



# DELIBERATE HARM

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# CHAPTER 1

Was this how Imma had felt before she died—helpless and afraid? Portia Marks scolded herself for allowing her thoughts to wander into the past. She needed to concentrate on the present and join the crowd of people hurrying toward the hotel exit. She began to run, but her legs were wobbly, as if made of bendable rubber rather than solid bone. Worse, an all-too-familiar pounding in her right ear, caused by the blare of a fire alarm, made her feel disoriented. She pressed her hand against her bad ear, but the pounding was stubbornly relentless.

The lobby's red carpet and white plastered ceiling, with its ornate gold trim, somehow melded together into a slowly spinning tunnel. Only the Roman columns stood upright, not defying gravity.

Someone tapped her shoulder from behind.

"IIIIIIII...heeee," a man said.

Who was he? She hoped he was a doctor who could help her regain a sense of balance. She painstakingly turned around to face him, trying to keep her dizziness somewhat in check. Her eyesight, nonetheless, betrayed her. The man appeared as a giant who oscillated in and out

of focus; even so, she could make out a few features that stood out.

He had a muscular build that only came from hours in the gym, and at six foot two, he towered over her five-foot-eight frame. Smartly dressed, he wore a round-collar dress shirt, sports jacket, and pressed trousers. His shoes, though, were a black blur. The shape of his face defied her, but his handsome cleft chin stood out with utter clarity. She only knew one person who had that chin.

“Thank God it’s you, Altan,” she said. “I’m dizzy. Can you get me out of here?”

“Donttttt...wo...yyyy. I’ll...hhhhhhhhlp yyyyyouuu.”

“Speak slower. I can’t understand you. My ear is acting up.”

Altan opened his mouth to respond, but the whirring screech of the fire alarm ended as quickly as it had started. A welcome silence reigned.

Portia inhaled with great effort, as though the air were razor thin. She shut her eyes, trying to will away the vertigo that had upended her. *Just breathe*, she told herself, *just breathe*. After several seconds, the hammering in her ear subsided to a tolerable ache. She lowered her hand and looked around.

Altan stood perfectly still and was now visible in twenty-twenty focus. The hotel lobby was stationary, no longer swaying back and forth like a tugboat on high waves. The throng of previously anxious guests now walked calmly and

chatted among themselves. Some even started to laugh, in what was surely a release of stress.

“Everything’s all right, Portia,” Altan said. “There’s no fire. It was a false alarm that sounded in one of the hotel’s restaurants. When are you having surgery on your eardrum?”

“Next week,” she said. “In the meantime, I’m supposed to avoid loud noises. I should’ve brought my earplug with me, but who knew a fire alarm would go off during our fundraiser?” Now that she felt almost herself again and the scare was over, she could redirect her thoughts to what mattered—the lackluster turnout at this event to raise money for the Zimbabwe International Relief Program. “When Ben asked me to be one of the speakers, he said they had sent out over two hundred invitations, but the audience was rather small.”

He nodded. “Only seventy-five people.”

“That’s disappointing.” Her voice, normally of powerhouse volume, was faint. She pretended to look around, but she was really trying to hide the unhappiness that misted her eyes.

“You’re looking pale.” His high forehead creased. “Do you want to sit down?”

“That’s a good idea, but let’s go someplace else.”

“Where?”

“How about a nearby bar? I could use a drink.”

“Are you sure? Maybe we should do coffee.”

“Maybe, but let’s not. This fundraiser has made for a difficult night. I’d like to relax. Come on. One drink is no big deal.”

Altan watched her closely. “All right,” he finally said. “My favorite bar is just down the street on Michigan Avenue, not far from here.”

“Is it quiet?”

“Yes, and it has the best cosmopolitans in Chicago.”

“Perfect. Let’s go.”

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Altan was essentially right. His drinking hole of choice, which was darkly illuminated with 1920s-style lighting, was for the most part quiet. Four young bruisers, out for the time of their lives, belly-hugged the bar and slugged down beers as if they were in a drinking contest. At a small table for two, a balding man in his fifties talked rapidly to an attractive red-haired woman who was ten years his junior. Like a teenager on a first date, he stared intently into her eyes, which were emphasized by generous strokes of black eyeliner.

Portia cozied herself into a booth that had a window overlooking Michigan Avenue. The heavy rain, which had poured down on the city as if from buckets, had stopped. A trickle of pedestrians, all clothed in winter jackets and hats, chose to combat a frosty wind that whipped the street with unbridled power. The only brightness to the late

evening were green and red Christmas lights that hung from the buildings across the street.

Altan sat across the table from her and leaned forward. “How’s your cosmopolitan?” he asked.

“It’s excellent.” His worried stare troubled her.

“How’s the ear feeling?”

“As long as there’s no fire alarm, it’s fine.”

“Good.”

Altan drank his bourbon as if it were water. He set down the glass, the light in his amber eyes disturbingly dim.

“Altan,” she said, “what else did Ben tell you about—?”

“Those bastards hid the IEDs well,” he muttered. “All three bombs just blended into the damn Iraqi sand.”

A bitter cold embraced her. Looking down, she bit her lower lip. She didn’t want to dig up the past. Yet, flashing before her was a very real nightmare—the lifeless bodies of army soldiers, one with his legs blown off, and the motorcade’s lead vehicle consumed in yellow and red flames, as though it were a log in a fireplace. She twirled her shoulder-length brunette hair in her fingers. “Our mission that day was a simple escort of the lieutenant general and Iraqi officials,” she said. “One bad—”

“Stop blaming yourself.” Altan’s voice was stern. “Nothing was ever simple in Iraq. Nothing.”

“That’s true.” Portia drank her cosmopolitan. How much better if it were straight vodka, she thought.

“That was over two years ago,” he said. “Did the IED explosion cause your ear disorder?”

“My doctor doesn’t think so, but he can’t say with certainty.”

“What does he think is wrong with your ear?”

“I’ve been diagnosed with Ménière’s syndrome.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“It involves an excess of fluid in the inner ear. I’ve tried various medications, but nothing has really worked. My doctor thinks surgery can decrease the fluid and promote more drainage.” She sipped her cosmo. “I’ll be good as new after it’s over.”

“Once you get the operation behind you, you can return to work and get on with your life.”

“Maybe, but I’m not sure I want to work for the security and protection company anymore.”

“Are you kidding me?” Altan’s eyes widened. “You’ve always loved doing protection work. This private company was perfect for you. You traveled and worked big events.”

“Things change.”

“Come on, Portia. This is old Altan you’re speaking to. Once you start working again, you won’t have—”

“Time to think about Imma?” She glanced at her left hand. She still wore the canary gold engagement ring engraved with interlocking hearts that Imma had given her the night they confessed their deep love for each other and decided to marry. “That’s impossible, don’t you think?”

Altan straightened his posture until he appeared as stiff as a cement column. “A normal routine will keep you busy.”

“I know,” she said.

“Imma was a wonderful combat doctor. She saved...well, she saved those of us she could.”

“I know.”

He leaned forward. “Okay, I know you know, but she’s not with us anymore. Let her go. Move on with your life.”

“You’re right. I just need more time.” Portia crossed her legs. She wasn’t in the mood for a quarrel, particularly a senseless one. She had already made up her mind to pursue a different line of work. Protective services wasn’t her calling anymore. Besides, the job reminded her too much of her former life with Imma, and that caused an unbearable ache that afflicted her entire body. “What did you think about my speech tonight?” She hoped he’d take the bait to switch the topic. “I’ve given it so many times that I’m afraid it’s boring.”

“What?” Altan’s voice rang with shock. “Your speech was wonderful and touching. You’re one of the main reasons ZIRP has been able to raise any money this year.”

“Maybe.” She pretended to savor her drink, unsure of how to say what was really on her mind—Ben was a disappointing failure. Yet, she couldn’t put it like that, since Altan had recommended him for ZIRP’s highest position. She’d need to use tact, which wasn’t her best

attribute. “I don’t feel good about the job Ben’s been doing as the executive director.”

“So you heard,” he said.

*Good. He didn’t seem offended.* “Heard what?”

“It sounds like ZIRP won’t be around much longer given the downturn in the economy. Donors aren’t giving like they once did. Tonight’s poor showing is proof.”

Altan’s bad news splashed over Portia like ice water. The sad chill, however, was quickly replaced by the image of a young boy, no older than twelve, being treated by Imma in a medical clinic in Zimbabwe for injuries he’d suffered in a vehicle accident. He sat on the edge of a table wearing only soiled shorts. He stared at Imma with quarter-size black eyes. She wiped his brow and half-smiled. “You’ll be fine, little man,” she’d told him with the voice of an angel.

What had happened to that boy? Portia couldn’t remember. She took a deep breath, wishing she knew how to save ZIRP. Sadly, her mind became an uncomfortable blank, but one she was accustomed to experiencing. She drank her cosmopolitan. What else could she do?

“Are you all right?” Altan slipped his hand through his thick brown hair. “I wish I hadn’t told you about this.”

“I’m glad you did,” Portia said, not sure if she meant it. “ZIRP has been around for years. The number of Zimbabweans ZIRP has fed and provided medical care for is countless.”

“Unfortunately, this global depression has hit everybody’s pocketbook, including those rich and faithful to the Zimbabwe cause.”

“I understand.”

He nodded but remained silent. Finally, he said, “You should talk to Ben about what’s happening at ZIRP.”

“I will,” she said.

“He needs all the help he can get to keep the organization alive.”

“Nothing lasts forever. Not a damn thing.” She pictured Imma’s silky short hair, black as the night sky. She remembered how Imma stared at her with that sad smile. She guzzled the last ounces of her drink and then grabbed her wool coat from the bench seat and stood.

“Where are you going?” Altan asked.

“Home.” Portia’s throat was suddenly parched for stronger liquor. She had a bottle of aged Russian vodka in her apartment’s kitchen cabinet calling her name. “It’s been a long evening, and I’m exhausted.”

“Do you remember what you said in your speech tonight?”

“I said a lot of things.”

“You said you became a ZIRP volunteer to honor Lieutenant General Carlson.”

“Volunteering was the least I could do. He was a wonderful man, who was passionate about helping his parents’ home country.” Portia sighed. “My decision that day in Iraq cost him his life.”

Altan rolled his eyes. “You also said that the Zimbabwe economy was in such distress for five years that it experienced hyperinflation. During that time, a loaf of bread—”

“Could cost in the millions in Zimbabwean dollars. The government blamed US sanctions for its economic problems, but regardless, the people suffered, and they still suffer. Assistance from organizations like ZIRP is vital.” She spoke rapidly, and her normally strong, even-keeled voice jumped an octave too high. “Why are you repeating my speech to me? Don’t you think I know it?”

“Of course you know it, but you’re not taking it to heart.”

That remark punched her in the gut. “That’s not true.”

He lowered his head, as if he knew he’d gone too far. “You’re right. I apologize.” His voice was kind, even gentle. “What I’m trying to say is that the people of Zimbabwe need you more than ever. They need you in a leadership role with ZIRP, not just in a public relations role. If you’re not returning to a career in protective services, which I hope you reconsider, you’ll need to do something else. Why not—”

“I have been doing something.”

He lifted her empty glass. “I’m not referring to this.”

Portia toyed with the lapel of her wool coat. If only he didn’t know her so well. “I don’t want ZIRP to fail,” she said, “and you know that. It’s just been a long evening.”

Altan stood and faced her, his jaw tightly clenched. “I know you don’t want ZIRP to go down,” he said. “I just care. Let me drive you home.”

“Thank you.” Portia gently kissed his cheek. “But my apartment isn’t far from here, and I need the walk. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“No, of course not. You’ve always supported me, even when I may not have deserved it. I’ll always be grateful.”

She turned and left before her dear friend could respond.

\* \* \*

Portia’s journey to her apartment through the unkind cold of Chicago lasted only a few hard-fought blocks until she finally gave up. Hailing a taxicab was the warmest way to get home. Chicago was, in the end, not a city for wimps. She stood on a street corner with a handful of people who were all wrapped in layered garments and waiting for the crosswalk light to turn green. Unfortunately, no cabs were in sight.

“Ms. Marks, your speech tonight was wonderful.” The male voice danced with the hint of a British accent. “It was informative and inspirational. In fact, before I left the hotel, I donated money to the ZIRP cause.”

“Thank you,” Portia said, turning to face him. She wished his kind words made her feel better, but the news of

ZIRP's financial hardship had gripped her with sadness. "The charity could use every penny it can get."

"Yes, I'm sure. Times are tough everywhere and will probably get worse, if the economists are right."

"Well, I hope they're wrong."

A freezing wind powered through the night, slashing Portia's cheeks with the sting of a metal blade. Without hesitation, she lifted the collar of her coat tightly around her neck and stared at the stranger.

His hair was hidden underneath a fashionable beanie that covered his ears. The frosty night had reddened his otherwise fair complexion. His angular face with sharp features, from his long nose to his pointed chin, gave him a tough, no-nonsense air. The noticeable lines around his eyes and mouth suggested he was in his late forties, perhaps early fifties. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other in what was surely a useless exertion to stay warm.

*Is he a businessman?* she wondered.

He wore leather dress shoes and a long wool coat that bundled his five-foot-ten body. And he had a confident air about him, as though he were a CEO of a large company.

"Thank you, again," Portia said. "Your donation will be well spent. Have a nice evening." She started to turn toward the crosswalk, when the man reached out and gently touched her arm. She stiffened, disliking the invasion of privacy from a stranger. Still, he was a ZIRP donor, so she forgave his boldness.

"I've been to Zimbabwe," he said.

"Really," Portia answered. At this point, she only wanted to be in the warmth of her apartment, sipping a glass of Dovgan. "Were you doing humanitarian work?"

"You might say that, yes." His brown eyes with specks of yellow, so unusual and transfixing, veered downward.

Portia's question was only an attempt at politeness. Why did he give a roundabout answer? She checked her wristwatch. It was late, almost midnight. Her patience was now withered, and she didn't care to engage in a conversation with someone who was pushy and odd. Plus, it had been a long night of emotional memories that made her long to be with Imma again. But there were no redos in life, only regrets.

The crosswalk light mercifully turned green. A herd of pedestrians walked toward the other side of the street.

Portia started to join them, but the stranger again grabbed her upper arm, this time with more force. Instinctively, she tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let go. *ZIRP donor or not*, she thought, *he's gone too far*. "Do you mind?"

"Oh, sorry." He released his grip. "The part in your speech about Dr. Imma Thoms was quite moving. So sad that a caring physician who volunteered for ZIRP would be imprisoned on false charges during a humanitarian mission. The world is mad, isn't it?"

"I suppose."

"Is she here?"

The bizarre question fluttered Portia's stomach with butterflies. This guy was a nut. "Dr. Thoms was executed after her escape attempt from prison failed," she said. "Her body was never found."

"That's right." He winked at her, as though he knew a secret they both shared. "That is what you said tonight."

"I said it, because it's true."

"I understand, but I'm a friend. You must believe me. So tell me. Did Dr. Thoms make it to Chicago?"

*This guy isn't just a nut, she thought, he's a persistent, scary nut.* "I'm afraid Imma—I mean Dr. Thoms—" She didn't want to anger him, so she decided to select her words carefully. "Isn't with us—here with us, on this planet with us, anymore. I hope you understand, but I'm tired and need to go home." She looked around in the hope she'd spot a crowd she could slip into and dash off with.

The knot of pedestrians, though, was long gone, and no one else was nearby. Cars only sped by at a whooshing pace. Making matters worse, the crosswalk light had flipped to red.

"You don't trust me." His eyebrows pinched together.

"What do you mean? I don't know you."

"I helped Dr. Thoms and Chessa escape." His voice radiated with certainty and confidence.

"What are you talking about? Who's Chessa?"

"Chessa Marsik. You really don't know who she is?"

"Mister, I really have no idea what you're talking about."

“I see.” He studied her intently. “So they haven’t come to Chicago, at least not yet. Otherwise, you would know about Chessa, and you appear to be telling the truth.”

“Of course I’m telling the truth. Why would I lie?”

“We must work together.” His face was the picture of sternness. “Before I left them at the camp in Zimbabwe, Dr. Thoms told me about you. She spoke highly of you. She said you were a hero, a US Army PSU agent specializing in protective services of upper brass and dignitaries.”

“That’s right. I was with the US Army Protective Services Unit, but I also talked about my background in the speech I gave tonight.”

His forehead wrinkled, as though he were thinking very, very hard. “She said that you love chocolate chip cookies.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“With white wine?”

Her heart skipped a beat. “How could you have talked with Imma about me?”

“It’s a long story, I’ll grant you, but I knew her. She’s a lovely, intelligent, and talented doctor. She’s alive. I’m sure of it.”

“Imma and this other woman—”

“Chessa. Chessa Marsik.”

“Right. Ms. Marsik. I don’t know anything about her, but as to Imma, all the evidence and intelligence showed she was executed for trying to escape from prison.”

“Yes.” He flashed a brief, but gleeful smile. “But they can be easily fooled sometimes. I’m sure Dr. Thoms will try

to contact you. I thought she and Chessa had made it to Chicago, but perhaps they're still in Zimbabwe. If that's the case, they're in grave danger."

"Grave danger?"

"I'm afraid so. This bloody mess is my fault. Will you help me find them?"

Before she could respond, a dark-skinned man with cornrow-braided hair that fell just above his shoulders wearing a knee-length, heavy coat and boots, approached the stranger from behind with the quiet and sneaky cunning of a lion about to pounce on his prey. He flew through the air with amazing agility for his beefy body. He bear-hugged the stranger around his midsection. They plopped on the sidewalk in a heap of outstretched arms and legs. Leaping to his feet, he picked up the stranger and carried him toward the street.

The stranger, whose feet didn't touch the ground, struggled against the attack. His blows, however, were uselessly limited to hammering his foe's shoulders.

Portia held her breath. She'd wanted to be free of that oddball, but what if his story about Imma was genuine? What if Imma had managed to escape? As she watched the tussle advance toward the middle of the street, quivers of unease ran up her spine.

The heavysset man slammed the stranger onto the pavement, face up, and kicked the stranger's stomach with a ferocious wallop. He glanced down at his fallen prey for

an instant and then strode to the sidewalk where he stood several yards away from Portia.

“You bastard!” The stranger clutched his midsection and struggled to his feet. “How did you find me?”

“Just trying to help the lady.” The heavysset man made no effort to hide his mocking tone.

A car engine revved and boomed like a clap of thunder, causing Portia to cup her bad ear with her hand. A white Cadillac SUV raced toward the stranger with ever-increasing speed.

“Look out!” she shouted.

The oncoming car was only a few yards away from the stranger. He began to run, but the vehicle struck him, causing his body to catapult into the air. He dropped like an anchor onto the SUV’s hood and rolled off.

The driver, a white male with short, cropped hair and an elongated nose, kept his eyes glued ahead. His expression was disturbingly calm, as though he were simply commuting home. He never slowed down but instead sped away with appalling haste.

Portia’s jaw dropped. The driver had to have felt the impact. *What an icy bastard*, she thought. She slowly lowered her hand, grateful that her bad ear felt fine.

The heavysset man remained on the sidewalk and gawked at his victim with a perverted smile that almost gave Portia the dry heaves. She realized he wasn’t a Good Samaritan trying to help her; he was a damn killer who

enjoyed his depraved victory. Finally, he ambled away and disappeared into Chicago's underbelly.

Portia's heart pounded like a war drum, while a stream of hot adrenaline rushed through her body. She turned toward the street.

The stranger was still lying face up, appearing to stare at the black sky. Fortunately, there were no cars, not yet.

Was he playing some sick game, or had he been honest? Was Imma somehow alive? But that was impossible, wasn't it? The CIA had confirmed her death. Yet, what if they were wrong? What if Imma were alive, and this oddball was the only person who could find her? She dashed into the street and knelt beside him.

The stranger's eyes were open, but his breathing was labored. Blood oozed from the back of his head, and he had an ugly gash on his cheek. The most noticeable injury, though, was his bent right leg, which was surely broken. If he had any chance of survival, he needed medical attention right away.

"You'll be all right," she said. "Just keep breathing. I'll call 911."

"There's no time," he said. "They've finally gotten me."

"I don't know what's going on, but I won't let you die." Hesitating, she asked, "Have you told me the truth? Is Imma alive?"

"Yes. They're after her and...Marsik...my...fault."

Shoving her hand in her coat pocket, Portia pulled out a cell phone.

“Don’t waste the minutes.” He reached up and feebly held her wrist.

“You’ll get through this. Don’t give up.”

“The People’s Revolution is after them. They won’t be able to hide forever. They need help, but you can’t trust—”  
A dark fright clouded his eyes.

“What are you talking about? I can’t trust who?”

The stranger didn’t answer. He’d lost consciousness.

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# DELIBERATE HARM

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