

Her ordinary life shattered in a brutal attack by well armed revolutionaries, Aislinn O'Connell comes to rely on the steadying influence of undercover agent John Starke who must use every skill at his command to keep them both alive.

Out of the Ordinary

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OUT OF THE ORDINARY

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Out of the Ordinary

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One

To that moment, Aislinn O’Connell had lived a life of comfortable, complacent routine... secure, untested, blissfully unaware of the sudden, gnawing grip of a fear that blotted out all else. And then, in the blink of an eye, everything changed. Her heart pounded over-loud in her ears, her limbs trembled uncontrollably and she struggled to master the panic, raw and untamed that raced through her then. They would kill her, without thought or reason.

“Move! Move! *MOVE!*”

Instinct, long unused and almost forgotten, drove her to comply with the command from the menacing figure holding a semi-automatic weapon aimed steadily at the crowd of Sunday shoppers. Only a matter of seconds before the steady hum of normal life had been shattered by gunfire and shouted instructions. People scattered, screaming, as a sinister group of men seemed to materialize among them. Raw emotion was everywhere; terror propelling people along the mall passage as their captors drove them forward.

“Over here, all of you — *NOW!*”

They’d reached a large central courtyard where the corridors of the mall complex converged. Growling and impatient, the men motioned for the frightened shoppers to gather at its center. Pressed closely with the rest, Aislinn’s wide-eyed gaze moved over the scene. To one side a middle-aged woman and her mother held hands. Clustered in front of her, several teenage employees were frozen in stunned disbelief. Glancing to her left, she met the steady gaze of the man who stood there, and a breathless moment passed as wide heather-hued eyes stared into reassuring green ones.

“Silence!”

The barked command stifled the hushed voices, leaving them to watch as more darkly clad men streamed from each corridor, leading other shoppers and employees to join the group in the courtyard. Clearly one of the men directed the actions of others, gesturing intently and speaking in a curt, authoritative tone. The ever-growing group of captives stood under the watch of weapons held by men whose glittering eyes blazed hatred.

“You,” one of the men gestured with his weapon to a girl standing trembling at the front of the crowd. Young and fresh faced, her long blonde hair was pulled back so that she looked all the child she was, “come forward.”

The crowd watched as another of the men ran his large, work roughened hands over the girl, forcing her to remove the shapeless smock of her store uniform. Satisfied, the serviceman motioned her to a space against a blank wall,

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where a third man stood with weapon at the ready.

It would be a while before they'd reach him, and the man at Aislinn's side took full advantage of these few precious moments, his eyes moving over the scene, assessing the threat and watching, always watching. The men motioned shoppers to them in turn, checking for weapons before collecting identification, which they then tossed in a heap on the floor. Special Agent John Starke had no illusions about his fate if his identity were to become known. Intent green eyes kept moving over the scene, coming at last to rest on the frightened woman at his side.

She glanced up at him, sensing his gaze upon her.

Keep your head, he mouthed silently, earning a grateful half-smile in return.

Knowing he must take this same advice, John stood quietly with the others, waiting patiently for an opportunity to present itself. As it happened, it came in the form of the elderly woman who stood just to the right, her sudden loss of consciousness sending her sliding to the floor. Caught off guard, those closest to her reached to break her fall, her daughter uttering a strangled cry as she knelt at her mother's side.

"She's fainted," someone said.

Unseen in the sudden press of people, John slipped a hand inside the pocket of his jacket, deftly removing the folded identification he carried and dropping it to the floor. Questioning violet eyes caught the gesture, and Aislinn glanced from the worn brown case to his face and back again. *It mustn't be seen*.

Understanding at once what he was about, she took advantage of her position at the back edge of the crowd to send the telltale item skidding silently along the polished floor, watching as it came to rest just under a huge granite planter that stood at the far edge of the courtyard.

"Get her up," the icy command came, and the woman's daughter struggled to comply.

"Please... she's 82 years old — she can't take this," the daughter begged.

The men remained stone-faced, resolute.

The incident had caught the attention of the leader of the force, and he surveyed them from where he stood, his eyes ice cold and assessing. "Be about your business men."

The search resumed, ruthless hands moving over the old woman, her feeble protests falling on deaf ears. Her daughter was next, and then it was Aislinn's turn. She cringed as rough hands lingered about her waist for what seemed longer than was necessary. Amazingly, she'd held onto her purse during the chaotic rush through the mall, and she handed it over to another of the men, his malevolent gaze boring into her. She could almost smell his hatred and she shuddered,

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chilled. He dumped the contents, and her treasured possessions fell in a heap with the others onto the polished floor, “Pathetic.”

Then it was over and she was shoved in the direction of the others.

John was next, the men handling him more roughly than they had any of the others. There was something about him that roused their dislike. “What? No ID?”

He shrugged, “Guess I forgot it at home.”

The leader, overhearing the exchange, crossed to stand before them. “What’s your name?”

“John,” came the reply, “John Starke.”

“No weapon?”

“Nothing, sir.”

The older man returned his attention to John. “Forgot it?” he questioned, his wary gaze moving over the man before him. Tall, well built, a fighting man who knew how to handle himself, the rapid assessment came to him right away. Like his men, the leader disliked this one on sight. “Or... lost it perhaps?”

Aislinn’s breath caught in her throat, and her gaze went unwillingly to the place where his identification had come to rest. She offered a silent, desperate prayer that it would escape notice.

“Forgot it.” John maintained, his steady gaze meeting the other man’s.

Wary grey eyes moved from John to where he had been standing. For a breathless moment it seemed he was satisfied with his inspection, but then the glittering gaze caught sight of something just visible against the polished floor. He strode over to the planter, bending to retrieve the well-worn case just visible underneath. He sent the younger man a triumphant look. “So then this one, right here, wouldn’t be yours?”

John weighed his options, knowing his life hung on his answer. “That could be anyone’s.”

The older man flipped open the case, his eyes narrowing at the image that stared back at him. “Well... what have we here? A federal ID, with a picture that looks an awful lot like you,” he paused, snapping the case closed with a crack that echoed through the tense silence. “Seems you’ve got some explaining to do g-man — ”

John was spared giving an answer by the sounds of renewed fighting that suddenly split the silence — a shouted word, a crash of glass followed quickly by bursts of gunfire. The telltale noises sent ripples of panic through the assembled crowd; gasps and sobs escaping into the uneasy silence that followed. The leader of the men thrust his lone captive toward the larger group. “Don’t let him out of your sight,” he tossed over his shoulder, motioning for several of the men to follow as he headed in the direction of the gunfire.

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In the next instant, more shouting, more gunfire, and pounding feet growing ever louder, coming in all directions. As the shots continued to ring out, a firm hand grasped Aislinn's arm, pulling her down to the floor and propelling her forward, ever forward along the hallway. Without time to think, she did as she was bid, scrambling toward the entrance to an electronics store just a few feet away. Behind her, the screams of the crowd mingled with the sounds of battle as the innocent and unprepared shoppers were caught squarely in the midst of the fighting.

"Keep your head down," John's stern voice came in Aislinn's ear though she needed no urging. Some unknown instinct was urging her toward the opening and the protection it could offer. Everywhere shots continued to ring out, mixing with the cries of the wounded and the screams of the shoppers as they sought shelter. Behind them, others had seen their route to safety and were scrambling to follow, as bullets came from every direction, striking walls, shattering displays and bouncing off metal surfaces with reckless abandon.

And then it was over.

In the breathless, eerie silence that followed time seemed to stand stock still for John and Aislinn, crouched behind a large display of computer monitors, their hearts pounding in their ears, though neither dared to move or make a sound. The silence was broken at last by the barely audible cry of a child, then another; agonized moans rose up to mingle with sobs of utter grief, and the whispered prayers of a woman carried plainly through the air. At her side, John shielded Aislinn's body with his own, aware only of an intense, driving need to protect her, to shelter her from harm and if need be, to lose his life at her side.

"Everyone up and out here *NOW!*" came the harsh voice of the leader, a barely discernable note of tension in his tone.

Aislinn sent John a questioning look, in that moment totally dependent on his direction. Fear had robbed her of her ability to think... to reason... to do anything but follow blindly the lead he provided for her. At her side, her companion hesitated a moment, glancing about the electronics shop where they had taken refuge. The place was relatively untouched, though cut off from the outside, and John cursed silently the lack of any immediately visible escape route. Out in the corridor orders were being given in a booming voice loud enough to carry through the tense, expectant air. "Search every inch of this place and shoot anyone you find in hiding. Do it now."

The decision made, John helped Aislinn to her feet. She did as he bid her, without thought or question, placing her trust, her very life, squarely in his hands. She held tight to his arm as they made their way toward the uncertainty of the hallway that led to the center courtyard. It was only as they reached the entrance

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to the store that they stopped, struck in that terrible moment by the devastation spread clearly before them. An ordinary, everyday place had become a blood soaked battleground — a chilling, strangely riveting sight that was branded instantly and for all time on the minds of those who took it in as they stumbled from their hiding places. In the next instant one of the armed men was motioning with his weapon for Aislinn and John, along with two or three others to move forward and they did as he bid, the hardened agent and ordinary woman both wounded to the core by what was displayed before their horrified eyes.

Bodies lay strewn everywhere, blood and gore seeping over the polished shine of the geometric designs on the floor. The wounded lay two or three together, sometimes alone amidst the shattered remains of a store window or display. Some had been trying to run... others to find shelter behind a display or potted plant... still more had clearly not had time to react and were cut down where they stood. Glass carpeted the debris-strewn floor, while bullets had left their marks on the walls and ceiling, clothing, electronics and toys lay scattered amid all manner of merchandise on the floor, and the survivors had to pick their way through the debris as they returned to their places. Some of those who lay sprawled about had begun to move; others lay where they had fallen, silent and still.

Aislinn could not take it all in... could not believe what her horrified eyes were seeing and she turned a frantic, frightened gaze to the leader of the men. John's grip was reassuringly firm on her arm, but she barely noticed. The bloody, garish images of a once familiar place were now burned into her mind, replaying themselves in rapid, merciless succession. Revulsion choked her and she squeezed her eyes shut.

"Stay back and keep quiet," her companion urged in her ear. John's well-trained eyes moved over the scene. Nearly 30 shoppers and 8 policemen dead or severely wounded, while their captors losses seemed far smaller — leaving them still nearly two dozen strong, well armed and seemingly unruffled by the sudden attack. Outside, sirens wailed steadily in the air.

"Reinforce our positions on the perimeter. I want them driven back far enough so there's no more little surprises," the leader ground out, gesturing to several of the men. To those who remained, he continued, "Secure the area and post a watch."

His men were quick to carry out their orders, moving toward each of the corridors, while two well-armed guards came to stand before the much smaller group of shoppers. Two more remained standing stoic and silent at their leader's side, watching impassively as he returned his attention to his own wounded who lay sprawled on the floor.

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“This day you give your life to our Cause, and you shall always be honored for your sacrifice,” he said to the first, the steely eyes lighting with respect. The soldier murmured something that went unheard by the crowd, though it caused the men to offer a stiff salute. In the next moment the leader raised his weapon, firing without hesitation. The watching shoppers gasped, though the men made not a sound. He moved to stand over the second of the two, a younger, strapping teen with a shock of red-gold hair. There were no words exchanged this time, only a silent salute and the single shot.

The ruthless gestures drew horrified cries from those who watched. Aislinn cringed with the rest, instinctively burying her head against her companion’s broad shoulder. He however, had not been surprised by the brutal action, recognizing the fanatical dedication of the members of this group. Sadly his world-weary heart knew what was to come next, and he slipped an arm about the slight frame of the woman at his side, pulling her closer, intent on shielding her. “Don’t look,” he warned, a hand reaching to cover her ears as well.

The leader moved from his place by his fallen men to the closest of the wounded officers. Gone was the look of respect, icy contempt lighting his eyes as he fired his weapon. One by one he stood over each of the uniformed men, delivering a fatal shot without regret or emotion. Another of his men followed behind, retrieving the weapons of the policemen and depositing them in a pile on the floor. Assured he had dispatched them all, he turned his attention to the first of the wounded shoppers, lying helpless and terrified where they had fallen.

“Please, no...”

The desperate words fell on ears that were deaf to pleading, a soul hardened and without feeling for those judged unworthy. This was a man with no place for the softer emotions, whether by nature or circumstance, fate or the lure of fanatical desire, he had become a fighter with no mercy in him — performing his duty with machine-like efficiency. Driven by an unseen force, his every action was cold, calculated to bring him maximum benefit. He raised his weapon, as if he was simply taking target practice, with no thought or care for the life that was about to be snuffed out.

Time moved with agonizing slowness, and Aislinn clung to her companion as the shots rang out, each more sickening, more final, than the one before. There was pleading and desperate, fervent prayers, but no mercy, no hesitation on the part of the leader. Cringing and utterly terrified now, Aislinn somehow managed to draw strength from the stranger at her side. A part of her sensing what he wanted so desperately to keep hidden — he was a threat to the men’s intent. Her survival lay with him; of this alone she was certain.

The leader stopped in his progress through the wounded, his cold, assessing

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gaze moving between the helpless at his feet to the now sobbing group of witnesses. “Weaklings... you know little of blood and death, but you will learn. The days of pampered luxury and wasteful indulgence are over. Today marks the beginning of a new order — a new way of life.

“For this is the first step toward the time of service and sacrifice, hard work and determination, faith and loyalty.” He said the words with all the conviction of a believer, though his eyes remained cold and distant, his expression detached. His gaze moved to the wounded at his feet. “It is your misfortune not to survive the battle,” he paused, glancing again to the group of surviving shoppers, “and yours to bear witness to the lengths we will go to secure our Cause.”

He raised his weapon once more, taking aim at a small child, no more than two or three, blonde and blue eyed, his cheeks spattered with blood from the wound in his shoulder. His mother desperate and terrified, cradled him defiantly in her arms, and the heart of those who watched went out to her. The man who stood before her felt nothing, save a casual, passing curiosity, wondering idly if one bullet would be all that was needed to kill them both.

“*NO!*”

The single word was out of Aislinn’s mouth before she could stop it, and the man at her side tightened his grip on her arm, the warning coming too late. John’s heart sank as the leader’s icy eyes turned from his helpless target to where they stood. Lowering his weapon, he moved purposefully to take a place before the group of captives, the other shoppers backing quickly away as he made his way through the press of people toward the rather ordinary looking woman standing near the back of the group. He reached to pull Aislinn from her place, his hard, punishing grip intent on causing her pain.

“You object?” he asked, his tone thick with contempt as he dragged her forward so that she was standing in the front of the crowd of shoppers. “Perhaps you would care to take his place?”

Aislinn had never wanted to live more than in that single, terrible moment, and she caught her breath as she stared up into the hard, angry eyes of a monster. Still the mother in her would not be silenced, even in the face of his towering anger. “H – he’s just — he’s just a baby.”

“He is a waste of resources,” the other man told her, “nothing more.”

Her gaze moved to the boy, whose mother clutched him to her while her wide, terrified eyes remained fixed on the leader and the weapon at his side. “He’s no possible threat to you. Please... *please*, there is no need to do this.”

“Who are you to say what is needed?” he demanded, his fierce dislike of her, and all her soft, simpering kind filling him with disgust. How he hated her in that moment. He tightened his hold, twisting her arm until she cried out in pain. “You

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have no say here on who lives and who dies, you understand that, surely?"

"Of course," she managed, fighting to keep her composure, her chest tightening as fear continued to hold her in its grasp. It was hard to breathe, hard to think, hard to do anything but cry in agony. His grip on her arm was like a vice, and she fought to master her pain. "You have that power. Only a fool would deny it."

Her words, spoken breathlessly and in fear, and the pain he was clearly causing her gave him a thrill of pleasure. He could destroy her or spare her as he liked, and the recognition of his ultimate power helped to soothe his anger. "Indeed I do," he went on, raising his voice so that his men who stood watching could hear. "Our mission is flawless, our Cause just."

"Then what threat can a baby be to you?" she asked simply, keeping her tone carefully neutral, respectful, tentative. Some long-lost instinct told her it was best for this man to look... to feel in utter control, to lead rather than be led. She could feel the eyes of the other shoppers, her companion's among them, on her and she drew some small measure of strength from this.

"None of you is a threat to us. We've made that perfectly clear."

Aislinn shivered, feeling in that moment the utter heartlessness of the soul before her. It was in this that she saw her chance. "We are no threat to you, of course," she agreed readily, there was no going back now, and she knew, with a sudden, stinging clarity that she would survive only if she kept her wits about her. She offered a fervent, desperate prayer for the right words... the words that would save her and the child. "You can take this country by force — there can be no doubt of that. But your Cause will never win the hearts and minds of the people if you kill children."

He tightened his grip on her arm, pulling her forward, his eyes boring into her. "We don't need you — *any of you* — to win this fight."

"No, today you do not," she was quick to agree. "But when the fighting is over and the battle won, you will need ordinary people — people very much like those here to support your Cause or the fighting will never stop."

It was a simple truth, spoken in a moment of utter desperation.

"Listen to her," the leader offered derisively, glancing to the dark garbed men of his force who stood several feet away, silent and watching. Sub-commander Richard Curtis drew himself up to his full height, well over six feet, and his ice-gray eyes bored into the helpless, frightened and exceedingly foolish woman standing before him. She would come to regret this making such a pitiful showing. "Is that the best you can do?"

Aislinn's heart sank, though she made a good show of holding onto her composure. "I ask only for mercy... mercy of the victor to the prisoner."

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There was a glimmer of something indescribable in his eyes as he regarded her, and for a terrible, breathless moment she was afraid her outburst had only delayed the inevitable. Curtis drew his lips into a tight line. “There is much to be decided this day,” he conceded after a moment, glancing to his men before returning his attention to the woman before him. “Very well woman, you shall have your mercy — for the moment at least.”

Relief flooded the room, and she sent him a look of genuine gratitude, “Thank you.”

Ever aware of the watchful eyes of his men, and the need to appear all-powerful before them, Curtis pulled Aislinn forward once more, and she was at once overcome by the smell of gunpowder and blood, sweat and smoke that clung to him. Bristling, she tried to put some distance between them and succeeded only in having his grip tighten painfully on her arm. In the next instant he had taken hold of her chin in one powerful hand, forcing her to look up at him, intent on hurting her. “You will find that mercy does not come without obligation woman.”

She shuddered, forcing her thoughts from the terrors of what those words might mean, steeling herself to remain still and compliant before him. Tiring at last of her submission, he thrust her aside with such force that she stumbled backward, falling hard to the polished floor. There she remained motionless for a few seconds, stunned by the unexpected ferocity of the action. Only when he had rejoined the other men did she dare to try to rise. Those who stood closest moved to help her, their whispered words barely heard as she met the relieved gaze of her protector.

“You took a terrible chance,” he admonished in her ear, though the relief in his voice took the sting out of the words. John slipped a steadying arm about her shoulders, grateful to have her come through the exchange unharmed. “He’d have killed you without a second thought.”

She could say nothing, overcome in that moment by the terrible realization of just how close she’d come to being shot dead. Death was everywhere... yet somehow, through some miracle, she’d escaped. Shivering uncontrollably now, Aislinn felt at once as if her legs would not support her and she leaned on John for support, marveling at the impulse that had compelled her to step forward, to speak out. She’d never stood up to anything or anyone in her life, least of all someone who could kill her without thought or regret.

“I — I know,” she managed at last. “I just couldn’t — ”

She could not go on, and she swallowed hard as she fought to collect herself, to keep her voice from shaking. “He — he’s just a baby.”

Understanding and no small measure of admiration lit the sea green eyes that

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regarded her, and he squeezed her hand.

“It’s a good thing you did,” he said approvingly, curious that he should be so well pleased by the composure she’d shown under such terrible pressure. “But from now on,” he continued, “keep quiet and try to stay out of the way.”

Two

As it happened, she was to have no say in the matter.

Having secured the mall complex itself, and held the arriving police at bay with a barrage of gunfire, Curtis ordered the hostages to move the wounded out of the way, to a place off to the side of the central courtyard. Here, those few who had any vestige of medical training had been pressed into service. Aislinn moved with the others, reaching to help the very mother and child she'd spoken for to their feet. The mother's embrace was heartfelt, and her whispered words of gratitude provided a brief bit of comfort as the trio moved forward.

Once at the appointed spot, Aislinn settled the two where she'd been bid and started back to rejoin the others. As she passed the uniformed men Curtis reached out, grasping her arm to halt her progress. "Not so fast," he snarled.

There was no escape, and she sent a helpless look to John who paused in his progress toward the other hostages. He started toward her unthinking, a part of him intent on taking his place at her side. Another of the men stepped forward then, only too happy to deny him. "Get back with the others."

Curtis' glittering eyes narrowed as he watched John driven back, and his lips curled into a sadistic smile at the thought of the pleasure he was going to take in tormenting her. All the more because it was clearly bothering that irksome bastard who'd made it his business to be at the troublesome baggage's side. "Your powers of persuasion are going to work for me this time." The words carried over the other sounds that hung in the air. He sent John a triumphant look before pushing Aislinn forward toward one of the shops further along the passage, leaving the younger man to fume at the roughness of his handling, knowing that the grip was needlessly tight, the motions abrupt and intended to wound.

Aislinn had no choice but to allow herself to be led along the passage toward a cell phone dealer a few doors down from the central courtyard. Curtis deposited her unceremoniously into a seat behind the polished counter and pushed one of the desk phones toward her. It slid along the smooth surface and she snatched at it before it went over the side of the counter. "What is it you want me to say?"

"Ah, now that's up to you woman," came the amused reply, his icy eyes glittering strangely as they fixed themselves upon her. "The time has come for a statement... I demand an uncensored broadcast of our message. One reporter, one camera, no more — here within the hour.

"You tell them if they try to storm this complex again, everyone within a

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hundred miles will pay — and pay very dearly. You tell them we are united, committed, and ready to lead this once great nation to new heights. You tell them no tricks.” He paused, his silver-gray eyes lit with a steely glimmer as he pulled her forward so that her face was only inches from his. “You tell them we’re not afraid to die.”

She had absolutely no doubt he meant what he said, and she nodded mutely. Somehow she was able to dial the telephone, her voice calm and quiet as she told them who she was and asked for whoever was in charge.

“This is Lt. Wallace. Who am I speaking to?”

She glanced to the commander, who raised his weapon, his steely eyes fixed steadily upon her as she spoke. “This is Aislinn O’Connell, and I have been instructed to convey the demands of my captors,” she began, forcing her attention away from the unwavering weapon, fixing her concentration instead on the words that the older man had uttered with such determination only a moment before. Her voice shook only slightly as she repeated what he had said.

There was silence on the other end of the phone before the calm, professional voice spoke up. “I can’t do that without getting something in return — a show of good faith.”

She knew, without looking, that the commander’s steel gray eyes were boring into her. “What is it you would have?”

“Release the hostages.”

“That’s impossible,” she snapped, not daring to meet the older man’s gaze. She could feel his simmering anger, and she knew with a chilling certainty that her survival depended on how she managed this exchange. She leaned forward, willing the voice on the other end to understand her desperate plight... to comply with her requests. “However, the wounded are seen as a drain of resources. Six of them could be released to you.”

“Can you tell me how many wounded?”

The question caught her off guard. “Under 50 maybe, I don’t know.”

“And the dead?”

Her reply was simple, heartfelt. “Too many.”

“What can you tell me about the group who hold you?”

In a flash, Curtis was beside her, grasping her chin and turning her head so that she was forced to look down the barrel of his gun. She was walking a tightrope between the authorities on one side and her captor on the other, with her survival depending on how long she could retain her balance. She swallowed hard, fighting to stay calm. “I — I am unable to speak for them. Your questions will be answered in good time — when the statement is made.

“What I want you to understand is that — that these men mean what they

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say. This isn't a game or a stunt." Aislinn took a deep, steadying breath, fighting to get the words out. "And if – if you make any further moves against this complex — you, me... all of us... will pay a terrible, terrible price."

There was silence, and Aislinn was at once acutely aware of the cold metal of the gun now pressed firmly against her temple. Her breath stilled in her throat, and she swallowed, not daring to utter a sound or make a move. Silently, reverently, she offered up a final, fervent prayer, taking what comfort she could from this simple expression of her faith. A breathless moment passed, and then another. The speakerphone crackled, the noise over-loud in the tense air. Somewhere beyond a child began to whimper, hushed voices offering whispered comfort. Time itself seemed to hold its breath as the silence stretched on.

"We will comply," came the decision at last.

Overwhelmed, she could barely manage her reply, "Thank you."

There was a pause. "It will take time to get someone..."

Aislinn dared a glance to the man with her, and he glared at her, holding up a single finger, "You have one hour," she said flatly.

"But that's not nearly enough — " The protest went unfinished as Curtis abruptly cut short the call. He lowered his weapon, his tone matter-of-fact as he regarded her with his steely stare. "You did well," he informed her, a mirthless smile touching his lips. "Perhaps I have underestimated you woman."

She could make no response, flooded with such utter and profound relief that it was over... that she was still breathing and feeling. The light seemed brighter, every sound echoing strangely in her ears. For one terrible instant she thought she might faint, though it was pure pride that kept her from that. Still she couldn't hold back the tears that welled in her eyes and flowed down her pale cheeks. She was still whole. Still alive. And in that moment life seemed more precious, more fragile than ever it had before.



Within the hour, a television reporter and cameraman toting equipment had been chosen from the hundreds of willing journalists who jockeyed for the assignment. Briefed with what little information the authorities had, the two stood silent and listening to what they were told, signing hastily provided but all-too-necessary release papers before they would be allowed out from behind the police barricade. If either man had any misgivings about what they were about to do, they give no sign as they stepped into the open, moving with slow, purposeful steps toward the smoked glass of the mall entrance. The two reached the doors in

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a matter of moments, standing there waiting, wondering what to do.

In the next instant the doors were pulled silently back, revealing two heavily armed men who motioned for them to enter. As promised, six of the wounded had been brought to the entrance, and were now pushed outside, with no thought to the wounds they suffered or their ability to move without help. Those who could walk struggled under the weight of those who could not, half dragging, half carrying them out into the parking lot. Firemen and EMT's rushed from behind the barricade into the open lot to help, ignoring the worried, fearful shouts of those around them.

The chaos of the release of wounded overshadowed the smoked glass doors closing with no small measure of finality behind the two journalists, now unseen by those outside. Here any semblance of the world they'd known was ripped away, the pair stopped in their tracks, each enduring a rough and thorough search for weapons. Finding nothing, the two were herded through the lurid destruction of the hallways toward the courtyard where the commander of the force was waiting.

Sub-commander Curtis looked up at their approach, moving purposefully from where he'd been standing watching news coverage on a television some of his men had set up for him. His tone was derisive, as he looked the two up and down. "You will take my statement."

The first of the pair, no stranger to dangerous assignments, was nonetheless shocked by the intensity of the destruction all around him. Ordinary people... a regular Sunday afternoon had been transformed into the terrible, senseless blood and gore of a battleground. And no one knew why. Up close the destruction looked so much more terrible than what he'd seen on footage from the security cameras that still worked... the outside world's only source of information about what had happened. Reality was raw and blood soaked, so real and horrible it rattled him more than he cared to admit. Still he was young, brash and ambitious — telling this extremist's story was his ticket out of weekend's and into a permanent seat at the anchor desk. He reminded himself of this as he stepped forward.

"I'm Erik Kent of KATV — here to take your statement as you asked."

"I don't care who the hell you are. Set up over there."

John stood with the other shoppers, watching the two move off and Curtis return to his place with the other men. At his side Aislinn was numb to it all, unable to think of anything but her husband and her babies waiting and worrying somewhere outside. How she ached for them now. From this her thoughts turned to her mother and father... old and sick and all at once without her. She offered a silent prayer for them, wishing she could do more. And there were the thoughts

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of friends glued to television sets in homes she'd known and loved... watching and waiting for news. It hurt to know she would never see them again. In those moments she knew harsh, unyielding pangs of regret... she'd taken so much for granted... never thinking for a moment that it could all disappear in the space of a single afternoon. And now it had.

"He'll make his statement soon," her companion offered, watching her with no small measure of sympathy. It has been his job to protect people like her from what had come to pass... though it only made him angry to think about that now. Why hadn't they listened? He considered himself fortunate that there was no one outside wondering and waiting for him... no one whose life would be profoundly changed once he was gone.

Her violet-blue eyes moved to where the reporter stood talking quietly with the cameraman. She recognized him at once, the handsome and dashing weekend anchor on the local news. She wondered if either of these two men had a family, parents still alive, perhaps a wife or children, and how they must feel knowing their loved ones had gone willingly into all this.

Curtis had returned his attention to the television and the news reports, intent on the images before him. With a shout, he leapt from his seat, shaking his raised fist to the rest of his men who had been waiting for a signal. In response, they too raised a fist and shouted, victory plain in their faces. The shoppers remained silent, watching the jubilant display and wondering what it might mean.

Moving quickly now, Curtis strode to where the reporter and cameraman stood, "Begin your broadcast," he ordered impatiently.

In the next instant, Erik Kent had transformed himself into the cool, confident newsman the world saw behind the anchor desk. "This is Erik Kent, reporting live from inside the Rockingham Park Mall. As many of you know, a group of heavily armed men has taken control of the complex. There are... there are scores dead, many more wounded. I'm here to take the statement from the leader of the group who control the complex."

At this, Curtis stepped forward, pulling the microphone away from the startled anchorman and taking hold of him in a rough, punishing grip. "I'll take it from here junior." At this, his men snickered, and he tightened his grip on the man he'd now easily immobilized.

"Today is a new beginning — a chance to rid our nation of the terrible cancer that grows unchecked inside it." Curtis paused, bringing his weapon up to rest against the temple of his captive/ "The most vile of these is the press."

There was sudden, raw fear in the newsman's eyes as he felt the gun pressed against his temple. This wasn't supposed to happen this way, and he struggled to keep his composure. "Now hold on... A free press assures a free country — "

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“You jackals assure us nothing, except scandal and ruin.” The older man growled, his finger resting comfortably on the trigger as he glared at the reporter, now held helpless in his grasp. “In the new order, there is no room for your kind.”

Kent tried, now without success, to hide his fear. “My *kind*? But you don’t under — ”

The single shot to the reporter’s temple wrenched screams of terror from those who watched, and a shout from the unseen cameraman. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Hold your tongue lest I make an example of you too,” came the hard, heartless answer, Curtis thrust aside the lifeless form without thought or regret. “Now that you all have seen the lengths to which we will go to achieve our aims, I am authorized to deliver this message.

“Today I broadcast in solidarity with my brothers who have taken up arms all across this great land. We are united in our purpose, to bring down an establishment that no longer serves, that has become corrupt and unjust, pandering to the special interests of the lazy and indolent. Soon there will be a new order — an order in which those of justice and purity will be rewarded — those of impure thoughts or mixed blood will be eliminated.

“All across this great land we stand united — do not test our resolve, but surrender yourselves to our Cause.”

His men, who had retained their positions but turned their attention to their leader while he spoke, sent up a cheer. Curtis nodded, satisfied. “I await word from our comrades-in-arms, and stand ready for a fight to the death!”

“To the death!” came the cheer.



The next hours were harrowing and horrible, the men of the attacking force well prepared, calculating and cruel. The authorities who sought to contain them were, by contrast, inept and halting, scrambling for direction as they struggled to cope with the sheer ferocity of the attacks. In all corners of the country similar forces had moved with lightening speed and an utter disregard for inflicting casualties, whether armed forces or civilians, all were shown the same cold, calculating contempt. The combined assault left the nation reeling and terrified, for no one had ever dared... ever believed it could be done. And yet it had been done. Once invincible, the country scrambled to face down the threat, the unknown yawning before the masses like a great, menacing monster.

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Everywhere people watched and waited breathlessly, televisions and radios always on, ears constantly primed for updates and status reports. Co-workers and neighbors forgot their routines, forgot what seemed so important only hours before, standing instead as one, caught and held by the terrible destructive force of the events unfolding before their eyes. Mothers clutched their children a little tighter, trying for all they were worth to mask the sudden, gnawing fear that had taken hold, reducing them to the most basic of human animals, intent only on survival and protecting their own.

And for those who loved one of the unfortunate souls trapped in the center of these struggles, there was the pain of public spectacle, of not knowing for sure. Instant celebrity brought nothing, the glare of the public eye intruding on ordinary people, depicting in lurid detail the agony of their beloved being ripped from their lives, their hearts. There would be no good-byes, no final moments shared, no eternal love pledged and returned. Somewhere someone had begun to record the names, though the gesture seemed a futile, helpless one.

Beyond the immediate commotion of the scene the streets were oddly quiet, as if no one dared venture out. The few who by choice or profession had to be about were unsettled by the silence, pretending for all they were worth that things were under control, though if pressed they would admit the truth. Families stayed close to home, events were cancelled, stores and schools closed to prevent further attacks, curfews announced and rigidly enforced. Patrols by National Guard troops were everywhere, the machine-gun toting soldiers a welcome reassurance. Differences were forgotten, feuds ended, new beginnings sought and everywhere, the spirit of the masses, long thought lost and forgotten, reared its head once more, as strong as ever.

And all the while the world stood holding its breath, watching...

Three

“I – I’m scared.”

“I know.”

“What will they do to us?”

“Nothing,” he told her truthfully. “We’re their safe ticket back to that camp of theirs.”

“We don’t even know where it is.”

“No,” he shook his head, “we don’t.”

“A – and once we get there?” She had to ask, even though her fears screamed the answer.

Involuntarily he pulled her closer, staring into the darkness as he sought some reassuring words to allay the fears that carried plainly in her question. Truth be known, he had no idea what was to become of them once they arrived at the stronghold that was their destination. They’d traveled for the better part of a day by car, stopping at regular intervals to change vehicles and clothing. The escape, like the attack on the mall complex, had been coordinated, well planned. By now they had slipped through the intense security surrounding the scene, leaving the authorities to pick up the pieces and count the dead. It would be weeks, maybe months, before the true outcome of those final moments would be known, if ever. “It’s hard to say. They’ve got something in mind or they wouldn’t have taken us this far.”

Aislinn shuddered at the thought. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Try not to borrow trouble,” he offered, forcing his voice to carry a conviction he was far from feeling. “We’ve got to stay positive. It won’t be long before the government will launch a counterstrike to root out and finish off these fanatics.”

He could feel her eyes on him. “And you still think they will?”

“They must,” he replied without thinking, his automatic answer far from the fact he was trying to portray. She could not lose hope, neither of them could. Not now. These men were clever, well financed and determined — a real threat. For the group to have managed a half dozen well-timed strikes in strategic, well populated and what had been considered secure locations across the country was a feat that warranted attention. New York, D.C., Chicago, LAX... all had been hit, and hit hard.

The fact that in the end the small bands of well armed, well trained and determined men had been outmaneuvered by the larger government force was

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luck more than anything else. The mistake he knew, would be for the authorities to believe the threat removed, smashed. The rebels had lost little, learned much, and if anything, were more resolved than ever before.

She bit her lip, “But how will they ever find us? We don’t even know where we’re headed.”

She was right, neither of them had any idea where they traveled, having spent the whole journey in the dark of a trunk, or as now, in the back of a van. “We don’t have to know,” he told her. “Things like this are the perfect opportunity for them to put all those fancy satellites to work.” He tried to make his tone light, convincing. She need not know that was more science fiction than the government cared to admit. Rural America was large and rambling, if you knew what you were looking for, and where to look, you’d find it. If not...

Tears burned her eyes, “You heard Curtis back there. He said no one is looking for us because — because — ”

She couldn’t go on and he pulled her closer still, as if by holding her he could somehow protect her from what waited for them at the end of this journey. He did not stop to wonder why it was so important to reassure her, to keep her from giving in to a despair that would surely cripple her. But at that moment it was, and he seized on this with determination. “Don’t,” he cut her off, “we’re not dead yet. And we won’t be — so long as we keep our heads.”

And are very, very lucky.

The thought went unspoken, but it hung there between them.

Without warning the images of their last moments inside the mall rose before John’s eyes. It had been luck, pure and simple, that had protected them from the fatal impact of the final assault by the government forces massed outside. Pushed to the brink and anxious to squash the rebellion, the assembled troops had moved against the complex without regard for the hostages — intent only on crushing the resistance. So they had launched a barrage of firepower and explosives in a frontal assault meant to take out the majority of the rebel force. As it happened, John and Aislinn had been separated from the other hostages, held together in a small, windowless storage room near one of the loading docks. It was this location, far from the initial frontal assault, that had given enough shelter to spare their lives.

John squeezed his eyes shut, unwilling to revisit the jarring images of those moments. Visions of angry red-orange flames racing up walls and over polished floors, devouring everything in their path came anyway. He felt again the crackling dryness of the air as it burned its way along his throat and into his lungs. The force of the weapons being used against the rebels had helped them break through the door at last, and they raced hand-in-hand along the narrow

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passage. Pulling her along behind him, John led the way toward what must be the exit, pure instinct driving him away, always away from the raging inferno that seemed to be growing closer by the second.

It had been that same instinct that had compelled her to move with him from the storage area and out into the corridor. Flames crackled and embers fell, scorching her hair, her clothing, her skin. Everywhere there had been the roar of the fire, and she'd needed no urging to run with him, terror propelling her toward something, anything, and away from the sights and sounds and screams that lay behind. As they caught sight of a door partially blocked by debris, another explosion rocked the building. There had been a searing pain... and then blackness. She'd awoken again in the dark, cradled in John's strong arms, cold and wet.

"I'm trying... It's just — hard."

"I know," he agreed, real sympathy in his voice. He'd spent a lifetime training for circumstances such as this, with no one or nothing to distract him from his work. She had never seen men die, or known true fear for her life. She had a home, a family, friends... a life as far removed from where they were now as it could be. And yet she had not dissolved into panic as some of the other hostages had, instead she'd managed the negotiations with the authorities, endured the injury that had nearly claimed her as they made their ill-fated escape... and now, facing crippling uncertainty, she was still fighting. "It's hard for me too."

Aislinn peered through the darkness, trying to see his expression. Inky blackness met her gaze and she wished with her whole heart that she could see his face. If it weren't for him... her mind would not finish the thought. "You know I — I never thanked you for what you did back there," she said quietly. "You could have been killed."

"But I wasn't," came the droll reply.

This hardly mattered, and she shook her head at him not thinking that he couldn't see the gesture. "Curtis said you could have been out of there... free. That you turned back —"

"He was just trying to get under your skin."

"Even so," she went on, "I — I had no idea what happened — and now, knowing that you — that you could have —"

"Not without you."

The finality of his pledge was like a lifeline that she clung to with all her might. Her life to that point had ill prepared her for the events of the last days, and yet somehow, something deep and long forgotten inside her had come to life. It was this age-old instinct that had recognized the man at her side as one to who

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she could turn... a man to be trusted above all others. And so she had placed her life in the hands of a stranger, a cool-headed fighter who was somehow more familiar than anyone she'd ever known. "I will not forget what you've done John," she said quietly.

He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "I promised to get you out of this and back to your family, and I'm a man of my word. You'll see."

And though she longed to believe his assurance, so bravely... so confidently uttered, she knew that he could guarantee nothing, not now. Still, she hung onto his hand just the same, sitting quietly in the darkness, waiting for what would happen next.



In fact, the rebel stronghold was completely unlike anything they might have expected. Hustled from the back of a nondescript minivan where they'd spent the last leg of the journey, the two stared up at the immaculate two story main house, whitewashed and stately. Well hidden from the main road by a thick grove of evergreens, the house was surrounded by smaller buildings — a single story bunkhouse, a sparkling white infirmary, padlocked supply shed and rambling barn. Although worn, all the structures were well kept, the gardens beyond weed free and brimming with vegetation, the well that stood between the main house and the barracks bore a fresh coat of paint and shiny new bucket.

"Welcome home sir."

The greeting had been uttered by all of the half dozen men who appeared as if by magic to surround the four as they emerged from the van to stand on the gravel drive. Uniformed as the rebels had been, the group was heavily armed, remaining stoic and stone faced under Curtis' unwavering regard. Satisfied by the show of respect, the older man returned their salute with one of his own.

"At ease men," he told them. "All is well Harris?"

"Running smoothly sir."

"And in town? No trouble?"

"None."

"The Commander inside?"

"Yes sir."

Curtis nodded, giving the scene a perfunctory glance. It was good indeed to be home. "I'll make my report at once."

"Yes sir," Harris replied, his speculative gaze moving from his comrades he'd not expected to see alive to the pair of strangers standing by the side of the

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van. "If you don't mind my asking sir — is this — is this everyone?"

"We are alone."

The news hit the men hard, yet they held their composure in a tight, steely grasp. "We have just begun the fight sir — we will have our victory."

"And we will avenge our brothers," another of the men chimed in.

"Most assuredly we will," came the response, the older man's gaze moving from the officer to the two who were his prisoners. His hatred simmered hotly in his veins, for it was they and their kind who had sent him scrambling for his life, and he longed to even the score, to crush them in defeat. Only the promise of final victory could quiet the bloodlust that threatened to consume him.

"Donagan and I must make our report to the Commander," he went on, glancing briefly to his companion before returning his attention to the two captives. Their lives from this point on would be nothing like anything they'd known before, and this knowledge gave him some measure of satisfaction as he continued to stare at them, wondering idly how long they would last. "These two are to be held as prisoners — don't take your eyes off them — especially him."

Instantly, a half dozen weapons were trained on the pair who remained silent by the side of the van. Curtis and his companion moved off, intent on making their report, leaving the two at the mercy of heavily armed strangers with eyes that blazed their hatred. Instinctively John reached for Aislinn's hand. "It's all right," he said quietly, his voice calm, reassuring. "Just stay quiet, don't give them a reason to shoot us."

The men surrounding them snickered at the comment, and Aislinn nodded mutely, her breath coming over-loud in her ears, her heart pounding as never before. Her senses were at once intensely acute, the rustle of the leaves from a summer breeze, the warmth of the sun on her arms, the scent of growing things in the air — she felt them all with a clarity that was almost painful. Her wide violet eyes moved over the scene, seemingly so placid, so normal, yet simmering with all the destructive force of these men. She glanced up to the clear, cloudless sky. They were alone here, truly and completely at the mercy of those who would see them destroyed. The thought chilled her, and she shivered.

She saw the faces of her children, frozen in time, and she ached for the pain they were enduring now — grieving and believing her dead. And her husband... left alone to raise their children, left to wonder at her final moments. They would have no body to bury... no grave to visit on birthdays and holidays. How she longed for just one more moment, one more chance to hold them close and tell them all that was in her heart. To say, "I love you" one more time. They would never know she still lived. They would grieve and move on, leaving her in the past, a distant, painful memory.

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It was in the clarity of those horrible, endless moments that she came to realize how quickly her place in the world would be forgotten. In her thirty-seven years she'd made no mark, left no legacy and would be remembered as one name among thousands. The world would be no different because of her; it would go on as it always had without her.

"Aislinn."

She glanced up, startled by the sound of John's voice.

"Stay with me."

There was something in his tone that brought her from the terrible place she had gone and back to the present. His need for her was almost a physical force, and she could feel it reaching out to shake her from her painful, pointless thoughts. She stared up at him, wanting more than anything to be brave, to be strong. "I — I don't think I can..."

"Stay with me," he repeated, low and earnest as he took both her hands in his own, his grip firm, reassuring, lending her strength. "*Fight with me.*"

The words seemed to echo strangely in her ears, as if somehow she'd heard them an age ago, in some other time, some distant place. A battle had been joined and lost then, though they had not been defeated. Something of this came to her now, and she found she could not look away from him. At once the choice seemed utterly simple —keep fighting or die now, here in the drive of an isolated and imposing main house, It was in that moment that some unseen instinct, long unused and mostly forgotten came to her aid, and she found her answer.

"I will."



The spell was broken by an abrupt gesture from the door of the house, and the two were lead up the wide stone steps and through the imposing front door to stand waiting in a tastefully appointed foyer. It was a large, open space with a graceful curving staircase moving up to the second floor. On one side heavy wooden doors opened into an empty, but impeccably decorated living room, an archway led to a darkened corridor, presumably connected to the back of the house, while on the far side of the foyer there was another set of intricately worked double doors, closed tightly with armed guards on either side. There were fine paintings to adorn the richly papered walls, the sunlight streaking across the subdued hues of the carpet and along the rich mahogany chair rail that covered the lower half of the walls.

At John's side, Aislinn glanced about in some astonishment. "It — it's

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beautiful.”

“The bastards got good taste, I’ll give you that.” John agreed.

“Keep quiet, both of you,” came the order from one of the young men standing guard over them. He was tall and blonde, barely out of school and yet glowering with all the hatred of his peers.

John sent him a level look, though he said nothing, his attention instead caught and held by the appearance of an older woman in the arched opening. Dressed in somber tones as the men were, her graying hair pulled severely back from her face, Mary Bartlett moved with a sort of bearing that commanded attention... a woman who was used to being obeyed. That life had been a struggle was plain in the deep lines of her face; her skin aged golden bronze by years under the sun. There was no trace of feminine softness or vanity in the stern woman who came to stand before the double doors of the study.

“I’m told he wishes to see me,” she said to one of the men stationed there.

“Yes, ma’am.”

The reverence they showed her was plain in every line of the men who opened the doors and stepped back to allow her to pass through. She nodded wordlessly to them, accepting this show of respect with a heavy heart, for now there could be no doubt, no hope that her son would return. Will was gone... lost in service to the Cause, yet lost all the same. And though she’d had time to prepare for the worst, her loss, now confirmed with the arrival of the Curtis and Donagan, cut her with a pain that was almost too much to bear. She was alone now... truly alone.

The guards closed the doors with a single, silent motion, exchanging somber looks. “Will was a good man.”

“The best.”

Aislinn sent John a questioning glance, wondering suddenly which of the men he had been, trying in vain to remember the faces of those who had held them. It was hard to imagine that any of the stone-faced men had someone who waited for them to come home, who loved and was loved in return. And yet there had been one such as this. Unbidden, Aislinn found herself remembering the sweet faces of the young children who’d been held at the mall, and she wondered if there had ever been a time in the lives of these hard-hearted souls when they had been young and innocent, full of dreams and ambitions, pure and good and true.

Several long, silent moments passed before the double doors opened again, a murmured command prompting the guards to motion John and Aislinn inside the study. Moving forward together, they entered the room and came to stand before the massive desk, rapt gazes taking in the man who sat there. He too, was unlike

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anything they might have expected. Silver-gray hair was still touched liberally with black and swept back off a face bronzed by the sun, his strong, chiseled features giving him a look that many would consider handsome. He had an air or command about him... of conviction and certainty that the less willed found hard to resist. It was his eyes, black as night and piercing, that made Aislinn's blood run cold, the intensity of his stare boring into them amid the silence of the room.

"Is this the best you could do Curtis?"

"I'm afraid so sir, the pickings were pretty slim."

The Commander pushed back his chair, rising to his full height, tall and towering as he came around the massive desk to stand before them. Aislinn fought the urge to step back at his approach, steeling herself to remain unmoving as he looked her up and down, his gaze penetrating, assessing. "I'm told you are an ordinary woman."

It was a statement really, insulting and full of spite and she said nothing.

He reached to take hold of her hands, his grip sharp and punishing. "Remove those trappings of your old life." He instructed impatiently, glancing disdainfully at her jewelry. "You will have no need of such trinkets here."

She did as he bid her, slipping her wedding ring, and the mother's ring the kids had been so proud to give her from her hands. Next came her watch and bracelets, and she dropped those into his outstretched hand reluctantly, at once overcome by the loss of her personal possessions, her last links to her home, her children, her life. Once she had thought to pass these on to her daughters, so that they might hold a part of her after she was gone. Now they lay in a heap in a stranger's over-large hand, leaving her hands bare and her loved ones with nothing of her. The thought brought fresh pain, and she looked away, tears welling in her eyes.

"See how she mourns such things," the Commander remarked disdainfully.

"They were all the same sir." Curtis assured him. "All about things... not knowing their place."

The Commander nodded, depositing the treasured keepsakes on the desk with a clatter and turning his attention to John. "And you... What's your story?"

John met the look squarely, showing no fear though he knew well his life, and Aislinn's, rested squarely in this man's hands. "Just in the wrong place at the wrong time I guess."

"He was carrying this." Curtis put in, tossing the identification he'd taken from John on the desk. "Says he works for the IRS, if you can believe that."

"He sure has a cool head for an accountant." Donagan added, coming to stand at Curtis' side. "He got himself, and this troublesome baggage out in the nick of time, just before the whole place blew."

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The Commander gave the worn identification a quick glance before tossing it atop the jewelry and returning his attention to the young man before him. "Quite the hero aren't we Mr. Starke?" He questioned mockingly. "I'd hardly expect that from a good-for-nothing hack like yourself."

"I'm glad I could surprise you."

John had tried, but was unable to mask the disdain he felt for these men, and the blow he received in response was sharp and quick, sending him flying backward to fall hard in a heap on the floor. Aislinn cried out, rushing without thought to his side, reaching to take his arm and help him to a sitting position. He rubbed his jaw, pain slicing along his jawbone though he sent her a reassuring look.

"I'm all right," he told her quietly.

"Get up, both of you."

They rose together, Aislinn keeping a hand on John's arm, her wide violet eyes moving to take in the Commander who had returned to his place behind the massive desk. "You will find Mr. Starke, that you get on much better here if you learn to show respect for your betters." The older man paused, his tone thick with warning. "Your insolence will not be tolerated."

"I understand."

The Commander sent Curtis a steady look, "We will proceed as planned for the moment," he told the second-in-command. "Keep him under lock and key until he is ready to swear the oath."

Curtis wanted nothing more than to kill the traitorous bastard standing before him and be done with it, though he knew this was impossible, for the moment at least. The Commander had his reasons for keeping the prisoner alive, and his place was not to question this... at least not now. His eyes flickered dangerously, though his tone was mild enough. "With pleasure sir."

"As to her," the Commander paused, glancing to someone standing until that moment unseen against the back wall. "Mary, I'll leave it to you to handle this one." He indicated Aislinn with a wave of his hand. "See that she learns her duties, and her place."

The older woman stepped forward. "It shall be done sir."

"Do not take any lip from her Mrs. B. — she's a smart-mouthed little baggage." Curtis could not resist adding, his disdainful glance taking in the wide-eyed woman now firmly in Mary Bartlett's grasp.

"That will not be a problem for me." She assured him, her cold, assessing gaze moving over the frightened woman who stood wild eyed before her. Weak and likely of very little use, she wondered how she'd even get a day's work out of her... though she looked healthy enough, if a little soft. Mary regarded her

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charge with all the contempt due those of her kind, primed and pampered, unable to fend for themselves or endure the rigors of life without convenience.

Aislinn felt the breath catch in her throat, and she clutched at John's arm for one last desperate moment before Mary pulled her away. His sea green eyes found hers, and the rest of the room was forgotten if only for an instant. John said not a word, yet she could almost hear his voice, calm, reassuring, urging her to hang on. And it was this, and this alone, that stayed with her as she was ushered from the room into the jaws of a harsh and terrible existence from which there could be no escape.

Her ordinary life shattered in a brutal attack by well armed revolutionaries, Aislinn O'Connell comes to rely on the steadying influence of undercover agent John Starke who must use every skill at his command to keep them both alive.

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