from him. And, hell, he got shot in the back protecting Petriv's woman Elana. If that wasn't evidence of his being on the side of angels, what was?

"I'll deal with Maddox—and Petriv—when the time comes." Which would probably be sooner rather than later since Sam's current quarry was their common enemy. "I need Tweeter to find out where Syd MacLean is right now and get current intel on the fucker's activities."

Sam's jaw tightened. "I'm going after the bastard and will end him—one way or another."

Syd MacLean or, as the treasonous fucker was now known, Sergio Manuel Lazaro a.k.a. Oraio, had sold his country's secrets and exposed the U.S.'s black ops teams to their enemies. MacLean's drugs and weapons businesses continued to contribute to the deaths of soldiers and innocents worldwide. His latest venture, sex slave trafficking, was just another abomination on top of all the other abominations MacLean had created while seeking wealth and power.

"Didn't the CIA get the intel Tweeter sent to the NSA?" Conn asked.

"Yeah. But while the CIA might believe the evidence that Sergio Manuel Lazaro, a legitimate Brazilian businessman, was the crook Oraio, they didn't want to make the leap that the two were one and the same as Syd MacLean, U.S. traitor. So, after I made my report on Belize, my handler put me on a two-month enforced leave. Said I'd been undercover too long and needed a break ... to rest." Sam blew out a disgusted breath.

"Fucking politicians have no business running intelligence," muttered Conn.

"Amen, brother," Sam said. "Truth is, I've got no physical proof, just circumstantial evidence and my gut. Even with Tweeter and his sister Keely throwing their weight behind my conclusions, the CIA—and Brazil's government—weren't ready to go after a man with Lazaro's kind of money and clout. With concrete proof that Lazaro-Oraio is MacLean, the United States could send in a spec ops team to kidnap the fucking traitor's ass and bring him back to the U.S. to stand trial."

"Hoo-rah." Conn paused. "Okay, I'll see what I can do in getting Ren and Keely to help you. Tweeter's out of the picture for now. He and DJ are getting married in Vegas today."

"Married?" Sam whistled. "Well, I shouldn't be surprised. The sexual vibes coming off those two were as hot as hell. I'll have to send them a wedding gift. Maybe his-and-her handguns?"

Conn snickered. "That should work. You still in Belize?"

"For maybe twenty more minutes. I'm on the next commercial flight to Cartagena and your place. Figured if I went after MacLean that Maddox might bend enough to lend me you as my backup."

Conn chuckled. "If Ren doesn't sign off on it, I'll take some time off and go in with you."

"Thanks, Conn. If we need more boots on the ground, I have some mercs I've worked with who'd love to get a piece of MacLean's ass."

"Bet there's a lot of ex-military who'd help us out if called upon. Need me to pick you up at the airport?" Conn asked.

"No. I arranged for a rental. I should be at your place by dinnertime. Pick a place for a

late meal, preferably one with good beer on tap, and I'll buy."

"Sounds good. Safe travels."

"See you soon and"—Sam paused—"thanks, Conn. I'll owe you big time."

"Nah, you won't. *Semper fi*, buddy."

"*Semper fi*, brother." Sam disconnected and leaned back in his chair, a big smile on his face. Thank fuck for the Marine brotherhood.

Chapter 2

March 1st, Belize Defense Force Headquarters, Belize City

The Belize Defense Force conference room was filled with Dawn Wilson's fellow Interpol Incident Response team members and the local BDF uniforms and officers who'd worked with them on the joint drug task force. Their goal had been to collect intelligence on the shady Brazilian Oraio in order to find connections to his more legitimate business persona of Sergio Manuel Lazaro and to take out his Belizean drug operations, if possible. Since both objectives had been accomplished, this would be the task force's last meeting.

Dawn sat at the large oval table and barely managed not to utter aloud the uppermost thought in her mind—that Ron Lloyd was an utter twat.

On paper, Ron was the nominal leader of the Interpol team in Belize. Unfortunately, the words intelligence, leader, and Ron didn't belong in the same sentence. A product of mediocre prep schools, Ron had risen to his current level of incompetency through political connections alone. The man didn't understand how to run a law enforcement team, especially one which involved undercover operations and cooperation across international boundaries. Unlike Dawn, he hadn't had any law enforcement training prior to coming to Interpol. He'd studied art history; her studies had been in criminal justice and international politics. Plus, Dawn had two years at Scotland Yard working on drug trafficking cases.

The only "experience" Ron had in the area of illegal drugs was in how to find the ones he used personally.

Even worse, Ron pictured himself as God's gift to women—and had decided she'd be his next conquest, mostly because as the daughter of an earl she had the social connections he desired. His pursuit had begun benignly, then had progressed to irritating and just short of stalker-ish.

Ron could pursue and aspire all he wanted. The only way they'd become a couple would be when a zombie was elected Prime Minister of England.

Dawn snorted softly in disgust. Did the bloody idiot think insulting her on-the-ground decisions during this last op would win her over? Well, his behavior simply proved he was a complete cockwomble.

The Belizean Defense Force liaison wasn't too happy with Ron either since Ron continued to treat the Belizean officer like an indentured servant of the British Empire. Guess Ron hadn't gotten the message the Empire was dead and Belize had been independent for years.

The sound of her name drew her attention.

"...and if Dawn had done her job, we'd have the evidence we need to demand the Brazilians turn over Oraio." Ron glared at her.

Fuck, he's still on that kick?

"But since she didn't," Ron blithely continued, all smug and self-righteous, "we now need to seek cooperation from the bleedin' Yanks—"

"Bloody hell, Ron"—Dawn cut into his harangue—"don't you even read your e-mails?"

Several of her fellow team members smiled at her question. Clearly, they'd read the e-mails headquarters had sent earlier that morning.

Ron frowned. "What do you mean? Of course, I do—um, did."

Clueless and a buffoon—and a liar, even to himself.

"Then you must have skipped the bolded paragraph with the link to the summary of the information Security Specialist International's operative Stuart Walsh gleaned from Oraio's closed computer network. That intelligence plus a detailed preliminary analysis prepared by SSI's Keely Walsh-Maddox for the U.S. intelligence community were provided to Interpol."

Ron's frown turned into a glare. His cheeks flushed with anger or embarrassment or maybe a bit of both.

As Ron opened his mouth to say something she was sure would be defensive as fuck and utterly worthless, she saved herself and everyone else in the room from having to listen to anymore of his inane remarks by cutting him off. "In addition to running a successful intelligence-gathering op in cooperation with SSI—"

Through her sole efforts which he was now complaining about.

"—our team, working in cooperation with our Belizean team members—"

Again, with her coordinating with the Belizeans' law enforcement liaison while Ron perseverated over which agency would get credit for the bust.

"—also shut down a major drug operation. While doing so, we managed to keep the lid on the fact that Oraio's closed computer network was infiltrated. According to intelligence from our people and the U.S.'s NSA, Oraio hasn't a bleeding clue and is still conducting business as usual. We, that's us and the Yanks, know where he is. We simply need to keep an eye on Oraio until the legal types go through the volumes of information collected to see if there is enough information to indict him in any of Interpol's member countries. It's all a matter of time ... and patience."

She added mentally—*You'd know this, you odious waste of space, if you had half a functioning brain cell.*

Ron turned toward her, his hands fisted at his side. She imagined she could see steam coming out of his ears. "I have had enough of your disrespect of my authority."

Good, maybe now he'll leave me alone and find some other earl's daughter to harass.

Dawn barely reined in the urge to take the asshole out at his knees. "I'd respect your authority," she enunciated, "if you weren't such a fucknugget."

Several of her teammates smothered their snickers and the BDF liaison coughed to disguise his laughter.

Ron's whole face was red now, like a two-year-old's throwing a temper tantrum. "Go back to our hotel, milady"—he spat out the honorific as if it were a curse word—"and think about your future with Interpol. If I have anything to say about it, it will be a short one."

What a bloody arse.

Ice-cold rage settled over her. She bet if she blew out a breath, it would be a frosty cloud. She fucking hated petty bureaucrats like Ron who thought their position made them gods. She'd been seriously thinking about quitting Interpol ever since the big bosses had appointed Ron as head of the team for this mission. She despised playing kiss arse to get ahead—and refused to do it. Ron did it all too well. Bleeding bureaucratic crap.

Her thoughts about leaving had become even more attractive after the message she'd received two days ago from SSI's Ren Maddox. He'd thanked her for aiding SSI's operatives

and issued a very gracious and tempting offer to come work for his private international security organization.

Since receiving his offer, she'd done some research on SSI. She'd also spoken to SSI operative Vanko Petriv whom she'd known casually when he'd worked for Interpol. She liked what she'd read—and heard—and made the decision to accept the SSI job offer *after* she'd finished her current Interpol assignment which was to take down Oraio-Lazaro's criminal organization.

In fact, just that morning, she'd spoken with her Division Head at Interpol, advising him of her decision and why she'd made it.

Ron's bully-boy pronouncements had merely advanced her timetable.

Dawn gave Ron an evil smile. "Fuck off, Ron. I quit."

She stood and turned to walk out, then paused and looked over her shoulder. "Oh, and I've already filed my report on what happened at the resort, including your refusal to send backup when I and others were in danger from Oraio's men. A copy was in your e-mail box right alongside the e-mail about the SSI intelligence sharing."

The glee on her fellow agents' faces was almost as obvious as the sick expression on Ron's horsey face.

Her smile grew wider as she added, "Also, our superior received compliments about *my* actions from the CIA's National Clandestine Service, the DIA, NSA, and SSI. So, I'm not sure your tenure at Interpol will be much longer than mine ... you fucking arsebadger."

On those less than lady-like words, she stalked out of the room and found her way outside into the sunny square that fronted the Belize Defense Force headquarters. For the most part, she felt good, elated that the whole mess with Ron was behind her. Though there was a slight sense of sadness at leaving her Interpol team. Until Ron had come along, she'd really enjoyed her job and her teammates.

After putting on her sunglasses against the bright sunshine reflecting off the square, she pulled her cell phone from her huge tote bag and hit a saved number.

The call was answered by a deeply growled, "Maddox."

Maddox's grumbling tones reminded her of the tall, shaggy-haired, grey-eyed Sam Crocker. Something deep in her core gave a little shimmy. While Crock-of-shit had rubbed her the wrong way, he possessed the kind of yummy voice a woman liked to hear in bed. He also had a very excellent arse and wide shoulders. Large hands. Kissable lips. Abs that could shred—

Stop it.

Okay, so the man was extremely attractive. He'd also been bossy and overprotective and—

A real man ... unlike Ron effin' Lloyd.

Yeah, there was that. Dammit.

"Talk to me or I'll fucking hang up," Maddox said.

Get your head in the game, Dawn. You can fantasize about Crocker's manliness quotient later.

"It's Dawn Wilson, Ren. If your offer of employment is still open, I'd like to accept."

"It is. Welcome aboard."

And there was the difference in working for a private organization—no political haggling. No brown-nosing. No messing around. You're qualified; you're in.

Petriv had told her working for SSI was a dream job for good former intelligence and law

enforcement types. Maddox was a straight-shooter. He demanded a lot from his agents on and off the field, gave them a wide spectrum of autonomy in the field, and backed up their decision-making.

Dawn was happy to know she'd met Maddox's high standards and would do her best not to let her new employer ever regret hiring her. Plus she'd earn twice what she made at Interpol. The greater autonomy in the field had attracted her far more than the money.

"You still in Belize?" Maddox asked.

"Yes."

"I have a job for you. I'll arrange a chartered jet to take you to Cartagena. I'm on my way there now. You'll arrive first, so hang around the charter terminal until I get there."

Ignoring the stares and smiles of those passing by her, Dawn grinned and did a little happy dance. No rest for the wicked. Good, she liked to be busy, and the assignment would keep her mind from wandering and thinking about the bossy, sexy, sarcastic, all-too-attractive-on-all-levels-for-his-own-good-and-so-bad-for-her former U.S. Marine. If Ren hadn't offered her an immediate op, she just might have tracked down Crocker and discovered exactly how dominant he was—in bed.

She'd had a long sexual dry spell, and she was thirsty.

"What's the job?" Dawn dragged her mind away from images of her in bed with Crocker. She blamed the sudden intense wave of heat that swept over her on the Belizean weather.

"Did you see Keely's analysis we sent to Interpol?"

"Yes, but I didn't get to read it yet," she said.

"Read it," Ren said. "We're going after the man you know as Sergio Manuel Lazaro or Oraio. We need to get DNA or other conclusive evidence to prove Lazaro-Oraio is Syd MacLean, U.S. traitor, so the United States can extradite him from Brazil."

A Brazilian criminal mastermind was also a U.S. traitor? Intriguing. Sounded as if there would be an interesting story at the bottom of it all. The darker and more twisted the cases, the better she liked them.

"I'd love to take that fucker down whatever his name is." Especially since she was bloody sure SSI would get the job done far ahead of Interpol. She had a moment of regret for her former teammates who were good agents—well, with the exception of Ron. But in the long run, everyone—or at least everyone but Ron—was fighting on the same side and only wanted to put Oraio, or whoever in the hell he was, away.

"See you in Cartagena," she said.

"Try to rest on the flight, Dawn. You'll only be in Cartagena long enough to shop for the right clothes for the op, to be briefed, and to meet your team. See you soon. Out." Ren disconnected.

Right clothes for the op? Hmm. Could the SSI boss possibly want her to use the eons-old, but highly successful, sexual approach on the operation? Wouldn't be the first time she'd used her feminine attributes for the greater good; probably wouldn't be the last. She wasn't averse to using her sexuality. She'd found that bad men thought with their cocks just as often as good men did.

"Dawn!"

Her arm was grabbed and she was pulled around to face an angry Ron.

"Let go of me." Furious she was caught off guard, she pulled against his hold, but the asshole merely tightened his grip, tight enough that she'd have bruises.

“No.” He dragged her along the sidewalk in the direction of the hotel the Interpol team had used. “We’re going to sit down and discuss our future.”

“Our future? You nutter, there is no *we* or *our future*.” Dawn dug in her heels, slowing him down.

Ron stopped and shook her. “Come along or I’ll throw you over my shoulder. I’ve had enough of you ignoring me, ignoring our relationship.”

The man was a stark raving looby.

“Relationship?” she snarled. “There’s no relationship, you arse. I can *not* stand you. I would sooner date the devil himself than you.”

Ron’s breaths were rapid and harsh as he pulled her toward him. She couldn’t get to her gun in her tote bag since he held her dominant arm. With bared teeth, he muttered, “Listen, you bloody, over-privileged bitch...”

Dawn had had enough. She didn’t care that a crowd had gathered to watch them. She kned him in the balls, putting every ounce of force and every bit of training behind the move.

Pain suffused Ron’s face as he released her arm and fell to his knees, heaving and gasping as he tried to catch his breath. To make sure she had enough time to get well away from him, she followed up with a knee to his chin, now within easy reach.

“Way to go, dearie,” a little white-haired woman shouted. “Bastard deserved it. My hubby went to get a cop. We saw the man assault you.”

With Ron on the ground, now rolling and moaning, Dawn made the decision to go straight to the airport and avoid the hotel altogether. She hadn’t left anything important in her room, just a change of clothes and some toiletries—all of which were expendable. She had her passport and other I.D., her weapon, and her computer tablet and phone in her tote bag. Plus, Ren had said she’d be shopping for the mission; she could buy whatever else she needed in Cartagena.

Ignoring the crowd that had moved to surround Ron and the little tourist who patted Dawn on the arm, she looked around and spied a taxi dropping off a man at an office building across the square. She turned and smiled at the nice woman. “Thanks, doll, but I’ve got to run.”

Dawn whistled, waved a hand, and shouted, “Taxi.”

The cab made a U-turn and pulled up next to the crowd. She got in the back. “Airport, please.”