

I AM JUSTICE

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STEWART



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This book is dedicated to my husband, for a lifetime of moments, blinding and brilliant moments, especially for those that were always and only ours.

Chapter 1

APPARENTLY, CAMO COULDN'T HIDE YOU FROM EVERYTHING. Justice yanked free of another thorn in the brush-choked woods. She squatted at the tree line and focused her night vision goggles on the rear of the bleak home turned bleaker business. The battered, white-shingled two-story sat on the poorest edge of a rural community in Pennsylvania.

Rural as hell. They didn't even have their own police force and had to rely on staties.

She snapped pictures of the gravel-and-stone backyard and the rusty propane tank propped on wooden legs like a miniature submarine dry-docked after fifty years at sea.

The whole “massage parlor” was dingy, dirty, and depressing.

Given the choice, most people steered well clear. Not Justice. She wanted inside. Planned and plotted on it. Call it a childhood dream, making good on her vow. Call it redemption, making it up to Hope. Call it revenge, making them pay for Hope's death.

It would help if Momma's oft-heard mantra—patience...reconnaissance always comes first—didn't keep popping up like a jack-in-the-box to wave a scolding, white-gloved finger at her.

Momma. What a fun sucker.

A single light, green through her goggles, shone over

the steel back door. She zoomed in on it as her breath fanned against the midnight air. Her camera *click, click, clicked*. No exterior handle. They'd have to pop it. And no security cameras. Figures. See no evil. Hear no evil. Or at least, record no evil.

She snapped photos of barred and blackened windows and a rusty fire escape that led up to a metal-gated door secured with thick, elephant-proof chains.

These guys weren't taking any chances. Which meant more surveillance and late nights for her. Unlike her other siblings, she always got saddled with recon for the family's underground railroad.

Not for long though. After two years of planning, the mission as dear to her as her own heartbeat—breaking up a human trafficking ring—was only a few weeks away. *Yeeshaw!* She was going to bust heads.

Her earpiece clicked, and her brother's voice came through. "Justice, youse...uh, you in position yet?"

Tony. He worked so hard to weed out his South Philly. She liked his accent. But being adopted into her big, crazy family had taught her people could have some weird issues.

"Aw, Tone, can't spot me? Is it my expert camouflage or that stealth gene you're missing?"

Tony snorted. The sound tightroped between amused and annoyed. "Yeah, you know as much about being a Choctaw as I do about being a Chihuahua."

"It's in my blood. Only thing in your blood, paisano, is cement shoes and boosting cars."

Laughter feathered through her headphones, making her want to scratch through her face mask to dig the tickle from her ears. "Just get the pic—"

The massage parlor's back door crashed open. A dark-haired girl, maybe fifteen, sprinted out, wearing a too-loose bustier and a thong as inconsequential as her chest.

A man broke out after her, hauling back with a belt thick enough to double as a swing.

"Tony."

"No. Think larger mission here. Not one girl. All of 'em."

The heavy slap of leather on flesh ricocheted like a gunshot.

Soundless, the girl tucked her shoulder and veered to the side, toward the woods, toward Justice.

Justice's chest tightened and heated until it became as hard and fixated as the steel on her Sig. Adrenaline flooded into her body. The scene slowed and intensified.

The girl's eyes were wide and frantic. The desperate eyes of a hunted child.

She couldn't sit here—ass on haunches—and do nothing. As ineffective as government raids that took months to organize and ended with not one conviction of a principle. Not one.

This was what the League of Warrior Women was about: Stopping the shit that other people stood by and let happen. It's what her sister would have done. It's what Hope *had* done for her.

Every nerve in Justice's body begged to act. But she kept absolutely still. Movement attracted attention. Stillness went unnoticed.

The man grabbed the girl's hair and yanked her back. The girl struggled and flailed, twisted and fought. The man drove a belt-wrapped fist into her neck. She sagged, gasped.

Tony's voice came through the headset, smooth and controlled. "Stay put, Justice."

Too late. She'd already stood, raised her gun, and was in fact mid-motion of pressing the trigger when he'd spoken.

There was a sharp snap, like a broken twig, as the bullet fired from her suppressed Sig. The man's head flung back. He dropped to his ass, surrendered to the gravel.

The girl skittered away. Her eyes swung left and right before she darted for cover behind the derelict propane tank.

"Not for nothin', J, you don't listen to shit."

Justice flipped up her NVGs, pulled down her face mask, and ran across the gravel. She checked inside the doorway for movement. All quiet.

She spotted the girl crouching by the propane tank, squeezed between the building and the rusty cylinder. The kid looked like a terrified skeleton—all haunted eyes and jutting bones.

Tony ran up, checked the dead guy for weapons. "Glock. Figures," he said and slipped the weapon into the back of his belt.

Justice reached forward. "It's okay. It's okay. I'm on your side."

The girl's copper-brown eyes tracked Justice's gloved hand like it came equipped with teeth and venom. For a moment, she was sure the girl wouldn't take her hand. But she did.

Brave kid. Justice pulled her out. She'd shouldered heavier backpacks. Shrugging off her jacket, she helped the girl put it on. Keeping eye contact, she pointed at the dead man, then at the building. "How many more men inside?"

The girl held up her arm and poked two rabbit fingers from the long sleeve. Two more men inside. Justice shrugged at Tony. “No choice.”

His dark eyebrows knitted tightly together, but he started for the house. He bumped Justice’s shoulder as he passed. “Call it in.”

She elbowed him hard in the ribs. He *oomphed* and kept walking.

Justice put a hand on the girl’s shoulder. Even with the gloves, it felt like she’d grabbed a coat hanger.

Shielding Tony’s view, she held out the G19. Tony could be pissed later. And not just because she’d so expertly pickpocketed him. “Can you use this?”

The girl hesitated. Then with a face as starved and empty as a runway model, she took the gun, capped her fingers across the top, and racked the slide.

Justice pointed toward the woods. The girl dashed away, and Justice pressed the button on her earpiece. Gracie answered on the first ring. “You’re kidding me, right, Justice?”

Why were her siblings always giving her such shit? “Just get a van to site six, Gracie.”

She hung up and went inside. A dangling, red lightbulb lit a narrow stairway and slim corridor.

On the stairs, Tony gave her a what-took-you-so-long look? She shrugged. He motioned he’d go up. She nodded and crept the other way, down the hall.

At the end of the dim hall, gun raised, she sighted around a doorway. Ugh. That smell. BO and whiskey.

Once a living room, the space had been turned into an office. A desk, a television turned to QVC, a potbellied man in boxers passed out on a saggy couch.

She reached for a zip tie, stepped inside, and...*crash and churn*. Shit. The bottle of Jim Beam sailed across the hardwood.

Drunky leapt up, saw her, and lurched forward like Frankenstein's monster. Biggest guy she'd ever seen, but slow and lethargic.

Justice skated around him, reached up, and slammed her gun into his head. One, two, three times. He dropped.

Still conscious? If anything, the hits had woken him up.

He grabbed her ankle. She fell in slow motion. Skull cracked against floor. Hand cracked against desk. Gun dropped.

Drunky reared up and slammed into her like a wrestler, pinning her neck with one beefy limb. He held her right hand. Her left arm was trapped and pressed between them.

Justice's heart pounded electric currents through thinning veins. Pinned. It felt like the dream, the nightmare that still haunted her. Her gaze bucked around the room. She couldn't move. Couldn't breathe.

She fought off panic. Off the memory. She wasn't a little kid. She wasn't helpless.

Hand trembling, she groped past his boxers, located one sweaty ball. Squeezed.

Drunky cursed and pressed harder.

Justice's eyes watered, black spots clouded her vision. She couldn't black out. She'd die if she did.

No. Not like this. Not like Hope.

She kicked blindly again and again. Her foot connected with his ankle. He jerked, lost balance.

Justice thrust up her right hip, swung her foot flat, got leverage, and pushed. Drunky toppled.

Snakebite fast, she rolled and belly-crawled away. Where was her... Gun. Justice grabbed it.

Drunky came for her. She rolled, aimed. "Stop."

Bam. The guy crashed back and down.

She looked up. Standing in the doorway, the girl lowered the Glock.

Holy Shit. The kid had killed the guy.

Wheezing through a throat still aching, Justice lurched to her feet. She sucked in hot, rank air as her legs Jell-Oed under her.

Ignoring the twist of nausea and the feeling of wrong, she picked up her night vision goggles and staggered away from the corpse. She went over to the girl. "You didn't have to."

Tiger-fierce red-brown eyes scanned away from her over to the body. The girl spit on the floor. "I wanted to."

Justice knew that anger, wasn't sure she disagreed with it, but still... "You wait here. Right here."

She went back down the corridor and up the narrow stairs. She swung her gun around as she checked the upstairs hall. Tony had taken out the other guard. He was passed out and hog-tied in the hallway.

Tony stepped from one of the corridor doorways. "Did I hear a problem?"

"Not anymore."

"Seriously, J? Stop killing people."

She glared at him. Definitely not the time to explain. "Guy had a hundred fifty pounds on me."

Literally.

Tony pointed to the man knocked out, hands bound behind his back and tied to his feet. "That guy's no featherweight. It's called training."

Dick. What did he know? Sometimes the only thing that made her equal to those she went up against was a gun. She gestured at the doors in the hall. “Where are the girls?”

He reached past her and pushed a door open. He nodded toward the occupants. “Salvadoran.”

She walked into the room. The young women and girls who’d been stolen, tricked, or coerced from their lives and countries huddled together in a dark corner. The windows had been painted black. There was one dresser and a full-size bed. Probably the same setup as every room up here.

She automatically gave the instructions in Spanish. “Stay calm. No one will harm you. We are rescuing you. You will be cared for. You will not be harmed. Stay calm. Follow us.”

The group began to panic. Cry out. Someone threw a shoe at her. *Ouch. Great.* She stepped back to Tony. “You got this?”

He nodded and lowered his gun. “Always a people pleaser, J.”



At the pickup location designated as Site 6, they loaded the freed slaves into the white panel van. The girl who’d saved Justice refused to get inside.

Justice put her hand on the kid’s bony shoulder. “What’s your name?”

She looked away, then down. “They called me Cookie.”

Cookie? That wasn’t a name. That was a dessert. Well, if she’d learned anything from *Sesame Street* it was that *C* was for Cookie.

“Thank you for saving my life, Cee.”

The girl's fiery-brown eyes, prematurely set to suspicious, appraised Justice. "Am I free?"

Justice pointed at the back of the fifteen-passenger vehicle. "Get in the van. Freedom is your next stop."

The girl shook her head. "I want to go where you go. I want to..." She hesitated as if looking for words in a language she didn't know that well. "I want to be what you are."

Kid had no idea what she was saying, what would be required of her, but rules were rules. If they asked and showed any kind of real promise, they got to try.

"Get in the van. A woman with red hair will be at your destination. Her name is Gracie. Tell her what you told me."

The girl nodded, turned, climbed into the van, and dragged the door shut.

Justice hit the door twice. The van pulled away, trailing a cloud of exhaust. When the taillights faded, she turned and slipped into the front seat of the black rental, next to the elephant in the room. Tony.

She cast her brother a sideways glance. Every inch of his five-foot-eleven frame looked ready to pound her to a soft, mushy pulp.

Tony ripped off his hat and gloves. He ran agitated fingers through black, wavy hair damp with sweat, causing it to stand on end.

Justice started the car and adjusted the heat to "off." She let out a breath, tightened gloved hands against the steering wheel. *Aw, hell.* "Stop pouting."

Tony hit the dash. "You gotta get over this cowgirl, *Kill Bill* bullshit. Why not send up a signal flare telling the Brothers Grim we're after them?"

The wheel spun through her fingers as she turned the corner. She flicked on the headlights and accelerated onto the highway.

Tony was so uptight. If only she'd known when she'd first seen him—a twelve-year-old runaway scrounging for scraps—what a pain in the ass he'd become. Never should've begged Momma to adopt him. The first boy in the family. "Get over it, Tony. An eye for an eye."

He flung himself back against the seat. "You know, an eye for an eye eventually leaves the whole world blind. It's stupid. Like your stunt tonight. We don't bust into a place like some eighties Schwarzenegger movie. You think this won't get back to them? Raise suspicions?"

He had her there. The League of Warrior Women wasn't just smash and grab or brute strength. It was the velvet hammer—negotiations, forums, and charities that supported women. And the chain saw of assassination, deceit, and violence.

Sometimes things just get messy. "Sorry, Tone. Really."

He made a sound of dismissal, stripped off his dark jacket and bulletproof vest. His tight muscle shirt showed off a navy-blue tattoo on his right arm. Half of the family motto: "One for all."

The other half, "All for one," was tattooed on his ribs, over his heart. Hey, let a bunch of kids choose the family motto and you were bound to get something plagiarized.

Justice swung up to the dark country road where Tony had parked. "Come on, let it go. We saved the lives of eleven people. Tomorrow they'll wake up in a warm place, with good food, and no one will treat them like that space between their legs is all that matters."

Tony's eyebrows rose. He flashed wide, pearly teeth

that looked like they belonged in an ad for braces. “Guess that’s why you have so many boyfriends, because you talk so sexy. Oh, Justice, tell me more about that space between your legs. What do you call it? The vortex of doom?”

Boyfriends? Like after what her father had done she’d ever trust any man outside of the League.

She leaned across him and opened the door. “Get out.”
He did. Still laughing.

Chapter 2

DUST AND DEBRIS FROM THE EXPLOSION LACED THE HOT, oppressive Syrian air and clung to Sandesh almost as thickly as the village mud to his combat boots.

His eyes watered. His ears rang from the blast of the barrel bomb, but he held steady—or at least held his arms steady to protect the child. It didn't help. She let out small, injured sounds as more of her skin sloughed off against his Special Forces uniform.

The barrel bomb had been filled with chemicals and had inflicted burns reminiscent of napalm. Her once-healthy skin was red and raw.

One of his Rangers pointed his rifle toward the sky. "Heads up, Sandman."

Sandesh raised eyes toward the muffled—to his ears anyway—whir of an approaching Black Hawk. His foot caught in a muddy depression. His knee buckled.

The child in his arms cried out, her eyes springing open. He whispered soothing words. Hopeless. The small, delicate body stiffened. Her head tipped back.

His heart tightened in his chest, a fist of hard anger. The Syrian government had attacked its own citizens, injuring bodies, hoping to also injure minds. It would probably work. Violence usually did.

It was only a coincidence—at least he hoped it was—that he and his Rangers had been in the area. They weren't technically supposed to be here. Their mission

was outside of Syria, supporting the Free Syrian Army with training and weapons. But someone higher up had wanted a better take on Assad's chemical profile, so they'd come into the country.

Guess they'd found out.

Behind him he could smell the chemical fire, even with the water someone had turned on to douse the victims. His stomach lurched. At least nineteen girls had been injured. Some shuffled forward like the walking dead, skin and clothes in tatters.

The helo landed. He got up carefully, but the child trembled. Fuck mission parameters. They needed to do something.

The girl in his arms stirred. "Please, Poppa." She knew English? "Don't be angry."

He looked into her face, expecting to see confusion and delirium. Her dark eyes stared directly at him, into him. Her raw hand rose to his chest, touched his heart. "There is more."

An awed gasp whooshed from her mouth. Her hand dropped. She stilled.

Sandesh had seen people die, seen how the body suddenly looked less real, less full. But this was different. It was as if he could feel the soul sink from the body, feel the tendrils of spirit wrap around his heart and whisper, "Poppa. Don't be angry. There is more."

Sandesh woke up sweating and hacking. He grabbed blindly for the lifeline. The phone that had woken him. He clicked Accept and brought the cell to his ear. "Yeah?"

"Sandesh Julian Ross, head of the IPT?"

"That's me." This guy sounded like he'd had too much tequila last night. And every night of his life.

What time was it? He checked the clock on his nightstand. Five a.m.? “Who’s calling?”

“My name is Leland Day. I work for Parish Industries, specifically Mukta Parish. We’ve been told your charity, the IPT, works along the Jordan–Syrian border.”

Sandesh blinked the sleep and fog from his eyes and mind. “No. I mean... Sort of.” He’d given the speech so often to media and at luncheons the words came by rote. “The International Peace Team aligns with organizations around the world. But yes, we’ve aligned with Salma’s Gems in the Middle East.”

“Yes. I read about you online. *HuffPost* called you a complex combination of righteous anger, surfer-boy looks, and gritty naïveté.”

Sandesh cringed. That didn’t sound anywhere near a compliment. And sure wouldn’t help him secure the funding he so desperately needed.

He sat up, flicked on the light in his bedroom. The essentials only—bed, nightstand, and lamp—snapped into focus. “Why are you calling?” To harass me about my pretty-boy media image?

“I’m calling to set up an appointment between you and Mukta Parish. She’s starting an initiative to expand global philanthropy. You’ve no doubt heard of Parish Industries and the Mantua Academy for Girls?”

Of course he had. Mukta Parish, hell the entire Parish clan was mega-wealth. A global powerhouse, they also ran an exclusive boarding school for wealthy families. The elite campus was home to Mukta Parish’s It’s a Small World clan. She’d adopted girls from all over the world. “This isn’t camp. We’re run and staffed by former soldiers for a reason.”

Leland cleared his throat. “I understand. But we’d mostly be a financial support system. Completely at your disposal.”

Sandesh swung his legs out of bed. Guy had just offered him exactly what the IPT wanted, needed: funding, a tie to a big name, and complete autonomy. It sounded too good to be true. “What exactly would I have to do to warrant this kind of support?”

“We’d like to discuss that. Are you available to come to our Center City office?”

“Sure. When?”

“Is this morning at seven doable?”

Sandesh was already up and moving toward his shower. “Make it eight.”

Chapter 3

Bucks County, Pennsylvania

DEEP INSIDE THE STONE-AND-SPIRE MAIN BUILDING OF THE 160-acre campus of the Mantua Academy for Girls, Justice's determined footsteps resounded across gleaming marble floors.

She knew the thing that sucked most about a family business. The family part.

She reached her sister's office...door? Great. Bridget had followed through on her promise to have the door removed.

She rapped on the wood framing the empty doorway. Inside, Bridget sat cross-legged on her mesh, Ergohuman office chair, eyes closed. Her frizzy, dark hair stabbed with a silver comb drooped lopsidedly, like a hairy modern art sculpture.

Justice smiled. This was so perfectly Bridget it almost deserved its own word, like *freaktacular* or *weirdiful*.

Justice knocked again. "Bridge?"

Bridget's eyes fluttered open and locked on her. Justice instantly felt seen. As in seen below the skin—all her small, broken secrets, fear of suffocating, and her dislike of the color blue. She fidgeted.

Shiva, *uhm*, Bridget quirked an eyebrow. "What can I do for you, Justice?"

“I need to talk to you about the yoga class. Is it true you have the girls chanting in Sanskrit?”

“Yes, but I’m not sure of your question. I submitted the yoga for approval through the director’s office.”

Justice walked into the office and plopped into a chair. She took off her right flat and rubbed her sweaty toes on the shag throw rug. “You got approval for yoga, She-pak Chopra. Not to have the girls chanting in Sanskrit. This isn’t good PR. And that’s bad for me. Means I have to do work.”

Bridget rested her hands on the desk. “I will limit my teaching to poses and centering music.”

Justice smiled. “Dammit, Bridge, you’re so easy. Why can’t I have more sisters like you?”

“Perhaps, because you are as abrasive as a starving boar,” a voice said from the hall.

Justice turned. Sheared head, lips painted bright red, skin as satiny smooth and dark as a starless sky, and cocked against the doorway, the generous curve of boys-can’t-help-but-wonder hips clad in a leopard-print skirt. Dada, six-foot-two in spiked heels.

And this was the problem with having no doors. Justice slipped her shoe back on, rose, and crossed the room. “You’re home? Aren’t you supposed to be contacting your Brothers Grim informant?”

Dada’s forehead creased. She looked around the hall, but the school staff, a.k.a. no-idea-a-secret-society-of-vigilantes-existed-under-their-feet staff, weren’t in yet. “Have you checked your secure email this morning?”



After passing through security, Justice whisked through the headquarters of the Parish empire in Philadelphia. She marched down corridors lined with sharp corners, glass walls, attractive twentysomethings, fortysomethings, and fiftysomethings in power suits.

She was too pissed to pay attention to the repeated nods and hellos. Momma's morning email had sent her scrambling for her Jeep keys. The mission to take down the global trafficking ring had been put on hold.

Nope. Not happening.

She didn't care if the Brothers Grim had been alerted by her screwup with Tony last week. Or that they'd moved their meeting up by six weeks. Or that they'd moved the location to Jordan—the one place on the entire fucking globe where the League had no established cover. This was bullshit.

Loosening the scarf covering her mostly faded neck bruises, she headed toward the mahogany double doors at the mouth of two intersecting hallways.

Momma's executive assistant, straitlaced Lorena of the cotton button-downs and starched pantsuits, stood from her desk and crossed her arms. Huh. A human barricade.

Good thing Justice had been trained for just such an event.

Sprinting forward, she lifted her foot, planted the arch of her shoe against the edge of the desk, toed herself into the leap, and vaulted into the air.

Lorena ducked and cried out.

Instant classic.

Justice landed with a thud. Lorena was still sputtering vague threats when Justice closed Momma's office door. *Click*.

For a confused moment, she stood within the inner sanctum. A huge corner office with buttoned leather couches, two flat-screen TVs, a hulking Thor of a desk, and a well-stocked kitchen. The self-satisfied grin slipped from her face.

Shit.

The man—built like a hot night of unforgettable, wild blond hair like a sandstorm, eyes the color of the ocean after a lazy day in the sun—drove the air from her lungs.

She couldn't move. Struck deaf, dumb, and blind meet deer-in-headlights. Damn, the man was tall. Like a wall. A wall of man muscle. So hot.

“Justice.” Leland, Momma's oldest friend and most trusted adviser, extended his hand with a warm smile, as if so very pleased she'd joined them. His silver hair gleamed under the canopy of recessed lights. The gray-checked Armani suit draped over him as if upon the confident shoulders of dignity itself.

Justice took Leland's smooth hand. He pressed down firmly and tugged her farther into the room.

“Sandesh, I'd like you to meet Justice Parish.” Only the stern grip of Leland's hand told her how annoyed he was. “She does PR for the Mantua Academy and will be working on the Greenville Initiative. She is familiar with all aspects of our newest philanthropy venture.”

Dude was good. Calm. Graceful. And full of shit. *Greenville?* What was that project about? Giving away money, judging by what Leland had said.

Behind Leland, Momma's brown eyes showed as little as the rose-colored niqab that covered her hair and face and scars.

Justice turned and gave Leland a rictus grin meant to

be a smile. It would probably be the scariest thing he'd see all day.

She was usually more successful at hiding her feelings, but a high-pressure situation—you know the kind where you Jack-be-nimble your momma's executive assistant, barged into a business meeting, and eye-appraised-seduced-and-fucked a total stranger—had her off her game.

“Actually, my role in all philanthropic projects is still advisory. I wouldn't want to mislead, uhm, what was your name?”

Blue-Eyes reached for her hand. “I'm Sandesh. Head of the International Peace Team. We're partnering with Greenville in Jordan.”

He slid his long fingers along her palm in a hot brush that sent her skin tingling. He grasped her hand. Heat suffused her body, brought a flush to her stomach and a smile to her lips. Nice.

Who said philanthropy wasn't sexy?

Wait. Jordan?

Chapter 4

SANDESH TRIED TO REFOCUS ON THE CONVERSATION AND NOT the heat of the woman standing before him. Not happening.

From the moment his ears had picked up the administrative assistant's objection, the *thud* of something he couldn't puzzle out, and another heavier *thud* before the door opened, he'd gone from *corner office mode* to *time to take someone down*.

And then she'd burst into the room.

First thought: He hoped he did have to take her down, because that body underneath him would make his day. Second thought: Sucked to be wearing a damn monkey suit, because he recognized a woman of action. Third thought as she was introduced and her eyes swept his body: If she kept eye contact for more than two seconds, he wasn't leaving without her number.

She did keep contact. Her eyes were so direct, sensual, and interested that the world fell away. Her mischievous, dark eyes and the fan and flutter of those thick eyelashes swallowed every decent thought from his mind.

His eyes returned the exploration. She had the cheekbones of an American goddess, Cher-length, sleek black hair, round breasts pressed against a cream silk blouse, long legs in bold print pants, and the curve of rise-to-meet-you hips. All of that combined with her unmistakable interest was almost too much.

“Jordan? Sandesh, you’ve aroused my interest.” She paused. “Tell me more about your organization. IPT?”

Dear God. If her eyes had been direct and aware, her voice was the promise of sex and the slipping of silk sheets against hot skin. His entire body caught fire.

Justice cleared her throat, her eyes slid over him in a lazy, feline way.

He gave her a smile he hoped wasn’t laced with lechery as he fished the question from memory. “The IPT is run and staffed entirely by former soldiers. It’s designed to aid victims of war and disaster globally. We’re focused on creating self-sustaining businesses. Giving options to people in difficult regions other than starve, flee, or fight. Die or be subjugated.”

She frowned. “Why soldiers?”

“Soldiers are skilled and adaptable. They’re used to discomfort. Used to keeping calm and navigating through difficult situations. Used to assessing problems, implementing strategies. Not having to train civilians saves us money. But I also wanted to give those soldiers having a problem going from warrior to Walmart an option. A way to recover the compassion they might have had to shut down in order to get the job done.”

Those fine, gemstone eyes—onyx black and hot as pitch—widened with curiosity. Or doubt. “But a man’s natural instinct, his base emotions, are geared toward aggression and fighting, right? The military amplifies that. Aren’t you afraid that your volunteers are going to create more problems than they solve?”

He cleared his throat. He couldn’t help himself. Her point was too close to one he’d heard again and again. Soldiers, men specifically, were dogs of war, trained

and good for one thing: killing. If he recruited them for his charity, he was asking for trouble. It pissed him off. “No. I’m not. Are you?”

She smiled again, that coy smile that made his mouth go dry. “I just find it bizarre to expect them to act like Boy Scouts.”

“Bizarre?” His voice rose before he could help himself. Seriously? He ran a hand under his collar, massaged his tense neck. “Why is it so bizarre to believe most men, just like most women, are capable of a whole range of actions?”

And that most men aren’t made to be mindless butchers as well as mindless fucks? That last part he had the good sense not to say.

“That’s not exactly what I meant by—”

Mukta Parish began to laugh, taking the conversation down a degree. She moved closer. Her astute brown eyes were framed by her rose niqab. Her powder-pink business suit showed off a determined-shouldered, Hillary Clintonesque form. She clapped her hands, her heavy bracelets jangling. “Justice, I hope you’ll be more supportive of Sandesh’s charity when you’re doing PR for him in Jordan.”

Justice’s eyes widened, as if she’d been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. “Of course. I’m just playing devil’s advocate. I know how best to defend the charity. When do we leave for Jordan?”

She wanted to go to Jordan now? She’d just put down his entire mission. He had enough issues with organizing; he didn’t need to add her to the list.

Mukta stepped forward. “We were just discussing the fact that Sandesh wouldn’t need to worry about

transporting weapons for his own security. He could use one of our private jets. And, of course, take off from our private airport.”

Oh. That was right. These people were scary rich. And the IPT was in dire need of capital.

Leland grabbed Justice by the forearm. “That’s our cue, Justice. Let’s leave them to the details.”

He guided Justice out of the room. Sandesh watched them go with growing concern. This was the woman who was supposed to do PR for him in the Middle East. Didn’t that job require tact? Seriously. She was going to get him killed.