

## Chapter 1

2 a.m., January 3<sup>rd</sup>, Williamson, West Virginia

DJ Poe squinted through the windshield of the Jeep Cherokee, trying to focus on Williamson Memorial Hospital through what seemed like a blizzard of fat, fluffy snowflakes. She shivered and clasped the collar of her shearling jacket around her neck with shaking hands. The wind chill had already leached most of the warmth from the shut-off vehicle.

Not all of the cold in her bones, all of the trembling in her fingers, was due to the weather. Some could be attributed to out-and-out fear.

A little over twenty-four hours ago, she'd received an emergency text from a trusted source that read: "Your momma is dying." She hadn't been calm or warm since.

DJ swallowed hard, the taste of dread acrid in her mouth. God, she hadn't been this scared since one muggy, West Virginian summer night ten years ago.

She'd deal better if she was doing something. Instead, she sat here on her ass, waiting for an all-clear, while somewhere in that building her mother could be dying. "Could be" being the operative term—because the whole situation smelled like an elaborate trap.

Her mother's health and safety were the only reasons DJ would come back to Mingo County, one of the most morally corrupt places in the world—and the site of DJ's own personal hell on Earth, Red Bone. Since she'd served several tours in Afghanistan as an Army helicopter pilot, she recognized hell when she saw it.

*Face it, Dahlia Jane, the fear is worse because of the guilt.*

Yeah, that nailed it. While DJ had tried to get her mother away from her abusive husband, she'd failed, miserably. When DJ had gone to the legal system, justice failed both her and her mother. Physical evidence of abuse, it seemed, wasn't enough; which demonstrated her father and his friend Ed Varney had too much clout and her mother, a typical abuse victim, had refused to file charges.

DJ had been too far away to change any of the outcomes, but once she received her discharge, "Operation: Rescue Nancy Poe" had become DJ's top priority. She'd just finalized her solo plan to sneak her mother out of Red Bone when she'd received the alarming text.

*Guilt, thy name is Dahlia Jane Poe.*

Yeah, DJ should've gone against her mother's express wishes to forget about her and Red Bone and tried something more drastic sooner. Something along the lines of what she and her friends Andy and Devin Walsh were doing tonight. Of course, at the moment she wasn't doing a damn thing but taking up space and worrying like an old woman. The guys, typical macho Marines, had also smelled a trap and convinced her they needed to surveil first.

DJ pounded the steering wheel with her fist. Dammit! What the fuck was taking them so long? They'd been gone fifteen minutes. How long could it take to find one room when they already had the number and knew the layout of the building? This was a small county hospital, not a large city medical center. She could've been in and out five times already.

Frustrated, worried, and just generally pissed at the whole effin' situation, she pounded the steering wheel again. It didn't help.

*Hold on, Momma. I'm here.*

"She's not here, DJ." Andy's husky baritone came over the headset she wore under her wool watch cap. "She never was."

Relief swept over her. For the first time in over a day, she relaxed. She unclenched and wiggled her tension-cramped fingers even as she slumped into her seat. Her mother wasn't dying all alone in a hospital bed.

The whole emergency text had been a ruse, a trap loaded with the perfect bait. Only her father and the Varneys would know just what enticement was needed—and only they had reasons to lure her back to their turf.

"Roger that. Not totally surprised," she replied. Obviously, the source of the text message, Mrs. Binkley, her high school English teacher, had been misled or maybe even forced to send the message. She'd have to follow up that line of inquiry once she and the guys had found her mother and secured her safety. They might have to rescue more than one woman tonight.

Then it hit her, this *had been* a trap, so—

Swallowing hard past the boulder-sized lump in her throat, she asked, "Who did you find?"

"Three men waiting by the elevator and a woman in the room," said Andy.

Woman? Had her father and the Varneys hurt Mrs. Binkley? Used her as a decoy?

"Let me see the woman's picture," she gritted out.

"Sending image," Andy said. "But she's not an innocent."

"Got that right, brother," Dev said. "We're bugging out, DJ."

"Roger that." She stared at the image on her smart phone. While the situation wasn't funny, her lips twitched at the sight.

*Donna Barstow—Red Bone's resident slut.*

Donna had done anything for money ten years ago, and it looked as if the skunk hadn't changed her scent.

"What did she tell you," DJ asked, "before you gagged her."

"She knows nothing." Dev's low growl was filled with distaste. "She was shocked—just shocked, mind you—that we thought Nancy Poe would be in that bed." He huffed. "Of course, the medical chart inside the room says 'Nancy Poe,' and the hospital computer system we hacked into gives Room 420 as Nancy Poe's private room."

"DJ," Andy interjected, "we'll give a full report once we're away from the hospital. Things are quiet and under control—for now." He paused and added, "But either the hospital security is really lax or purposely MIA."

Someone had messed with the hospital's security? More likely, someone in security was in on the trap. The Varneys owned a lot of people in Mingo County.

"Roger that." DJ started the Jeep, put the defrosters on high, and then got out to clear the snow off the headlights and windows. The snow was coming down more heavily, maybe an inch an hour. The winds had picked up slightly and the wind chill could freeze extremities in less than five minutes. She pulled her balaclava up around her nose, so she wouldn't inhale the cold air directly.

"We going to Red Bone?" Andy's voice came across the headset as clear as if he'd been standing right next to her. She heard the clang of a metal door shutting and then the thudding of the two men's boots as they descended stairs.

Red Bone was where she'd been born, raised, and lived for the first eighteen years of her life. It was a mining town—well, not even a town, but a population district—south of Williamson, on U.S. 52. The godforsaken bump in the road had become a place to loathe as soon as she'd developed breasts, mostly because of Sean Varney.

Sean was two years older than her. He was a spoiled brat, a bully—her nemesis—and the reason she hadn't been back to West Virginia since the morning after she'd graduated high school.

DJ shuddered and clenched her teeth against the anguished moan threatening to claw its way out of her throat. The memories of that time had never faded, but had gone stealthy like a predatory beast waiting to attack her when she was at her weakest.

She'd made it her business never to be weak. But that might be impossible here and now. The memories—the pain—were far too close to the surface.

“DJ? You copy?” Dev's voice held a hint of impatience.

*Get your head out of your ass, Dahlia Jane.*

DJ shook off the tentacles of the sly past—for now.

“Yeah—and yeah, Red Bone,” DJ replied, happy her voice didn't reflect her unease. “If my momma's at the cabin, then we're going to get her out of that fricking hellhole.”

If her mother wasn't at the old homestead, then DJ would happily beat the information out of her bastard of a father. He deserved to get a taste of his own medicine. The man had beaten her and her mother whenever he felt like it—didn't need a reason. He was just plain mean.

The memories of years of abuse at her old man's hands slithered through her mind's eye. She shook her head—*Not now*. Remembering him and Sean would do her absolutely no good. She couldn't allow anything to distract her from the mission at hand.

*But it's all a part of what's going on now, isn't it? If you'd dealt with your pa and the Varneys all those years ago, now wouldn't be happening.*

Yeah, she'd been a coward, the proverbial ostrich with her neck buried halfway to China. Because of her lack of guts, her mother, and maybe even Mrs. Binkley, could be hurt or worse.

No, she couldn't think that way. Her mother was fine. Mrs. Binkley, also. She refused to allow the past and a mixed bag of negative emotions to tank the mission; it was too important, maybe the most important mission of her whole life.

DJ pulled her Beretta pistol and double-checked the magazine. The routine maneuver served to calm her nerves. The only better routine would've been performing a pre-flight check on a Black Hawk, the airframe to which she'd been assigned after finishing Army flight school.

Gun in hand, she checked the surroundings for potential danger.

No one was out. But why would they be? It was the middle of the fricking night, colder than the ice lakes of Hell, and snowing as if the next Ice Age had arrived. Shift change at the hospital wouldn't be for several more hours. All the other fine citizens of Williamson were home, tucked in their beds.

Worry gnawed at her control once again. Was her mother safe and warm? Was she hurt? Was she even alive?—*Stop it.*—All she could do was move forward one step at a time.

Assured the area was secure for the men's return, she holstered her weapon, then climbed back into the driver's seat and waited for her teammates.

DJ couldn't have asked for better partners than Andy and Dev. The men had dropped everything, sacrificed their last few days of leave from their Marine Special Operations

Command teams, and driven straight through from the North Carolina coast to help with the rescue of her mother.

She'd only known the two Marines for about six months, but Andy and Dev had become closer to her than her blood kin—with the exception of her mother. They'd met when Dev had asked a room full of Army helicopter pilots for a volunteer to fly a risky rescue mission to pick up a MARSOC team led by his brother Andy. All the pilots had offered, but DJ had been chosen since she was the best pilot for the job. The risky mission had been a success.

That one small act, something she would've done for anyone, led to the Walsh family adopting her as one of their own. They'd even gotten her an interview which had led to a job with the private security firm Security Specialists International, owned by Ren Maddox, the husband of the Walsh's only daughter, Keely. DJ would be SSI's first female operative.

With a job waiting for her, she left the Army after ten years. She'd arrived in the States and stayed with the Walshes at Camp Lejeune while she'd finalized her plans to get her mother away from her father.

Then Mrs. Binkley's text had arrived. It had been Andy and Dev's mother Molly who'd noticed DJ's distress. The woman had gently, but determinedly, pried the information out of DJ—and then called a family meeting where DJ had given the Walshes the Cliff's Notes version about her family situation.

Andy and Dev had insisted on coming along as her backup. They wouldn't take "no" for an answer. Their—the whole Walsh family's—unqualified support had filled a place in her heart that had been empty for far too long.

A low whistle over the headset alerted her to the brothers' approach. She unlocked all the doors. The two men piled in.

DJ turned toward Dev. "Tell me about—"

"Later. Get us away from here," Dev said. "If someone discovers the four people we left trussed up in that suspiciously vacant ward, a cluster of cosmic proportions will rain down on us."

"Why? What did you do?" As the men buckled up, DJ pulled smoothly out of the alley into which she'd backed. Driving at an appropriate speed for the weather, she headed for the outskirts of Williamson; her destination, an all-night truck stop right off U.S. 52.

"*Who* is the correct question. One of the three men was the Mingo County Sheriff."

Dev delivered the statement in the same calm tone and manner he'd use to order a coffee. But the impact on her nerves was like that of a surface-to-air-missile taking down a chopper. She lost the cool facade she'd forcibly donned before the men had reached the Jeep and shrieked, "Sheriff? God, what did you—"

Dev grasped her shoulder, then gently squeezed. "Chill, DJ. They're tied up, but unharmed. They can't identify us. We had ski masks on and wore gloves. Just get us to a place so we can fully debrief." He looked in the side mirror. "I haven't spotted a tail. Andy?"

"Nada. I keep telling you, no one saw us, bro," Andy chimed in from the back seat. "That wing was deserted. Old technology security cameras, shut down. I checked them as we went in and out. That hospital doesn't have the budget to do anything super-high-tech small. Face it, the Sheriff was being a bad boy. He didn't want DJ's capture to be seen. Kidnapping charges definitely wouldn't look good for his re-election chances."

Andy was making light of the situation, but it was serious. From the beginning, the whole situation had stunk to high heaven. She should've anticipated the potential of crooked law enforcement participation. She hadn't warned the Walshes about the Varneys—so they hadn't

had all the facts about how things worked in Mingo County. She'd only told them about her low-life father and that had been bad enough. Now, it looked as if the minute details she'd skimmed over in her back story might bite them all on their asses.

"Sweet Jesus, what have I gotten you guys into?" This wasn't their fight. Guilt, fear, and worry—of late, her close emotional companions—ate at her gut. "Maybe you guys should—"

"Shut it, DJ. Do *not* finish that sentence," Dev gritted out. "We aren't leaving until we get your mom and *you* away from here."

"Yeah, we're a team, and a team member doesn't leave a teammate behind. You know that," Andy scolded.

Yeah, she did, but that was in the military—this was personal. However, she wasn't surprised at their response, but was still leery of risking their lives and reputations.

Dev added, "Plus ... you're family now. We'd go to war for you."

And it might come to that.

Tears of gratitude formed in her eyes. *Not the time, Dahlia Jane*. She furiously blinked the wetness away as she carefully negotiated the curvy, snow-covered road. The mountain road was tricky on dry days, but on snowy days, it was downright treacherous. One wrong move and they'd slide off the icy pavement into the Tug River.

With all the potential dangers, her gaze never ceased moving back and forth from the road to the rearview mirror. No one on the road, but them and a few truckers who had to make deliveries or lose money. Most importantly, no county sheriff's car in high-speed pursuit.

And who was the Sheriff now?

She'd find out once they stopped. Chances were she might not even know the man, but she'd bet he was firmly in Ed Varney's back pocket.

To distract her mind from chasing the unknowns like a hamster running a wheel, she said, "So ... Donna sure looked scared. What did you do or say to her? The Donna I knew could skin a person with the sharp edge of her tongue."

DJ chanced a quick glance at Dev. His lips twisted with disgust. Yeah, that was how a lot of decent people felt about old Donna.

Before Dev could open his mouth, Andy laughed. "Ole Dev told her that if she made a single peep before morning that he knew where she lived and he'd come back and personally give her a facelift with a dull knife."

"Facelift?" DJ bit her lip, stifling an inappropriate snicker, as she carefully steered through a series of S-curves that hadn't seen a plow or salt.

Dev snorted. "That's what she said she was in the hospital for."

"Nothing's changed with that bitch," she said on a sigh as she pulled out of the last curve with only a slight skid. Donna had regularly had tune-ups even when DJ lived in Red Bone. She was fairly sure her father and Ed Varney paid for most of the body work.

The Walshes hummed in a way she'd quickly come to recognize meant they wanted her to share—but only if she wanted to. Their patient silence filled the confines of the Jeep until she couldn't stand it any longer.

DJ grimaced. "Donna was—and probably still is—the town slut. She spread her legs for most of Red Bone's and the surrounding area's male population over the age of sixteen including my father and my two brothers. She's quite the femme fatale."

She could still remember the one time her mother had put her foot down about her husband "visiting" Donna. Her father had beaten her mother, beaten DJ when she tried to stop

him, and then had still gone to see the fat-assed bitch. His regular nights had been Tuesday and Saturday. On Saturdays, he'd shared Donna with his boss Ed Varney in a threesome.

Everyone in Red Bone knew about her father's philandering. Her mother had tried to shelter DJ from the salacious knowledge, but there were always people who liked to gossip. *Bless their hearts.*

"Not seeing that. Not my type." Dev looked over the seat at his brother. "Yours, Andy?"

"Only if I was blind, deaf, dumb, criminally stupid—and so crippled I couldn't run the other way."

DJ's lips twisted upwards before thinning into a tight tense line as she struggled to keep the Jeep on the road when a particularly vicious gust of wind hit the vehicle sideways. "Thanks, guys. I needed a good laugh. I always thought she looked too ... too..."

"Tarted up? Cheap? Skanky?" Dev suggested.

"Rode hard and put away wet," Andy muttered. "She smelled like it, too."

"Eeuw, thanks for putting that image in my brain." DJ shook her head as the brothers chuckled. The laughter relieved some of the tension in the vehicle. "I bet Donna had sex in the hospital bed. She told me once ... well, never mind. I'd never take sex advice from the likes of her. My momma raised me better."

Worry for her mother rose to swamp her once again. She choked up on the steering wheel until her fingers ached. When the vehicle began to drift, she realized what she was doing and deliberately loosened her grip and steered the Jeep back on her side of the center line. Now was not the time to have an accident because she'd become distracted.

With a sigh of relief, DJ spotted the bright lights of the truck stop. She pulled into the parking lot and backed into a spot between a darkened pickup truck and an equally empty SUV.

"We can talk here without being noticed." Besides the two vehicles and theirs, there were at least twenty semis and quite a few cars. They'd be just three among many snow weary travelers.

After she turned off the vehicle, she turned to face Dev and so that she could see Andy in the seat behind his brother. "Okay, show me the damn pictures."

Andy hung over the seat and pulled up the first picture on his phone. "Here's the Sheriff."

The picture was of a large, dark-haired male. He lay on his side, hog-tied with zip ties, and had gauze bandaging and tape over his mouth. He wore an eye patch, but his other flame-blue eye glared into the camera.

*God help them all. His daddy bought Sean the Sheriff's job.*

DJ swallowed the threatening nausea and fought against being sucked into the black hole of her past. The guys needed more intel—part of which would include what had happened between Sean and her on the night she graduated from high school. The events of that night were why they were here now.

She managed to gasp out, "That's Sean Varney. His father Ed is my father's boss."

Both men's body postures tensed. Their gazes sharpened as they glanced from the image on the cell phone to her face and then back again.

Could they sense her fear of Sean? Her distaste? Her horror?

Probably.

For a few seconds, she ignored their questioning looks and took a couple of slow breaths in an attempt to regain control of her emotions. She wasn't sure she could talk about what Sean had done to her. Didn't want to see the pity on their faces, if she could.

*Denial, thy name is Dahlia Jane.*

DJ swept a shaky finger across the cell phone's screen and shuddered at the next image—Sean standing against the wall next to the elevator, his hands behind his neck. He'd bulked up even more over the last ten years. But the feral look promising pain and eventually death in the one good eye—the one she hadn't damaged—hadn't changed at all. It still chilled her to the bone. He'd aimed the same expression at her on graduation night right after she managed to get away.

Seeing that look in Sean's eye was the tipping factor. She could no longer hold back the tsunami of dark memories.—*It was a hot summer night. A good night for a swim in the creek by her family's cabin. Sean followed her—made crude remarks and sexual overtures. She refused him. Tried to leave. He pounced on her like a hungry bobcat on a rabbit.*

*Nothing she did stopped him. She scratched and kicked. Screamed until her throat was raw and only mewling sounds emerged.*

*Sean beat her until she lay, gasping, half in, half out of the creek. Then he stripped her with rough, pinching fingers. Raped her—taking her virginity—and beat her some more. Time blurred as he raped her again. She fell unconscious then. She only roused when dawn broke. Sean must have fallen asleep, but the sun awakened him, too—and he raped her yet again. But this time, she managed to find a rock near her hand. In her fear and pain, she hit him in the face, in his eye.*

*He screamed, roared, cursed—and threatened, "I'll cut you to pieces, you fucking bitch. You'll beg for death."*

*As he rolled on the ground, covering his damaged eye with his hands, she struggled to her feet and then stumbled away. She fell many times, but kept getting up until she could no longer manage it. Then she crawled. Anything to put distance between her and the animal who'd hurt her.*

Relaxing her clenched jaw and taking several deep breaths, DJ beat back the nightmarish images. That brutalized girl no longer existed. She couldn't. The Army had made DJ strong, strong enough that no man could ever hurt her in such a way again.

Maybe if she told herself that often enough, she might even begin to believe it, might be able to live a normal life and be more than good buddies with men.

"DJ ... come back to us, please." Dev's voice broke through the miasma inside her mind.

She blinked and then looked at Dev and Andy. How long had she been lost in the past? It must've been awhile since their expressions had switched from questioning to concerned.

Then it hit her.

"Sweet Jesus," DJ whispered, a sick feeling in her stomach. "Sean as a law enforcement officer would have access to databases most citizens wouldn't. Maybe not the classified stuff, but my regular Army records. He could've come after me at any time."

"It's awfully hard to kidnap a Chief Warrant Officer off a military base stateside or on deployment. That would cause a ruckus," Dev pointed out. "He waited to set his trap until you were out. He and his buddies might not have even been aware of your plan to take your mom away."

"Yeah, that makes more sense than Momma or Mrs. Binkley screwing the pooch." DJ laid her head back against the headrest, willing her stomach to stop churning.

"If it bothers you, we can have Tweeter and Keely look into who's accessed your Army records. They can also check to see if your classified records were hacked." Andy patted her shoulder. "The fucker could've also hired a private investigator and gotten the info about you and your discharge date that way."

She nodded. "Show me the other two."

Andy held his phone up with another picture.

"That's Ed Varney." She shivered. If she'd been Catholic, she might've crossed herself. The devil hadn't changed at all. He was still big, ugly, and mean-looking. She was surprised he hadn't had a heart attack since his bulk looked to be all fat, concentrated in his middle.

"And here's the last guy," Andy said. "Looks like he eats small pets and children for breakfast. His vocabulary was ... impressive."

DJ frowned as she looked at the picture of the last man. Andy had also taken closeups of the man's tattoos. He could be militia, an outlaw biker, or an ex-con. He looked very rough. "I don't know him. Um, where did y'all get the restraints you used to hog tie them? I didn't see you take in any."

Dev's face darkened with repressed rage. "The bastards had them. We also found a couple of syringes on them. We gave each of them a little dose of whatever they'd planned for you. We kept part of one, and we'll have Dad get it analyzed on base. It's evidence they'd planned to take you by force. We have lots of lovely pictures before and after our take-down of them."

DJ shuddered. No matter how strong she was, how well she fought, or how heavily armed she'd have been, the three men could've easily overpowered her. God, she was glad she'd come with backup.

"Dev opted to drug them." Andy let out a disappointed sigh. "I wanted to beat the shit out of them."

"Glad you restrained yourself," she said.

"They're alive, but won't be real happy. They don't dare come after us, even if they could discover who we are. What they were doing was illegal," Andy said. "We took the pictures to show you—but also to turn over to the Feds when we report the attempted kidnapping."

"If I'd only reported Sean ... ten years ago..."

*But you didn't and here you are.*

Yeah, here she was. Her mother missing. Two decent men involved in the filth that was her past. All of a sudden she was that eighteen-year-old girl again and nothing had changed. She choked back the sob threatening to escape. The view outside the Jeep's windshield blurred, not because of the heavy snow, but because of the tears welling in her eyes.

*Again with the crying? God bless it, Dahlia Jane, man the fuck up. You aren't alone. You have a team. Share the load.*

Dev wiped away a tear streaking down her cheek with his gloved thumb. "Talk to us."

DJ blinked away the tears and sniffed. "Yeah ... you need to know the whole, sordid story—need to know what you could be walking into and why."

Also, they needed to learn she wasn't the hero they thought she was. She'd run away all those years ago and stayed away. She'd failed in her attempts to free her mother, thus leaving her in the hands of an abusive man.

*Cut yourself some slack. You tried. Your momma has to share some of the blame. She never grabbed the safety lines you threw out.*

With her head resting against the seat back, she inhaled and then slowly exhaled, several times. Her vision finally clear, she stared at the roof of the Jeep.

Jesus, she'd rather face a horde of Taliban terrorists than talk about this crap. She sniffled and immediately resented the weakness in her that still allowed the past to bother her this way.

Andy handed her a handkerchief over the back of the seat. “Here ya go. You know, anything you tell us will stay with us, if that’s what you want.”

*Get a fucking spine, Dahlia Jane. Just spit it out.*

“The night I graduated high school ... Sean Varney beat and raped me.”

Silence met the stark statement, which said it all without having to relive the gory details. Been there. Done that once this evening. Walking an emotional tightrope without a safety net as a result.

The energy pouring off the two men had gone from cool and calm to nuclear in a split second. She sensed their stares, their concern. She couldn’t look at them. Because if she found pity in their eyes, she’d fall right off the thin line she was walking and then be of no use to her mother.

DJ inhaled, then let out a harsh, shaky breath. “My momma found me ... I was too hurt, too weak, to make it all the way home ... after I got away from him.”

Echoes of Sean bellowing in pain from the hurt she’d managed to mete out—screaming he’d cut her to pieces and use her as fish bait—rang in her head again.

Dammit! No! She slammed a mental door, shutting out the cacophony from the past.

“She’d come to find me, because...” She gasped for breath.

Why wasn’t there enough oxygen all of a sudden?

“Breathe.” Dev rubbed her arm. “Take your time.”

The sound of his calm voice, the warmth of his hand through her coat helped. She took several breaths, then continued, “My father and Sean’s had made a deal...”

“What kind of deal?” Dev’s voice now had a darker, more feral edge. His hand squeezed her arm, but that was okay since he was angry on her behalf. While Andy’s curses sizzled in the cold air, he gently laid a warm hand on her shoulder, adding his support to his brother’s.

*A devil’s deal.*

“That Sean could now have me since I’d graduated high school. I guess they’d been making plans for a while.”

DJ looked at her lap and pleated and unpleated Andy’s handkerchief. She was embarrassed. Her father had bartered her away like a piece of property to curry favor with his boss. Dev and Andy had been raised by a decent man who loved his only daughter and would emasculate any man who threatened her well-being. They had to be disgusted. She was disgusted.

“You didn’t report the rape.” Andy’s voice was harsh. “Why not?”

She looked up. Even with all her training and years in the Army, she felt as helpless now as she had ten years ago. “Nothing would’ve been done. The three of them would’ve made me out to be a lying harlot.”

At their looks of shocked disbelief, she reached out a hand, pleading. “You have to understand. The Varneys had—still have—clout in Mingo County, both in money and power. They owned the then-Sheriff,” she let out a hysterical laugh, “just as much as they currently own the office of sheriff.”

She held her breath and clamped her lips shut. If she gave into hysteria now, she didn’t think she could stop and there were still things that needed to be explained ... and done tonight.

Several seconds passed, then Dev asked, “What happened after your mom found you?”

She could tell he kept his tone, gentle, calm, to help her settle down. She looked at him and then Andy. “It’s okay, guys. I won’t go all crazy-woman hysterical on you.” Maybe.

“Jesus H. Christ, DJ.” Andy shook his head. “You don’t have to tell us that.” Yeah, she did since she was a flea’s whisker away from losing control. “But, hell, I wouldn’t blame you even if you did. You’ve got cause.”

Dev nodded. “You know you don’t have to face any of this alone any longer, right? We’re here ... hell, the whole Walsh family would be here, if needed, to support you.”

And that was why she’d count her blessings every damn day that she’d been present when Dev needed a pilot.

“Now, tell us the rest. How did you get away?” Dev said.

“My father was visiting Donna that night. We were afraid Ed and his men would come looking for me. So, my momma hid me in an out-building and then called my English teacher Mrs. Binkley who got me out of town.” DJ shuddered and pulled her collar up around her neck. “She drove me to her nurse friend in Williamson and got me basic medical treatment. Then Mrs. Binkley had her cousin drive me to Cincinnati and I received more treatment. I lived at the YWCA until I’d healed enough to enlist in the Army and ... that’s it.”

A pregnant silence settled over the vehicle.

DJ stared out the window. The snow had slowed a bit, but was swirling in the gusty winds. There was no traffic on the highway. No movement in the parking lot. It was as if she and the two men were alone in a snow-globe-universe of white and cold and dark.

Dev grunted then blew out a breath. “Besides being an employee, what’s your father’s relationship to the Varneys that he’d pimp his only daughter?”

Yeah, that was what her father had done all right. Could it be uglier or dirtier?

DJ couldn’t shake the shame of it all—had tried for years to figure out why her father hated her so much. Fathers were supposed to love and cherish their daughters. Or, at least, that was what she’d learned once she’d escaped from Red Bone.

She looked at the now horribly wrinkled handkerchief and twisted it even more. “My father is Ed’s right-hand man. Ed was ... is...”

She shook her head and concentrated on swallowing and breathing past the lump in her throat. Until now, she’d been the victim of her past. What would they think of her when they learned the truth?—That half her DNA came from a degenerate crook.

*And the other half comes from an angel incarnate.*

“I’m such a wuss.”

“DJ,” Dev rubbed her arm, “you aren’t a wuss.” He leaned over and gave her a brotherly kiss on her cold cheek, his lips so warm she shivered at the difference in temperature.

Andy leaned forward and rubbed her shoulder through her thick shearling coat. “Give yourself a break. You were traumatized at an early age. You received no justice. No counseling. So, you’ve never fully processed the attack. You have post-traumatic stress disorder, not a thing to be ashamed of, but something that must be dealt with.”

“Once you get to Idaho, talk to Keely or Vanko’s wife Elana. Both of them have had similar traumas and deal with PTSD. They’ll listen ... help you get you counseling, if you need it.”

Dev slid a finger along her cheek and then tapped the tip of her nose before sitting back in his seat. “So, to review the cluster to this point, your ass-hat of a father wanted to suck up to his boss and decided to gift his only daughter to the man’s scum-sucking rapist of a son to accomplish that.”

“Yeah, that sums it up.” DJ tilted her head back and frowned at the Jeep’s roof. “When Sean wanted something, his daddy got it for him. For some reason, Sean decided he wanted me all those years ago. Now, he wants revenge ... and his daddy and my father will help him get it.”

“Why does fucktard Sean want revenge?” Andy asked.

She laughed, a harsh sound. “Because I’m the reason he wears an eye patch. I managed to hit him in the face with a rock after he...” She couldn’t say the words again. Once was enough. As it was, she’d be sure to have nightmares later, if this godforsaken night ever ended.

“Good for you,” Dev purred the words as Andy muttered, “Serves the fuckwit right.”

“Now, tell us exactly what the Varneys do that provides all their money and clout?” Dev asked.

She snorted. “If it’s illegal, Ed Varney does it.” At Dev’s raised eyebrow and Andy’s gimme-more grunt, she added, “When I lived in Mingo County, Ed ran guns, drugs, and moonshine. I’ve been told he’s expanded his criminal empire to include human trafficking to brothels in the Midwest.”

Her stomach lurched and she swallowed hard at the thought her father could be involved in something so evil and sick as selling humans. Yeah, her paternal genes sucked big time. “No matter who the elected officials might’ve been, Ed oversaw his little part of the world like a *Posse Comitatus*. Do you know what that means?”

“Yeah,” Dev said. “It means some elected official, or any asshat who has lots of political pull, runs roughshod over the area where he lives. Militias tend to be involved most of the time.”

“Exactly. Ed held most of the power in Mingo County while I was growing up,” DJ said. “With Sean as the elected Sheriff, he has solidified his control.”

“Do the Varneys have militia ties?” asked Andy.

“Oh hell yeah. Their unit is an offshoot of Christian Identity, one of the Aryan Nation militias. The unit has reciprocal trading agreements and vows of mutual support with other militias across the United States, including a few in Idaho, Washington State, and Montana.”

DJ eyed the two men. Their expressions were grim. “So, I’m not holding my breath that Sean and my father will never track me and Momma down even after we move to Idaho—if I still have a job after all this comes out. I never told Ren the details of why I left West Virginia and about my family’s criminal ties.”

“Fuck, DJ,” Andy drawled. “Ren won’t hold the Varneys’ and your father’s backgrounds against you. He was happy to get you. Your military training is just what he was looking for in a female operative.”

Andy was being nice. She had no doubt the Walshes had lobbied hard to get Ren to hire her on the basis of her Army record and after a few Skype interviews. She’d never be able to pay them back, but she’d work hard for SSI—and to make a new life for her and her mother in Idaho.

“Is there anything else we need to know before we go and get your mom?” Dev asked.

“No—that’s the whole mess.” She scanned the two men’s faces. Both wore the calm expressions of the highly trained Marines they were. But what was behind those facades now that they knew the mess they might be wading into? “You don’t need to come with me...”

Dev growled and Andy frowned. Okay, maybe that was insulting, but she had to give them an out. She had no clue who her father might have backing him up at the cabin. She needed to approach this from a different angle, one they’d understand from a military viewpoint.

“Guys, the mission has changed. This is more than getting my momma out of a lightly secured hospital...”

Now, both men glared. Okay, that approach was probably even more insulting.

“Dev ... Andy ... with Sean being the law in Mingo County, this could turn into a real goat rope...”

“Jesus,” Dev turned to Andy, “can you believe this?”

Andy shook his head. “Nope, she must not have processed the part about her being our new sister.” Then he turned, his gaze fierce. “Let me spell this out. Me and Dev would kill for you, bury the bodies, and lie like bandits about it. No militia or a fucking rapist bastard wearing a tin badge will make one bit of difference—we’re staying.”

Dev used his finger to turn her face toward him. “So, soldier ... stop trying to protect us. We’re here. We’ll do what we need to do to rescue your mom and then take these assholes down once and for all. End. Of. Story.”

DJ let out the breath she’d been holding. The sense of relief knowing she wouldn’t have to go it alone was much bigger than she would’ve thought. She might’ve left her crew when she left the Army, but she now had a new crew, a new team, in the Walshes. It was a damn good feeling.

She turned on the Jeep and drove out of the parking lot onto the snow-covered highway. “Okay, here’s the layout of my family’s property and cabin...”

As she drove back to where her life had begun twenty-eight-years ago, she briefed her team and gave them as many details as she could about what to expect.

## Chapter 2

*3:00 a.m., in the hills outside of Red Bone*

The three of them hunkered down in a copse of snow-laden trees off to the side of her family's cabin. A cold chill had settled in her belly. The area echoed with bad memories of arguments and abuse, diluted only by her mother's love and sacrifice for her only daughter.

*Please be here and unharmed, Momma.*

DJ shook off the fear fileting her insides and fixed her attention on the target they needed to breach. As far as she could tell not much had changed since she'd left home, in either the surroundings or the character of the people who lived there.

The cabin built by her great-great-grandfather with hand-hewn logs and cement-sand-lime chinking still looked as if it would fall down any second. The fieldstone fireplace had giant cracks and tilted toward the back of the building. The wooden porch sagged, and the window to her attic bedroom was still boarded up from the time she tried to escape in her junior year in the middle of the night. Her father had never seen any need to "gussy up" the exterior.

There were some concessions to the twenty-first century—two satellite dishes hung precariously on the rickety eaves. Her father had probably justified those expenses as a cost of doing business.

"How do you want to do this, DJ?" Dev spoke in a low monotone.

After she'd briefed the guys on the way here as to the physical layout of the property, she'd offered the mission lead to Dev or Andy. Both men had declined in favor of her home field knowledge. Their continued faith in her went a long way in calming her nerves and tamping down the bad memories that coming home had brought to the surface. The images were still there, lurking under the surface of her consciousness, but for now she was in control.

DJ surveyed the surroundings once more, looking for anything she might've overlooked during her first go-round. No matter how focused she was, she could always miss some detail that might bite her or her teammates in the ass.

Several pickup trucks were parked in the side yard. Since several inches of snow had accumulated on the vehicles, they'd been there for a while. Lights were on in the cabin. Tendrils of smoke with an occasional flickering of bright red sparks rose lazily from the chimney. Her not-so-loving father was up with his drinking buddies, or maybe some of Varney's militia men, keeping him company while waiting on Varney to call and report on her abduction.

"I'll knock on the door," DJ said. "While I distract father-dearest and whoever else is inside, you can go around to the backdoor. My parents' bedroom is located at the back of the house on the main level. Find my momma and get her the hell out of there. Once she's clear, I'll bid my father a not-so-fond farewell."

"One of us will get your mom," Andy muttered. "The other will back you up and make sure you're clear. You aren't confronting that bastard and his buddies alone."

She cast both men a look her helicopter crew would've recognized as her don't-argue-with-me expression and found them looking mulish. How could she have forgotten that while Dev and Andy had ceded her the lead, they were still Special Ops and would argue with authority if they didn't see things her way?

DJ shook her head and blew out a frosty breath. In the short time she'd known the two men, she'd discovered they were far more stubborn than she was—and bigger and meaner. Truth be told, confronting her father would be distressing—because deep inside, she was still the little girl who wanted her father to love and cherish her.

Plus, Andy and Dev were correct—she needed backup. Her emotional issues could rise up at anytime and throw her off the game plan.

“Okay ... thanks.” She stood, brushed snow off her legs and butt. Then she pulled her weapon and flicked off the safety, just in case, and placed it in her jacket pocket. She felt for the switchblade in her other pocket. She was as ready as she'd ever be.

“Com check,” she spoke under her breath into the headset mostly hidden under her watch cap.

“All clear,” Dev said.

“Ditto,” Andy replied. “Don't do anything stupid, DJ. Keep your com unit on so we can hear everything.”

DJ shot Andy the finger over her shoulder as she walked away and grinned as the men's chuckles came over the headset. Her long legs made an easy and quick trip through the shin-high snow. When she was within a few meters of the front door, motion sensors activated exterior lights on the front corners of the cabin. Something else new since she'd been here last. Bet the local critters set those puppies off on a regular basis—and they'd be just as regularly ignored.

*Unless they have cameras attached to them, Dahlia Jane.*

Nah, her father was too cheap to pay for that kind of upgrade.

DJ paused and let her eyes adjust. She shoved her hand in her pocket and lightly gripped her pistol, just in case. Once her vision was clear, she mounted three steps, which had been half-assed repaired, crossed the small expanse of porch decking, and then knocked on the roughly hewn door.

“That you, Ed?”

Her father's irritating whine came through the wood door. Her gut clenched at the all-too-familiar sound; it brought back too many memories of bare-assed strappings with his belt as he'd whined about what an ungrateful brat she was. She still carried faint scars from when he'd gotten carried away.

“Didn't hear ya drive up. What the fuck took ya so long? Did you get the little bitch?”

*Little bitch?*

Her heart stuttered. Yeah, nothing had changed. But then why would it? The man was rotten to the core. Her only value in his worldview was as barter for more money and power in the Varney empire, and she'd deprived him of potential ownership in the Varneys' dirty empire when she'd left. She wondered what her barter value was currently?

*Too bad, Pa. I ain't playing.*

“We're in. Shit locks—so no problem.” Dev's voice came over the headset. “Your mom isn't in the first floor bedroom. Andy's searching the attic.”

*Shit.* Was her mother even here?

DJ snarled as the sound of multiple locks being undone echoed in the snow-filled night air.

“Stop growling, DJ. It's distracting.” Dev continued, “Someone's been cooking meth in the kitchen. Front room—there's three men on a couch to your left as you enter. They look drunk. Too out of it to be on meth. Guy opening the door, on the other hand, is practically bouncing. Watch him—he could get violent.”

“Roger that,” she muttered right before the door opened. She pulled her hand from her gun pocket and slid her other hand into the pocket with the knife. It was better not to shoot guns inside a meth house.

And then she was face-to-face with her father for the first time in ten years.

Her stomach curdled, and she swallowed the bile threatening to come up—fought the Pavlovian response to back away and cower.

The bastard was shorter than she remembered, or, maybe it was because she’d grown taller. He had a comb-over on the top of his balding head and a ragged, salt-and-pepper mullet elsewhere. Sort of a Billy Ray Cyrus meets Bruce Willis look.

She smelled booze wafting off his dirty flannel shirt. His breath could fell a bear. Yeah, he was twitching—bouncing just as Dev had said. His pupils were so dilated she could barely detect the pale blue of his irises. His facial skin was pasty and hung loose on his bones. His teeth were rotten and some missing.

*Christ Jesus, he’s the frickin’ poster boy for meth addiction.*

“You’re using meth? I knew you were rotten to the core. Never thought you were stump stupid.” She scanned his body and felt only disgust. “You look like shit, old man.”

“Dahlia Jane.” Her father looked over her—twice—then leered. The gaps in his teeth made him look like a sick jack o’lantern. She’d need a long, hot shower after this just to scrub the icky feeling off her skin. He was her effin’ father and he eyed her as if she were a hooker.

“My, my, my, you grew up good.” He smacked his lips. “Look just like your momma did at your age. Built like a brick outhouse, but you got my daddy’s family’s height. Damn girl. Sean might keep you alive for a while before he offs you. He do you yet? That why it took y’all so long to get here?” He craned his neck to look past her. “Where is Sean and his daddy?”

“Um, they’re tied up.” DJ walked toward her father and forced him to move out of her way. She spotted the other three men ... all strangers. Her brothers weren’t here. Why that fact relieved her? She didn’t know. The fact they weren’t present didn’t mean they’d straightened up; it just meant they were elsewhere.

She wrinkled her nose. The place smelled like unwashed men and fresh moonshine overlaid by the sharp smell of the acetone used in the meth cooking.

A loud snort and then a buzz-saw sound came from one of the men on the couch. As if on cue, the other two began to snore. Yeah, they were drunk out of their puny minds.

Dev was a shadow among the shadows of the back hall. Knife in hand, he never took his eyes off the men on the couch.

DJ turned her gaze back to her father who blinked like an owl and whose meth-fried brain cells had finally processed her previous words. “Whatcha mean *tied up*?”

“As in hog-tied and gagged. They ain’t coming. I’ll be leaving once I get Momma.”

“Now see here, girl.” Her father lurched toward her, his fist raised.

As a young girl, she’d pleaded with him not to hurt her. As she’d grown older, she’d tried to run away from the violence. Now, she moved into him, blocked his arm, grabbed his other arm, and then used it to turn him around, twisting his arm up behind his back. She pulled her switchblade with her left hand. The snick of the blade sounded like a gunshot in the silent room. She placed the knife under his chin, the blade flat against his throat—for now.

“Where’s my momma, you disgusting freak of nature,” she gritted out over his ear.

“We got her, DJ.” Dev preceded his brother into the room, his focus, on the men on the couch who hadn’t moved and were still snoring in stereo. Andy followed with her mother

cradled against his chest. He'd bundled her in a thick, fleecy blanket. She didn't move. Didn't make a sound. Andy's expression was dark and ugly as he eyed her father.

"Momma..." DJ's voice was a strangled whisper. What had the fucker done to her? As she was about to ask, her father began to struggle in an attempt to get away. She pulled the knife away so she didn't accidentally slice his throat, while simultaneously jerking his arm up higher to stop his bid for freedom. He groaned at the pressure she placed on his joints. "Don't fucking move. I really ... really want to slit your throat right now."

The Walshes joined her by the door. She could barely see her mother's face, but what she could see was pale and bruised.

*Fucking abusive asshole!* DJ couldn't stand the foul creature being anywhere near her mother. She shoved her father toward the couch. He stumbled and fell to the floor, landing like a pile of pick-up-sticks, his legs and arms askew.

"You'll fucking regret this, you little she-bitch. Sean and I will find you and my cunt of a wife. We'll make you both bleed and beg for mercy."

DJ saw red. Her asshole father could threaten and call her anything he wanted—but not her mother. She growled and started forward.

"DJ..." Dev sounded worried and moved as if to place himself between her and her father.

"I won't kill him." She waved Dev off as she strode over and lifted the waste of a carbon life form off the ground by his filthy shirt. "Shut the hell up, old man." Then she shook him. "Never..."

She shook him again and then shoved him away. He stumbled, regained his balance, and came at her. She punched him in the gut as hard as she could. His pained expulsion of breath satisfied a bit of her need for retribution. "Ever..."

Proving just how dumb he really was, he came at her yet again. She easily avoided him and hit him on the jaw this time. "Call my momma a cunt again."

DJ then kicked his legs out from under him and he landed on his ass. This time, he stayed down and glared at her. His rapid, wheezing breaths harmonized with the loud snores of the men.

She backed away until she reached Andy and Dev, who'd remained to guard her. Would they have stopped her from killing the piece of shit who'd fathered her? Yeah, they would've. They would've protected her from herself—that's what teammates did for one another.

*Gawd!* She mentally cringed. They'd seen where she'd come from—seen who'd fathered her. Their father was a damn hero, and hers was a piece of scum-sucking, drug-addicted shit.

*He was never your father, Dahlia Jane, just a sperm donor.*

"We done here?" Dev asked, his voice even and impassive.

She inhaled sharply and shook her head. "Got a few more words to say to my ex-father."

"I'll take your mom to the vehicle," Andy said. "Short clock, DJ. I want to get your mom checked over by a doctor."

"What?" She looked away from her father who now glowered at her as if he wanted to kill her. "Momma..."

"She's been beaten pretty badly." Andy peeled back the blanket.

DJ snarled under her breath as she could now see the full extent of the beating her mother had endured. She swept a lock of hair off her mother's bruised forehead. Both her eyes were swollen shut; her jaw, red and purple. Her lips were split and had dried blood on them. Her breathing, shallow.

Sweet Jesus, her mother had to be in horrible pain. She wasn't making a sound—was she even conscious?

“God, I'm so, so sorry I didn't get here before,” DJ whispered, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes, down her cheeks, and then dripping onto her mother's bruised face. “Forgive me, Momma.”

“No ... baby girl ... not your...” Her mother gasped, then moaned.

“Shh, Momma.” DJ stroked her mother's hair. “Where else is she hurt?” she asked Andy. The words ground out of her mouth like stone scraping over stone.

“Everywhere. I'm mostly concerned about her ribs. Finish this up, or let Dev do it.” Andy walked out of the cabin, his words carried back to her on the wind.

DJ turned to find Dev standing over her father, who'd enough brain power left to process the danger the larger, younger man posed.

“Maybe I should kick you while you're down, you fucking worthless piece of dog crap. Beating women make you feel manly?” Dev moved his foot as if he'd follow through with his threat.

“Dev, no.” DJ moved and grabbed his arm, tugging him away. “We'll tie them up and leave them. We need to get my momma to a hospital.”

Not the one in Williamson either. Someone there had colluded with the Varneys to clear that wing and faked the medical records to lure DJ in to be abducted.

Dev snorted with disgust, but nodded. As she stood guard, he hog-tied all four men with zip ties and left them on the drafty floor.

“Go on, Dev. I have some final words for the fucker who sired me.”

Dev scrutinized her closely for several seconds. He must've found what he needed in her face, because he nodded and stalked out of the room, pulling the door almost closed behind him.

DJ knelt next to her father's head. “Listen up, old man. Me and those boys with me are your worst effin' nightmare. I've got more friends just like them. So, you keep that in your sick, feeble brain when you're plotting your revenge. Which you will, 'cause you're thick as a post. My advice? Forget about me and Momma. Tell that fucker Sean and his daddy to forget about me, too.”

“Dahlia Jane, you done just fucked up, girl,” her father sneered, though it lost some effect since his words were slurred. “You don't know who you're messing with.”

DJ shook her head and sighed. “Yep, dumber than shit.” She stood and kicked him in the ribs with her Army-booted foot. “That's for my momma.”

Then she turned and walked out of the cabin to find Dev, still on the porch, still covering her ass. God, she loved the Walsh men.

“You going to close the door?” asked Dev.

“Nah, maybe the old bastard will do me a favor and catch pneumonia and die.”

“Works for me.” Dev joined her as she walked down the wobbly steps and never looked back.