

CHAPTER 8

Now it was my turn to get educated.

Char began, "Maisie, I would love to tell you about BJ. Let's get our pizza, and then we'll go there."

She didn't have to tell me twice, as Jazz tried to shove me out of the way, we raced toward the kitchen. We dished up far too many pieces, eating like a pack of hyenas.

As Jasmine and I stuffed our faces, Char began. "When she died, he died too. He walked around, and worked, as a shell of a human being, as if a parasite had gotten inside and eaten him from the inside out. We all expected to hear the worst about him and then, one day, we realized that he had just disappeared."

"People thought that he had died," Char started, voice low, the way you talk when you're not sure you should be saying it at all. "not literally, though some did, figured he'd just disappear one day – thought he'd put the barrel of a gun in his mouth and it would be done. After Elizabeth... man, there wasn't much left of him. He'd sit in that dark house for days, not answering the door, not eating. Work? Forget it. He quit his job, let the bills pile up. We all waited for the call. You know the kind."

Jasmine made a small sound, almost a laugh, but bitter. "He didn't die," she said. "He just... stopped being a civilian."

I had to ask, "What's a civilian?"

At first, Jazz looked at me like I'd been living under a rock, and then... she remembered.

"A civilian is a person who is not a member of the military, police, or any other armed forces."

Char nodded slow. "He heard about this outfit - private contractors - no American flags, no rules. Guys who embedded with special forces, and did the jobs that regular units can't touch or won't. High risk, higher pay – if you live. BJ signed on like he was buying a one-way ticket to nowhere. Figured the desert would finish what cancer started."

Jasmine picked it up. "First six months, nobody heard a word. Then the stories started filtering back through the pipeline. His friend Matthew would talk – to a very few, who really mattered, who loved BJ and worried about him. He didn't have parents – only a few got close to his heart."

"...Whispers at first," Jazz said, "some village elder in Kandahar swearing a ghost walked through a Taliban checkpoint at 3 a.m. and left twelve bodies cooling in the dust. No shots fired that anyone heard. Just silence."

"Shab-e Marg," Char said, pronouncing it carefully. "Night Death". That's what the fighters started calling him. Said he didn't raid; he arrived. You'd be in a house with twenty armed men - laughing, smoking, planning the next ambush, and then, one by one, the voices would stop. You'd look up and he was already behind you, like he'd been there all night, waiting for you to notice." I began to shiver, slightly, as the girls told his story, as if we were sitting around a campfire.

Jasmine's voice dropped softer.

"He lived like an animal out there. No base, no Quick-Reaction-Force to save your hide, no medevac on speed dial, no calling in the A-10 fighter jets to "knock them back" with air support. Just him, and whatever he carried. Matthew said he carried nothing at all. Sometimes, he said, he approached villagers, who had no idea who he was – but they saw a man, unarmed, walking for miles in the desert. They'd offer him na'an and tea; herbs and prayers. He never forgot that. Said the people weren't the enemy. That kindness damn near broke him all over again."

"Out there in the trenches," Char broke in, "eating dirt with the teams, he started seeing all the holes in our gear. Not literal holes, but rather, things that should've existed and didn't – a breaching charge that wouldn't fragment friendlies; a drone swarm you could fit in a backpack; a silent grenade that cooked off only when it detected bearded heat signatures. The enemy thought it was a dud, or a good one, and when they picked it up... bang! Stuff that could've saved his buddies, stuff that could've saved countless lives – if someone had thought harder, worked faster."

"Ahhh!" I broke in. "Whiskey Tango Foxtrot!"

Jasmine looked at Char now, something fierce in her eyes. "He started sketching them on whatever paper he could find. Napkins, ammo cardboard, the margins of a dead fighter's Koran once. Ideas that worked because he tested them the only way he knew how – right there, with lives on the line. When he finally came home, he wasn't the same shattered man who'd left. He was quieter. And harder, but there was... purpose now. Like the desert had burned everything unnecessary out of him and left something useful behind."

Char finished it. "He started the company six days after returning home. No investors, no fanfare. Just a shop – machines running day and night. Now, half of the gadgets saving American lives, in places we don't admit we're fighting, came from a man who went to war hoping to die... and accidentally figured out how to live."

Now, I sat curled on Char's couch with a blanket wrapped around my shoulders, still trying to process everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. The fire crackled softly. Char sat on one end, legs tucked under her. Jazz sprawled on the other, wine glass in hand.

"You've got that look," Char said gently, studying me. "The one that says you're still trying to figure out the man who dropped you at the diner like he was putting a bar of gold in the lost and found. Didn't make sense to him at all, did it?"

I gave a small, tired laugh. "He didn't even tell me his name. Not that I cared or would have even listened. I feel so bad Char, I was like a rattlesnake, and he was just trying to save me from getting my head cut off."

Jazz snorted. "BJ does that. Man's been playing lone wolf since he got back from the desert. Six days after he came home, he bought that old warehouse and started Whiskey Tango Foxtrot like it was the most normal thing in the world."

Char nodded, running a hand through her hair. "Most of us thought he was dead. Four years gone, no word, just rumors he'd been killed on some off-the-books contract in Afghanistan or Pakistan or God knows where. When he finally walked into the diner, Mrs. Henderson dropped an entire pot of coffee. Shattered everywhere. She crossed herself like she'd seen a ghost."

Jazz leaned forward, eyes sparkling with sarcasm.

"Oh yeah. The good people of Cannon Falls had already written his obituary in their heads. Then he shows up looking harder, quieter, hair all cut off, tattoos – like the desert had sanded off everything soft. People stared. Old buddies shook his hand, but he shook theirs too hard and they couldn't meet his eyes. Half the town whispered he'd gone rogue – working for whoever paid best. The other half just didn't know what to do with the version that came back."

Char's voice softened. "He tried dating again. Including me."

"After he came home, and after the months of silence that followed, I had been the first person he let close again. We'd gone on dates – quiet dinners, walks along the frozen river, nights that ended in my small apartment above the hardware store."

He'd been ready to say the words. To promise something more permanent.

Then the biker showed up.

Darwin Espinoza. Tall, broad, covered in ink that told stories most people wouldn't want to hear. He wasn't handsome in any conventional way—dark hair, rough jaw, the kind of face that looked like it had taken and given punches in equal measure. He rode a Harley that rattled the windows when he pulled up, and he had that bad-boy gravity that pulls certain women in like gravity itself."

"Women like Char," Jazz said, then realizing that what she'd just said sounded stupid.

Charlotte gave Jasmine a squinted stare, and then continued.

"BJ fought it for a while. I saw the war on his face every time he came in, as I struggled with good angel, bad angel, shoulders tense, eyes flicking between the two of them. But in the end, I chose the storm over the quiet. He didn't hate me for it. He understood. Some people need chaos to feel alive. He just wasn't the chaos I was looking for. I still smiled when he came into Nick's. Still poured his coffee black without asking. Still asked how he was doing in that soft, careful way that said I knew

exactly how deep the cut had gone. And I still felt the pull, every damn time. But some things you don't get to keep. You just learn to live around the empty space they leave.

Jazz took another sip, tone turning sharper. "Then he tried a couple other local girls. Bless their hearts. They wanted the old charming BJ who fixed cars and told funny stories. Instead they got the man who sat with his back to the wall and scanned every exit. One of them actually told him he was 'too intense.' In Cannon Falls. Where the biggest scandal is usually the mayor's wife ordering the wrong shade of paint for the gazebo."

Char continued. "He stopped trying after that. Said silly things didn't matter anymore—worry, jealousy, anger. He didn't get angry. He just made sure justice happened. When the normal ways didn't work—when crooked cops looked the other way on domestic calls, or certain councilmen took kickbacks from shady developers, or cases at the old mill kept getting buried—problems had a way of resolving themselves. People lost elections. Lost jobs. Suddenly decided Cannon Falls wasn't healthy for them anymore and left town."

Jazz smirked. "Town secrets, honey. Pretty riverfront, nice families, Friday night football... and underneath? Deputy Harlan 'losing' evidence on abuse cases until he suddenly retired after an audit. Councilman Briggs taking envelopes from that north-side developer until he decided Florida sounded nicer. And those girls who went missing after parties out at the old mill—cases that went nowhere until BJ started paying attention. Things changed after he came home. Not loudly. Just... quietly. The way shadows move when someone finally turns on the light."

Char picked up the thread. "Then one rainy Tuesday this skinny kid from New York walked into the shop. Matthew Rossi. Looked like he hadn't eaten in a week. Resume full of gaming achievements and online certifications. Talked nonstop about code and drones and military tech from simulations."

Jazz laughed. "BJ almost threw him out. Kid was all mouth, no calluses. But something made him pause. Matthew said he knew how to see patterns—how to look three moves ahead and set traps. BJ had the same instinct that kept him alive in the desert. Raw. Gamer brain meets operator mind."

"Matthew. He had nowhere to go," Char said. "Sleeping in his car, turned down everywhere. BJ offered him a deal: rundown thousand-square-foot house that needed everything. 'Work the shop during the day, fix the house on nights and weekends. I buy materials. When it's done, it's yours. But it's not done until I say it is.'"

Jazz grinned. "First day, Matthew swung a hammer like he was fighting a boss. Nearly took his thumb off. BJ just took the hammer, drove the nail clean, and handed it back. 'Measure twice. Swing from the shoulder. Let the tool do the work.'"

"Matthew kept showing up," Char said. "He was terrible at first. But he never quit. BJ taught him everything. And somewhere between the sawdust and the late nights, that scared kid became part of us. BJ didn't just give him a roof. He gave him a chance to become someone better. And in teaching him, BJ started remembering how to be human again."

Jazz raised her glass toward the fire, voice softer but still edged. "That's how WTF really started. Not just with machines. With people nobody else wanted. People who needed a second chance. People like us."

I sat there, blanket pulled tighter, heart beating a little faster. The man who had pulled me from the snow and dropped me at the diner like I was fragile cargo... had all of this behind him.

Char leaned over and squeezed my hand. "He's a hard man to know, Maisie. But he's a good one. The kind who shows up when it matters."

Char watched the tears stream down my face. I couldn't hold it in any longer. How wicked I'd been. I was a brat who should've gotten a spanking, instead of rescued. I used my own tragedy as an excuse to treat a good man like shit. I didn't know how I was going to make it right, but I was going to. As my lip quivered and my heart ached, my two new best friends held me close.