
Chapter 1

Special Agent Alastair Riddick stared at the man sitting opposite him, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. How the hell had he found himself in this situation?

"I know what you're thinking, but this isn't something that can be dealt with in the usual way," retired Commissioner Denver said, his strong nose and defined features barely hinting at the age Riddick knew him to be. "I've come to you because I need your help, not to be judged."

Riddick ground his teeth together, struggling with the information he'd been given. "Commissioner—" Riddick replied, only to be cut off by the older man's gruff voice.

"Not anymore, son," John Denver said, his raised brows testing Riddick's patience.

"Mr. Denver," Riddick began again, "I understand how concerned you must be, but what you're suggesting is completely illegal." John rolled his eyes, fucking rolled his eyes, at Riddick. It was all Riddick could do to hold his tongue, since the older man would probably put him in his place, were he to speak his mind. "Listen, John, I don't seem

to be getting through to you. There is no way I can infiltrate a military run facility that my own government commissioned, to retrieve an asset who is already under Australian federal protection."

John cocked his head, his jaw clenching with what Riddick could tell was barely controlled anger. "You don't understand," John said, puffing out his chest, "if you think I can let this go, then you don't know me very well."

"And if you think that I'd go blindly into a mission that could cost me my badge, then you don't know me, either."

John sighed, realising Riddick wouldn't be bullied. "Very well, but I was hoping to avoid this." Riddick scoffed, astounded at his former commissioner. He waited for the man to explain, determined not to agree to anything until he knew what was going on. "Do you remember my daughter, Augustine?" John asked, his light blue gaze piercing Riddick's own.

"I do," he said, although it had been years since he'd seen the girl. John nodded, pushing a hand into his hair, and Riddick noticed a wetness to his dark lashes. It wasn't like John to show sign of weakness, especially in front of one of his agents.

"When Augustine turned thirteen, she began showing interest in applied sciences. I couldn't have been prouder since my daughter was finally coming into her own. Then, by the age of fifteen, I realised that she had an uncommon aptitude for nuclear fission. You can't understand what it means to realise that you're the parent of a gifted child, one the world would want to use for all the wrong reasons. It's the same reason that I hid her."

Riddick stiffened, completely blown away. Whatever he'd been expecting, it wasn't this. "You hid your daughter from the government?" Riddick asked, not even sure he wanted to know about this.

"Yes, I pulled her out of school and moved us away," he

confessed. "I fudged her grades and continued home-schooling her, until she was seventeen."

Riddick felt his jaw drop, his fuzzy mind picturing the young girl who'd always averted her gaze whenever he'd visited her home.

"I know exactly what you're thinking," John said, crossing his arms over his chest. "And you'd be right. I was being completely paranoid. But I still did it to keep her safe."

"Why didn't you just integrate her?" Riddick asked, wondering why John had gone to such lengths. "Surely, she could have had a normal life without all of the subterfuge."

John pushed his hands through his hair, and this time the white strands were left in a spiky mess. "I kept her out of the public eye, since I knew what would happen if they saw how brilliant she was. I had to restrict her internet access and teach her how to fake her results just to keep her under the radar. But in the end, none of it mattered anyway. The poor kid was given an IQ test during her finals in high school, one that I hadn't known about. It wasn't long before she was picked up by the Australian government, her results having reached our army intelligence and secret services."

Riddick listened carefully, his heart heavy for his ex-boss. "I guess that was when you retired," Riddick said, not really surprised when John nodded.

"Forcibly retired, it was my punishment for hiding such a significant asset." The last was said with a bitterness that Riddick could fully understand. "She was gone, and I was removed from my duties and never allowed to see my daughter again."

"And now you want me to break her out?" Riddick asked, his hackles rising at the thought of Augustine being mistreated.

"I don't think she's in any immediate danger," John said, his tone hard. "The government completed her training then

turned my daughter into something she was never meant to be. Augie may have been a distant child, but her sense of right and wrong have always been exact. Now they send her on dangerous missions and make her build weapons for the good of the country." John's lips thinned sourly. "If that wasn't enough, they've turned my girl into some sort of assassin, killing people to help their cause."

Riddick clenched his jaw, hating how much John had suffered. But he knew he was being the devil's advocate when he said, "Maybe she's okay with her new situation? I mean, you did say she wanted to work in that sort of field—"

"I know my daughter," John growled, his anger resurfacing. "And I won't let you tell me otherwise."

Riddick raised his hands in defeat, facing the older man. They were sitting in John's living room, his Victorian house set on many acres. The position offered privacy needed for their conversation and Riddick wondered how long it had been since his former boss had left his home.

"So, how do you plan on breaking her out of the stronghold?" Riddick asked, making his decision.

"I speak to Augie once a week," he said, "it's all they allow. A few years ago, Augie and I worked out a secret code, in case something like this ever happened. She told me during our last conversation that she needed to get out, that they were going to make her do things she didn't want to do." Riddick pondered this, realising that if he were in John's place, he'd want to act on his daughter's behalf as well. "If I were younger, I'd go myself," John said, sounding desperate. "But I can't, so I need you, Alastair. I'm asking for your help to save my daughter."

Riddick ground his teeth together, his instincts driving him to offer protection. It was something that always landed Riddick in trouble, no matter how hard he tried to keep himself out of other people's business.

"Where are they keeping her?" he asked slowly, knowing that he'd agreed to one crazy plan.

Augustine used the back of her hand to wipe across her sweaty brow, her movements precise as she fixed the wire to the detonator inside the metal casing. This type of military weapon was still in its prototype stage, and Augie was fairly sure it was the only one in existence.

"For fucks sake, Denver, we're not paying you to waste our time," her commander barked, his features twisting with anger. Augie had been hired to build weapons for her government, but most of the people here knew that cooperation was forced.

"I'm attaching the detonator now, Senior Constable," Augustine murmured, avoiding eye contact as she calmly completed her task. She knew better than to piss off her ranking officer, especially this one.

"And that means shit to me," he barked, his aggression towards Augie something she was quite used to. "Just get the job done so I can go home."

Augie ground her teeth together, not bothering to point out they'd removed her from her own home at barely legal age, to force her into a military academy without her consent.

"Yes, sir," she replied, ensuring that the connection was in place, before sliding the metal plate closed. Senior Constable O'Riley grunted once, then turned on his heel and headed for the exit.

"I expect to see you at o-seven hundred, Denver," he snapped as he reached the metal doors. "I want that thing coded and ready to launch by noon."

Augie stood to attention, her back stiff as she waited for the Senior Constable to leave. Once the doors swung closed, she breathed a slow sigh of relief. She'd dragged this farce out

for far longer than she'd thought possible, but now she was running out of time. There was no way she'd been able to delay the completion of the weapon, not when her bosses kept bringing in other physicists to check on her progress.

"Fuck my life," Augie groaned, collecting her tools and leaving the main floor. The guards stationed at every exit didn't so much as glance at her as she made her way towards her quarters. Augie knew most of the personnel here believed her to be unpatriotic, and therefore beneath their notice. The walk back to her barracks was short, and Augie breathed a sigh of relief when she entered her room. Placing her items carefully on the bed, she completed her usual routine, scanned the room for bugs, then collected her pyjamas and entered the small bathroom.

Once she closed the door and checked every surface, Augie twisted on the shower and stripped out of her clothing. Even with her delays and countermeasures, the bomb had reached its final stages. Tomorrow, Senior Constable would make her arm the prototype, and Augie would have to sit back and watch as the damned thing took lives for the good of their country.

"Well, fuck that," Augie growled, her movements precise as she thoroughly scrubbed her body then rinsed off. She would die first before she allowed something she'd created to harm an innocent person. Once she was finished, Augie turned off the shower and collected her towel. If her communication with her father was correct, then she would be getting the chance to escape this prison tonight. If not, well, then Augie would just have to go with her own plans to stop the violence, using any method possible.

Dressing quickly into her comfortable pyjamas, Augie pulled a frozen meal from her icebox and placed it into the microwave. She didn't know what her father had planned, but she'd make damned sure she was ready for him.

"Riddick, my man," Brax greeted, high fiving his friend as they made their way into the spacious office. Riddick had rung 'McCallister and Westworth' private security the previous evening, telling Brax that he needed an urgent meeting.

"I have to say, I was a little surprised to hear from you," Brax said, completely at ease. "What's up? Has your new girlfriend been cheating on you or something?" he asked, half joking.

"No, mate, I'm all good in that department," Riddick said, not bothering to tell Brax that it had been a long time since he'd had a girlfriend. He'd learned a long time ago that he wasn't really relationship material.

"Okay, well, that's good news, I guess," Brax said, leaning back into his office chair. "So, what can I do for you?" Riddick glanced around, wondering if they were completely alone.

"Is Sarah here?" he asked, deciding he might as well talk to them both.

Brax furrowed his brow, peering closely at Riddick before calling out to Sarah. The woman in question strode into the room, her steps decisive as she gazed at them expectantly. Riddick nodded, aware that his friends were probably wondering what the hell was going on with him.

"I have a job for you," Riddick said, his stoic expression hiding his nerves.

"We kind of guessed that," Sarah said, her usual snark drawing a chuckle from Brax.

"Yeah, well, I need your help and it needs to be officially off the books," Riddick said. "I have to infiltrate a secure facility and retrieve a potentially at-risk asset," he told them both, pausing as they stared at him, wide-eyed.

"I don't know if you noticed this, mate, but Sarah and I

are running a legitimate business," Brax said, prompting Riddick to raise his hands in a gesture of defeat.

"I'm not trying to coerce either of you," he said. "This isn't a trap or—"

"Really? Because it sounds a lot like entrapment," Brax cut in, his frown deepening.

"You know I would never do something like that to you!" Riddick argued, his own anger rising. "Besides, if I wanted to arrest you for breaking the law, I could have done so a number of times before now."

Brax worked his jaw, while Sarah put a hand on his arm, steadying him. "He's right," she said, eyeing Riddick. "So, why don't we wait and hear what he has to say before we make any decisions?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Brax demanded, staring at his girlfriend incredulously. "I'm not taking you on any jobs that could put you in danger."

Sarah rolled her eyes, perching on the edge of Brax's desk. "So, tell us, what's this mission?"

Riddick tried to cover his laugh at the way Sarah took charge, but the look on Brax's face told him he wasn't fooling anyone. "The Australian Government is holding my ex-commander's daughter," he said, relaying the entire story John had told him.

"And what does that mean exactly, that they're going to make her build a weapon against her will?"

"From the sounds of it, she's already built the thing," Riddick replied, the seriousness in his tone giving them pause.

"And you believe this ex-commander of yours?" Sarah asked, obviously suspicious of the circumstances.

"I believe that his daughter doesn't want to go along with her government's plans. If we fail to retrieve her, I think she may try to take matters into her own hands and the outcome could be much worse."

Sarah and Brax shared a look, then Sarah spoke. "So, what do you need?"

"I have a plan on how to infiltrate the stronghold. My ex-commander has access to its blueprints. It seems he still has some friends left in our organisation."

Riddick spread out the plans on Brax's desk, indicating a point of entry. "The facility was built around a major wetland, within central Victoria. They have almost infallible security, except for the filtering system that runs between the building structure and the neighbouring marshes."

Brax frowned, eyeing the vents Riddick was pointing to. "Why the hell would they add such a wide filtering system?"

"Because the Australian government built their secret facility smack bang in the middle of an endangered species' natural environment. Meet the Painted Snipe water bird," he said, pointing to a small photo of a red, grey and white striped bird, its dark eyes surrounded by a ring of white feathers.

Sarah tilted her head, a slow smile spreading over her face. "So, the almighty Australian government are forced to add those huge filters to protect the endangered birds?" she asked, her eyes twinkling.

Riddick nodded, glancing back to the carefully displayed plans. "Yes, they are, and we plan to use it against them," he said.

Augie lay quietly in her bed, her breathing slow and even. She'd followed her routine to the letter, even reading a book before bedtime, then retired at precisely nine o'clock that night. If her father planned to make his move, Augie knew that she needed to be ready, without rousing suspicion. The sound of voices outside her room made Augie stiffen. The

Senior Constable had stationed guards by her door tonight, another indication of the mistrust between them.

"She's supposed to be super-hot," one man said, his deep chuckle sounding cruel through the closed door. "I'm just saying it might be nice to get a look at her, before they move her to her next post." Augie bit her lip, wondering if they were already planning to move her to another location.

"Yeah, well, I hear she's a trained killer," the second man said, his tone much less interested. "Before they had her building bombs, they had her running ops with our own special forces. The woman is dangerous."

"If that's true, then why are we guarding her? Surely, she'd be able to overpower us if she wanted to." Both men chuckled, obviously not believing the rumours they'd heard.

"I don't know about that, man, but I do know that Senior Constable said she's not to leave her room tonight, for *any* reason."

Augie waited silently, listening for more snippets of information. Unfortunately, the two men seemed to have fallen quiet, adding to her frustration. When a small sound eventually echoed outside her room, Augie knew that it had finally become time to move. Sliding out from the covers, she reached under the bed and retrieved her duffle bag. Then, stalking to the doorway, she pressed her ear against the wood panelling and listened carefully.

"What was that?" one man hissed, his movements jerky from behind the door.

"It was probably nothing," the other man said, although Augie could hear the worry in his voice. "We should stay here; the others will probably investigate." Augie waited until both men stopped talking, her hand tight on the doorknob.

"What the..." one of the guards barked, before Augie swung the door open and launched herself at the men. With a sharp elbow to the temple, she stunned the first guard before

swinging around and grasping the second guard's rifle. Pulling his weapon free, she launched a closed fist into the man's face, then twisted to connect that same fist into the throat of the other guard.

"Are you Augustine Denver?" a man asked, his voice muffled by his ski mask. Augie nodded, watching as both men dropped to the floor, before repositioning her duffle over one shoulder.

"Did my father send you?" she asked, waiting for his nod before waving for him to follow.

"We have to get out of here—"

"Not yet, cowboy," Augie said, lifting the rifle into position as she stalked in the opposite direction.

"What?" the man barked, his footsteps close behind her.

Augie stifled a grin at his question, continuing to lead the way. But the hand that landed on her arm had her rethinking her good mood. "Get your hands off me," she hissed, determined to finish what she'd started.

Instead of letting her go, the man's grip tightened. "Listen, lady, it's my job to get you out of here, not risk my own life while you take matters into your own hands."

Augie rolled her eyes, shrugging out of his grip. "And you listen to me, cowboy. I'm not leaving this compound, not until I've disabled that bomb. So, if you want to leave me here, that's fine, but I'm not leaving until I've done everything I can to prevent a catastrophe."

Augie continued down the corridor, her back to the man who'd just infiltrated a government run facility to help her.

Riddick ground his teeth together, flanking the woman in front of him. When he'd studied the blueprints to this facility, he'd found that the mess hall led to her private quarters. Apart

from that, Riddick hadn't studied the plans for any other particulars. A mistake on his part, since he now had no idea where this woman was taking him.

The lithe figure in front of him pointed two fingers to her eyes, then back to a door she neared, indicating that he keep watch while she worked. Riddick followed silently, waiting as she entered a code before carefully pulling the door open.

"Hey, who's—"

The words were cut off as Augie burst into the room, plugging a bullet into each guard, before moving over to a large metal bench and opening her bag. "Watch the door," she ordered, as she began immediately unpacking her duffle bag with the tools she needed.

Riddick watched in fascination, staring as the woman pulled out a power tool and began drilling open the missile.

"Riddick?" Brax's voice asked over the microphone in his ear.

"Yeah, I'm here," Riddick replied, pinching the small device on his sleeve to speak.

"Where the fuck are you? We need to get out of here, like now."

"Augustine has to disarm a nuclear weapon," Riddick replied blandly, glancing back to where she'd connected a port inside the metal casing and was entering codes with her portable keyboard.

"We won't have much time before we're found out," Brax growled, sounding urgent.

"I know, just give us five more minutes," he replied, hoping that it would be enough time.

"Fine, five more minutes, then we're out of here," Brax said, the click of his mic ending their conversation.