

Chapter One

Gideon

“There’s no one I trust more than you, Blake. I need your help.”

Trust the senator to get right to the point. I step into the small office and close the door, shutting out the clink of glasses and loud conversations of the Double Tap bar. My business partner, Derek, is sitting behind the desk with his boots kicked up and his tattooed fingers laced behind his neck.

Two years ago, we were in the same combat unit and discharged out together. Within a month, we’d relocated to New Orleans and started Citadel Securities. We now own the building, Double Tap, and Arcane Brew, the coffee shop next door.

Derek’s eyebrows raise, silently asking why I’m using his office for a call instead of going to the Citadel office on the floor above.

I would have, but the phone rang right after I came downstairs to check inventory on some gear and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I didn’t recognize the number, but I knew I needed to take the call.

“How can I help you, Senator?” *And how the fuck did you get my personal cell number?*

The older man gusts out a heavy sigh and I hear what sounds like a chair creaking, as if he sat heavily in it. “There’s an important vote on the hill two days from now. It’s supposed to be top secret, but clearly word has gotten out.”

“In my experience, the best way to let everyone know what’s going on is to label something top secret.” Especially where the government is concerned. Damn bunch of chatty hens.

The senator chokes out a strangled laugh. “You’re probably right.”

I've only met the man once. Six years ago in Afghanistan when we rescued him and a few of his aids from insurgents. They'd taken Mayfield and the others hostage for four hours before my team infiltrated and freed them.

"I pride myself on voting by my principles, Blake, which often makes me unpopular on either side of the aisle. The pressure on this vote is tremendous. All I can say is that it involves spending for national defense. Party lines are split, which leaves me and another senator as swing votes." The phone rustles, and when he speaks again, he sounds tired. "Someone got wind of the vote. This afternoon, I received what I'm told is a very credible threat. If I don't publicly admit that I'm voting against the bill, they will kidnap my daughter. The FBI has a few leads on who could be behind the threats, but can't narrow it down in time."

"Damn."

"I know you're no longer in the service, but I also know what you did for me and my aids that day. I just learned that you are in New Orleans, which is a godsend. Amber's in college there. I need you to pick her up and protect her before..." He clears his throat and when he speaks again, his voice is strained. "Before something happens to her."

"So you don't intend to make a statement?" I need to be clear of his intentions.

"I won't surrender to terrorists. But I can't risk my daughter's safety. Please, Gideon. She's my only child."

"I'll take care of it personally. No one will get near her." I'm already running through a list of preparations and alternative plans. "Where can I find her?"

The relief in his voice is palpable. "Her last class ends at five p.m. She usually goes home to study after that. I'll text you the details and tell her you're coming. Keep me in the loop."

"The fewer who know, the better, sir. Trust me. If you get any updates from the

kidnappers, call. My man, Derek, will get the information to me.”

Derek glares at me.

I shrug. He’s here and the others aren’t. He gets the job of go-between.

He shakes his head and flips me off.

The silent communication buoys my mood. We went through hell and back during the years we served together in Delta Force. There are few men I trust more. Despite his denial, I can count on him.

The senator sputters in anger. “Amber is my only child. I need to know she’s safe.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and reach for patience. Can’t blame a man for being afraid for his daughter. “I’ll keep her safe. Notify my office once the vote is complete and I’ll bring her home.” That seems to mollify the man, and we finalize the last few details.

“Senator?” Derek asks after I’ve disconnected the call.

“Remember Congressman Mayfield? We pulled him out of Afghanistan when his goodwill tour, or whatever the fuck it was, went sideways?”

He snorts and reaches for a cup of coffee I hadn’t noticed on the desk. Double Tap’s office has just enough room for the desk, filing cabinet, and a couple of chairs. The French doors leading out to our private courtyard are its best feature.

“I remember.” Derek sips his coffee. “They shouldn’t have been there.”

There’s no arguing about that. “It’s Senator Mayfield now. Someone’s putting pressure on him to vote against some top-secret security bill. They’ve threatened his family.”

A muscle in Derek’s jaw twitches, and he runs a hand through his auburn hair.

The look on his face reflects the fury in my gut. We both know how this could end. We’ve seen it far too often, both in the service and as civilians once we started Citadel. I have to

get to the senator's daughter in time. If the kidnapers grab Amber first, she's as good as dead.

Derek turns his troubled gaze on the courtyard. "They'll never stop, will they?"

"No. That's why we do what we do." My phone trills with an incoming text. I open the screen, expecting more information from Mayfield about his daughter and her habits. Instead, I spot the name of an old friend from high school who now works with my sister. I almost ignore it, but Trish never contacts me. It's odd enough to make me check the message.

Trish: Gideon, I gotta talk to you about Harmony right away. Call me.

Dammit, I don't have time for this. I type out a quick reply, certain this can wait. I love my sister, but Harmony has a knack for seeing the world as one big, beautiful place and worrying the shit out of everyone who knows it's not.

Trish's reply is instant.

I dial her number.

An hour later, my truck is packed and ready, yet I'm stuck here, waiting for my buddy Caleb. I check my watch for the fifth time in ten minutes and try to calm my racing heart.

I hate this. My sister is in trouble and I can't do a goddamn thing about it because I just committed to the senator that I would personally guard his daughter. I could send someone else to protect Amber, but if anything went wrong, and he was forced into a vote he clearly doesn't want to make, the lives of tens of thousands could be affected.

There's no good decision here. I grip the back of my neck. My only option is to send Caleb to help Harmony. We grew up together in a tiny mountain town in Montana. He spent more time at our house than his. If I can't be there for Harmony, Caleb's the next best thing. I have to believe that sending him will be enough to protect her. Anything else is unacceptable.