

DANGEROUS GAMES



NIKKI ROSE



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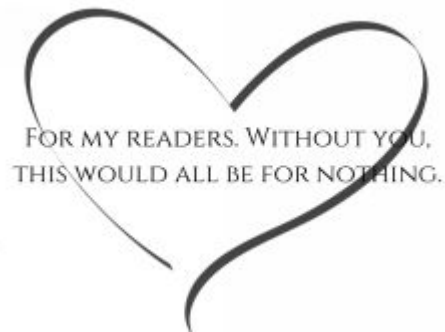
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Chapter 1

The moment Jaxon opened the door in his perfectly fitting jeans, no shirt, and bare feet, it was on. A guy like that set my body on fire.

“Jax.” I gave him a seductive smile as my eyes met his.

“Hi, beautiful.” His sexy little smile told me he knew exactly what he was doing to me. I was sure it was written all over my face.

“Hi,” I breathed out. I wanted him and by the way his gaze raked over my tight jeans and low-cut top, the feeling was mutual. Jaxon brushed back the auburn locks from my face and tucked the loose strand behind my ear before pressing his lips to mine.

One thing I loved about spending time with Jaxon was that we never wasted time with a bunch of small talk. He backed up, giving me room to close the door behind me.

He grabbed my ass with firm hands and lifted me as I wrapped my legs around his waist. I could already feel his erection pressing against me. My back slammed against the living room wall, and he ground his hips against me. He broke the kiss, pulled his chest from mine, and practically ripped my shirt over my head.

He kissed me hard and carried me to the back bedroom. Jaxon tossed me onto his bed. I landed on my back and sat up on my elbows to watch as he stripped off his jeans exposing his black boxers underneath.

My chest heaved with excited breaths as I watched him crawl onto the bed between my legs. His hands were quick to unfasten my jeans and I lifted my hips as he slid them down my legs. He carelessly tossed them on the floor without even breaking his stare.

He leaned over my body, pressing his chest against mine with only my tiny emerald green bra and panties between us.

“I've missed you.” His husky voice reverberated against my neck as he kissed his way around my collarbone.

My head dropped back and I moaned out a similar response.

Jax continued kissing down my body, pulling the cups of my bra down to expose my breasts. He let his lips and tongue explore my body, teasing each little bud until they tightened into peaks. He moved down my stomach, kissing and licking the whole way. My body shuddered as he kissed along my panty line. He pushed the thin lace and satin aside, teasing me with his tongue until I was nothing more than a writhing mess.

He lifted his mouth from me and I could feel his warm breath on my wet skin as he spoke. “We really should get together more often.”

“Yeah,” I breathed out, still trying to remember my own name.

“I have a family trip coming up next month. I'm going to visit the parents on the coast.”

“Oh. Okay?” I tried to fight back the confusion and frustration in my tone. I didn't want to talk about his plans to see his parents. Hell, I didn't want to talk at all unless it was me screaming out his name as he made me come again.

“I'm going to miss our time together while I'm gone.” He kissed my inner thigh.

“Yeah me too.”

Jaxon and I had been hooking up like this off and on pretty regularly for months. It was far from a relationship. It was mostly sex, sometimes sharing a meal between sessions while we both recuperated, but nothing more. I *would* miss our time. He was fantastic in bed — and on the floor, and in the shower, and on the kitchen counters.

“Maybe you should come with me?” He asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“Come with you?”

The lust-filled haze was completely gone. I sat up again on my elbows to look down at him.

“Yeah, why not?”

He sat up on the bed between my legs and I knew the moment was lost.

“Jaxon, you know I enjoy our time together but this between us...” I motioned my hand between us to reiterate. “This is all we can be.”

“You want to be free to sleep with other guys, I get that and I’m okay with that. Shit, it’d probably be a turn on to watch...”

“No.” I had to shut that down. “I’m not into that.”

“If having you as mine means having to let you spread your wings now and then, I’d be okay with that, as long as we had an honest relationship.” He gently stroked up my leg which usually turned me into a puddle of my former self but not today. Today, panic rose inside me as I felt the cage door about to slam shut.

I jerked my leg back, hiding the reflex by sitting up and crossing my legs on the bed. “Listen, you are great — amazing even. I’ve enjoyed what we have but I’m not looking for anything more. I don’t want a relationship. I just like hooking up with you.” I hated to be so blunt but anything else wouldn’t work.

“I just...God, how’d I become the girl in this relationship? Hailey, I think I love you.”

And there it was. The death sentence for what Jaxon and I had. As much as I hated it. I knew what I had to do.

“I’m sorry. I can’t. That’s not what this is for me.” I moved off the bed and he rose to follow me as I picked up my jeans from the floor and slipped them on.

“Don’t go. Let’s have something to eat and talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. I’m not the *dating* kind. I’m just not. I thought you understood what I wanted and what we had.”

“I did. I just thought...we’ve been seeing each other for —.”

“Sleeping together.” I stopped and turned to him from the open bedroom door.

“What?”

“We haven’t been *seeing* each other. We’ve been *sleeping* together.” He looked so hurt at that moment. I hated myself for letting it get this far. “I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

I hurried into the living room and found my shirt. I barely had a chance to pull it over my head before I was reaching for the front door. I didn’t like hurting people. I always made it clear with the guys I got involved with that I was only interested in having a good time.

Chapter 2

“Drew did more than break my heart. He shattered it. He shattered me.” I'd been heartbroken before but Drew Caraway's form of destruction had left my heart broken beyond repair. “I'm happy you found love, I am. But, it's not for me and I don't really want you setting me up, especially not with Liam. We're friends.” I sat across the table from my best friend at our favorite little bar and took a sip from my wine glass.

“I'm not saying this will be love, I'm just saying, Liam, is a nice guy. I've seen you guys flirt. Maybe you could give it a shot. You can't keep having these flings forever.”

“I appreciate the thought, Becs, I really do, but no. Love isn't in the cards for me. Relationships lead to expectations and those lead to getting hurt. I'd rather just have fun and be free to hook-up with whichever hot guy catches my eye. Like the one over there by the bar.”

I inclined my head toward the smoking hot suit at the bar and took another sip of my wine while Rebecca subtly turned to steal a glance.

“Oh, he is gorgeous.” She whispered as she turned back around. “I just don't get how you don't want to find love.”

“You've always been the romantic and that worked for you.” She raised her brow as I spoke. “I'm not jealous of what you and Jason have. I'm glad you found someone.”

She smiled fondly at the mention of her husband and sipped her wine. “I just want you to be as happy as we are. I want you to be open to the idea of love again.”

I sighed and shook my head. “I'm happy as I am. At least I am when we aren't talking about this.”

“Okay, I'm sorry. I'll drop it.” She raised her hands in surrender.

“Thank you.”

“You know I only nag you because I care.”

“I know. So, how is my favorite guy in the world?”

“He's wonderful. Growing like a weed though. I can't believe he's almost a year old already.”

“I can't wait to see him and kiss those little cheeks again.”

“You're coming to the party tomorrow, right? It's mostly going to be Jason's old marine buddies so I need you there to save me from the shop talk.”

“Wouldn't miss it.”

The next evening was Jason's promotion party. I was only going to save Rebecca from being bored out of her mind surrounded by men talking about their old missions. That and I wasn't totally opposed to the idea of being surrounded by a large crowd of muscled men.

I walked into the living room filled with several men, all in suits like some kind of secret service convention. I spotted Liam, Jason's good friend, and the only familiar face I saw in the whole place.

“Hey, where's the host and hostess of this shindig?” I stood close to Liam and nudged his shoulder.

“Hell, if I know.”

Movement from the direction of the kitchen caught my eye. Jason led Rebecca into the living room, followed by a few other men who looked very similar to the ones already filling the room. They stopped in front of the large stone fireplace that acted as the focal point.

“Hello everyone, thank you all for coming,” Jason spoke in his authoritative voice that spoke to the man's ingrained leadership skills. “As you all know, this past mission was my last among the ranks. And, I couldn't be prouder of the men who I had the privilege of serving alongside all these years. And, it has been an honor to work side by side with many of the other teams represented here tonight.”

“I am excited to be taking over as team leader. They are some very large shoes to fill, but as my wife can contest, I am a man with big feet.” Jason winked and glanced at Rebecca who blushed furiously and the rest of us let out a chuckle. “My promotion has created a vacant spot in our team and I am excited to announce that my old friend and someone I had the pleasure of working with years ago has agreed to join us. He has been awarded for his combat as well as his undercover work which helped to recently take down a certain drug lord that I'm not at liberty to name. Let's hear it for Andrew Caraway...”

Drew? The sound of clapping was drowned out by the blood roaring in my ears. A rock sunk in my stomach and I couldn't breathe. I looked toward the kitchen and to an older version of the man who had broken my

heart five years earlier. Jason put his arm around Drew and shook his hand as darkness closed in on my vision.

“Hailey? Hailey, you okay? You don’t —.” My legs wobbled under me and Liam wrapped his arm around my waist to hold me up. “Shit, girly. Let’s find you a place to sit down.”

He led me to Rebecca’s reading chair near the window and I plopped into it, resting my head in my hands.

Drew. I can’t believe it’s really him. The ache in my chest was like an elephant weighing on me. Old emotions flooded back in and all I wanted to do was curl up into a ball. No one had ever broken my heart the way that man had. I stayed in bed for a week and cried. I had to tell everyone I had the flu.

A flood of images rushed through my mind. Drew lifting me into his arms, kissing me. Laying on a blanket underneath the stars as we waited for the meteor shower, then missing most of it because we couldn’t keep our hands off each other. Drew’s hands running wildly over that skank in the bar as she straddled his lap in that skimpy little hot pink top and black mini skirt.

“Hailey, what happened?” Rebecca’s panicked voice brought me back.

You are not that same weak girl anymore. You are stronger now. I looked up to see him rushing over to me with shock and concern on his face but all I could feel was a wave of burning anger rising in my chest. I shot up out of my chair.

“Hailey. It’s really you. Are you —?”

My hand made contact with his face with a loud echoing crack. Pain radiated all the way up my arm but I didn’t care. It felt good.

“What the hell?” He stared at me with disbelief and the room went silent as everyone stared at us.

“Hailey, what’s gotten into you?” Rebecca grabbed my arm and tried to pull me away.

“How dare you? How *dare* you?” It wasn’t clever or snippy. My brain was still short-circuiting from seeing the man I never thought I’d lay eyes on again.

“My study. Now.” Jason ordered in a low growl.

He led us to his study and closed the door to the large room made smaller by Jason, Rebecca, Liam, Drew, and myself. “Someone better start

explaining what the hell is going on. This was supposed to be a celebration.”

“Ask *him*.” I bit out in Drew’s direction.

“We used to date and things ended...badly.”

“Well, that's the understatement of the century.” I shot back.

“Andrew...you mean this is *Drew*?” Rebecca glanced between us in shock as she connected the dots.

“Well get over it. That's been years ago and you two need to act like adults. Now I need you to both go out there and act civil. Can you do that?” Jason scolded us like we were siblings fighting in the back of the car.

I was embarrassed by how I acted. I was better than that. I was stronger than the girl Drew cheated on all those years ago. I felt like an errant child. “I can. And I'm sorry, Jason.”

“Good now let's go back there and pretend this whole thing never happened.”

I passed Drew without a second glance and left the room with my head held high. I wouldn't lower myself for him.

We walked out to the party and immediately all eyes turned to us. I tried my best to ignore them. Once they saw that Jason was acting like nothing had happened, they all followed his example which I was grateful for. I never wanted to see Drew again. I just need to get through this party.

“You okay?” Liam nudged me and offered me a drink.

“Yeah, I'll be okay. It's just...”

“Seeing him threw you, huh?”

“Gee, what gave you that idea?” I rolled my eyes and bumped Liam’s shoulder.

“You wanna walk outside and get some fresh air?”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

Liam and I walked past Rebecca to the French doors that led out to the back patio. She smiled and squeezed my hand in a show of her support before I slipped away.

Outside, I could finally breathe easier. I plopped down on the bench and held my head in my hands.

“I can’t believe you slapped that guy.” Liam chuckled as he took a seat beside me.

“I'm surprised that's all I did.” I straightened and looked at Liam with no humor in my eyes.

“What happened between you two anyway?”

I gazed out into the dark yard but images in my mind moved like a movie reel. “Drew and I started dating in high school. We dated for two years. He graduated a year ahead of me. Don't laugh but... I thought we were going to get married.” I glanced at Liam, waiting for a sarcastic remark but none came. I wouldn't blame him if he did. Me thinking of marriage is kind of funny considering how much of a commitment-phobe I'd become.

“One day in my freshman year of college, he said he had to work late so I went out for drinks with a couple of girlfriends. There was this local bar that never carded and we were so close to twenty-one by that point they didn't bother. When I walked in the bar, he was sitting at a corner table with a girl straddling his lap kissing on him.”

“Damn, what did you do?”

“I turned and left. I couldn't even think about it. I was so upset.”

“You never confronted him?”

“I was a lot different back then. I was head over heels in love with him and it took me by complete surprise.”

“So, you mean to tell me you never suspected anything?”

“No, never. He always seemed so loyal. I mean, he worked a lot and sometimes strange hours.” Liam gave me a look

“I know, looking back it seems so obvious.” I hid my face in my hands again and Liam wrapped his arm around me.

“I'm sorry you had to deal with that. I know it can't be easy but I have to say things make a lot more sense now.”

“What makes more sense?”

“Why you are how you are with relationships. That guy really messed up your head — and your heart.”

“Nah, he made me stronger.”

“He made you more guarded. You put walls up to keep anyone from getting close enough to hurt you the way he did.”

“Can you blame me? Why would I want to go through all that shit again?”

“I don't blame you. I'm just calling it like I see it. And, I worry that you're going to end up missing out on something great because you're too afraid.”

“Now you're starting to sound like Rebecca.” I teased.

Rebecca peeked her head out the slightly opened French door. “Hey, just wanted to let you know everyone left. They wanted to hit their old drinking spot before it closed for the night. Did someone mention my name?”

“Just that Liam is starting to sound like you.” I smiled. “I think he needs to lay off the steroids before his manhood shrinks up too.”

“Hey, my junk is more than adequate. Say the word and I’ll prove it.” Liam jumped up and reached for the button on his jeans.

“Oh God, no.” I grabbed his wrist to stop him but was laughing so hard I almost fell over.

“What did I walk out to?” Rebecca laughed and shut the door leaving us laughing like a couple of nut jobs.

Once Liam and I found our senses again, we went inside and helped Becs clean up from the party. Liam walked me to my car and I went home with two of my favorite men — Ben and Jerry.

Chapter 3

Friday morning, I found myself with less of a hangover than going to a party usually allowed but I felt worse. The memory of seeing Drew walking across Jason and Rebecca's living room was still running through my mind.

God, he looked so good. Even better than when I'd last seen him in that bar years ago. When Drew and I had dated he was gorgeous. Fit, strong, a boy next door look with mischief in his smile when he looked at me. But, now — now he was muscular, his shoulders and chest were broader, his midsection smaller. His jaw was chiseled and hard. It stung my hand for an hour after I'd slapped him. His face was no longer clean-shaven but rough with prickles from his five o'clock shadow. All the details had come back to me as I'd tried to fall asleep the night before. All the details my overloaded mind couldn't see when I'd been face to face with him.

I had to get Drew out of my head. Even after all these years, that man affected me in a way I no longer wanted. I'd come so far. I wouldn't go back. With how things ended with Jaxon, and the incident with Drew, I needed a new fling — someone I could pick up at a bar, go back to his place without even exchanging names and screw until my brain cleared again. I didn't think like most women. I accepted it and prided myself on it. Guys didn't get hurt the same way women did, not usually. That was because women wear their hearts on their sleeve where it could get bruised and broken but not me. No, I kept my heart locked away in a secret vault where no one could reach.

As much as I loved going out with Rebecca, my best friend was now married with kids which meant she wouldn't make the best companion for what I needed. Most of my friends were married or in committed relationships. If I wanted a new fling, I'd be going it alone, which was fine with me. I didn't plan to hang out too long at the club anyway.

During my lunch break, I sat at my desk perusing local hotspots online to pick my hunting ground for the night. My usual place wouldn't do. It had become stagnant with regulars and I was looking for something new and exciting.

It seemed I was in luck. I clicked on a news article about the grand opening of a hot new club about an hour away. It was farther than I usually

went for a night out but this would ensure I wasn't surrounded by all the same guys. I wanted fresh and it seemed like the perfect answer. I punched the details into my phone for later and went back to work with a new determination to finish early so I could get ready and have time for the hour-long cab ride.



My cab pulled up in front of the club a little before ten.

"Damn," I whispered to myself as I gawked up at the three-story building with bright spotlights moving along the front and a red carpet rolled out like we were part of some celebrity event. Two large men in tight black collared shirts marked with Security in bold white letters guarded the doors with clipboards. It was then I worried that I might not be able to get in at all.

"Is there something wrong, ma'am?" The cab driver's voice pulled me from my thoughts.

"Just not sure they'll let me in."

"A knockout like you? I'm sure they'll let you in."

"Here's an extra ten, stay here until you see that I get in, please?"

"Of course. Have a good night." He took the money and I climbed out of the cab, smoothing out my shimmering gold, curve-hugging dress before walking toward the shorter of the two lines which moved quickly, most being turned away.

It was finally my turn. I straightened my back, pushed out my breasts and watched as the security guy's hungry gaze roamed over my body. "Go on in, beautiful."

I smiled at him and let out an internal sigh of relief as I walked through the doors. I was shocked when I finally got a glimpse inside. It looked like a strip club and night club had a love child. Dance poles and cages peppered the deep red walls, some on lifts and some hanging from overhead. None of the girls on them were naked though. A few of the girls were obviously hired pros but others on the lower stands were plain Jane club-goers having a go on a pole or dancing in a lower cage. The dance floor was packed and flashing red and white lights added to the chaos.

"This place is amazing," I blurted out to myself.

"I'm glad you think so," a deep voice with a thick Russian accent came from over my shoulder.

I turned to see a man probably in his early forties, sexy swept black hair with just the tiniest bit of silver along the front that didn't make him look old but distinguished. I'd never been into older guys but as far as one-night flings go, I could definitely get on board with this guy. His strong jaw and broad stance radiated power, authority, even slight intimidation. He was just what I needed to get my mind off of Drew and Jaxon.

"I am Mikhail." I realized I'd been standing there silently staring for way longer than was socially acceptable but I put on my most confident smile before introducing myself.

"I'm Hailey."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Hailey." I loved the way my name rolled off his tongue as he lifted my hand to his lips and pressed a soft lingering kiss against my knuckles. I could imagine that move had earned him more than a few one-night stands of his own. Lucky for me, that's exactly what I was looking for.

"The pleasure is all mine." I used my most seductive tone, dripping with innuendo.

"I guarantee, there will be plenty of pleasure to go around before the night is through." *Oh yes. It's going to be a good night.* "Would you care to join me on the VIP balcony for a glass of champagne. From there you get an excellent view of the entire club."

"You have access to the VIP balcony?"

"One of the perks of owning the place. Come." His hand rested on the small of my back, as he firmly led me to a hidden staircase that took us to the balcony.

The balcony was more like a full room that overlooked the club. It had a large wrap around couch and a stripper pole-mounted in the corner for what I assumed was his private dances. Mikhail moved straight to the minibar and took out one champagne glass and one shot glass. I watched curiously as he pulled out a bottle of champagne and another of Tsarskaya Gold, vodka. *Russian, of course, he's drinking vodka.* He smiled as he carried the two bottles and glasses to the coffee table where a beautiful glass chess set acted as a centerpiece. I wondered if he played or if it was only for show. A club seemed like an odd place for a board game.

"Do you play?" He looked at me curiously and I nodded my head toward the game on the table.

“Yes. Do you?” His eyes lit up with a tiny spark of enthusiasm but I shook my head.

“I never really had a reason to learn.”

“Everyone should learn chess.” He inclined his head toward the couch, signaling me to sit. I lowered myself onto the soft leather couch and he followed, turning his body to face me.

“Everyone?”

He nodded. “Chess is much different than other games. Sports like football, they require physical strength but that’s something anyone with a gym membership can acquire and other games are simply a matter of luck, but not chess. Chess is like war or love. To win, a person must know how and when to make his move. When to sacrifice and when to strike. It requires intellect, instinct, and the ability to determine what your opponent is going to do before he has even decided for himself.”

Mikhail had a real passion for chess, that was clear. I’d never heard anyone talk about it the way he did. I’d always pictured some scrawny guys in thick-rimmed glasses sitting around playing when they couldn’t get a date on a Saturday night. But the way he talked about it with that deep menacing undertone made it seem dark, almost dangerous.

He didn’t speak as he poured me a glass of champagne and himself a shot of vodka. As he handed me the glass, I raised my eyebrow at him.

“How come you get the good stuff?” I said boldly as I nodded at his shot.

He blinked and looked at me with a blend of surprise and intrigue, “My apologies.” Mikhail handed me his shot which I lifted to my lips without breaking eye contact until I tilted my head back, draining the glass.

He took the glass from my hand and poured another shot which he took in a similar manner. “You are different from other American girls I have met.” He smiled seductively and placed his hand on my knee.

“You have no idea.” I placed my hand over his and dragged it up my thigh, watching as his eyes widened with surprise. I had a feeling this was a man who wasn’t surprised often and yet I’d managed to throw him off twice now. It was intoxicating.

He reached his other hand to cup my face, his thumb running over my lower lip before leaning in for a kiss. I closed my eyes and leaned in only to have the moment shattered by another voice equally as Russian.

“Boss, the guy you’ve been waiting for just arrived.”

I expected Mikhail to get angry at the interruption or at the very least annoyed, but I opened my eyes to see him smiling. He put his index finger up as if signally this would only take a moment, then pressed it softly to my lips. I kissed his finger and he smirked at me before turning his attention to the man.

“Bring him in.”

The red privacy curtains opened and in walked two Russian men in dark charcoal gray suits. They parted to make way for the man they escorted in. For the second time in a week, I felt like all the air had been sucked from the room. *Drew. What the hell was he doing here?* Drew must have had similar thoughts but he chose not to keep his quiet when his gaze landed on me and his jaw dropped.

“Hailey? What the hell are you doing here?” He pushed past the men and stormed toward me.

“I could ask you the same thing.” I challenged.

“You two know each other?” Mikhail asked, looking between us.

“You could say that. Can I speak to you — alone?” Drew snapped.

Mikhail turned from Drew to me. “Why don’t you give us men a minute to catch up?”

“Yeah, sure.” I forced a smile, but tension filled the air. I stood and smoothed out my dress, casting Drew one last glance before I walked through the curtains.

I leaned against the wall at the top of the stairway and struggled to hear their conversation. I had to know what they were saying.

“What is all this about?” Mikhail demanded.

“What was she doing here?”

“It’s a club. Women come here all the time.”

“So, she’s not one you brought here?”

“No, though I was in the middle of sealing the deal when we were interrupted. Do you want to tell me how you know her? I’ve never seen you get so riled up over a woman, Andrew.”

“She’s just someone from my past I’d rather not see again.” *Ouch.* It wasn’t that I particularly enjoyed seeing Drew either but to hear him say that hurt. Besides, if anyone had the right to not want to see the other, it was me. “Could you do me the courtesy of not pursuing her? You know it’s not something I usually ask. I just really don’t want to see her again. Maybe ban her from the club or something?”

The nerve of this guy. How dare he try to get me banned from the club. I hoped Mikhail kicked him to the curb or laughed in his face. But I couldn't wait that long. My temper was flaring. I wanted Drew to know I'd heard his pathetic attempts to get rid of me all because he didn't want to be reminded of his past?

I pushed open the curtains and barged back into the room. Both men turned to look at me but that didn't stop me from storming over to Drew and poking his chest with my finger. "How dare you. Trying to get me banned from a club just so you don't have to see me again? You are a petty son-of-a —."

"Hailey," Mikhail interrupted and I glanced over at him with his surprisingly calm demeanor. "It's time for you to go, now. One of my men will escort you out and please, do not try to come back in the future."

"My jaw dropped as I stood gawking at him. "Seriously?"

"I'm afraid so," he said coolly.

I glared at Drew and Mikhail before turning around and storming passed the man waiting to escort me out.

"Are you sure you want her to go, Andrew? She has such fire." I heard Mikhail say in an amused tone as I stomped down the stairs. I didn't need an escort. I could walk myself out.

I plowed my way through the crowd of people and out to the cold night air. I sucked in a breath and let it help cool my burning anger. *How dare he come back around and think he was going to start meddling in my life?*

I pulled out my cell and called a cab to take me home.

By the time I got back into my neck of the woods, my blood was practically boiling with anger. The whole ride home my mind ran through the events of the night. Each time making me more and more furious at both men.

I asked the driver to drop me off a couple blocks before we got to my apartment. I needed some fresh air and a walk in the cold might do me some good. I knew if I didn't calm down before going home, I'd just lay in bed simmering all night.

The streets in my residential area were pretty quiet this time of night. There were a few stray people here or there but nothing like the area

where the club was. I walked at a brisk pace toward my apartment, breathing in the cold air as it burned my lungs.

I turned the corner and thought I caught the glimpse of motion behind me. I turned around but there was no one there. A few more steps and I could have sworn I heard an extra set of footsteps behind me.

My anger had calmed. I had to be imagining things because of the adrenaline still coursing through my body. Then again, I was a woman, walking late at night, alone in a mostly deserted part of the city.

My skin prickled that primal way it does when danger is nearby. The same intuition an antelope might have when a lion is stalking it in the thick savannah grass. I quickened my pace, almost jogging toward my apartment. I was almost certain someone was following me.

I came to the corner and could see the door to my building. I just had to cross the street and I'd be home. The red hand was blinking at the crosswalk, counting down the seconds before the pedestrians had to be cleared from the road.

I only had a few seconds left. If I didn't go now, I'd be stuck waiting until the light turned again. That would take too much time. Standing still that long would allow whoever might have been following me the opportunity to catch up.

I sprinted across the street, catching a glimpse of the still, red hand telling me my time was up. I was almost to the other side when a car horn blared to my right. Bright headlights came far too fast and were already way too close. I screamed and threw myself at the curb.

The car horn blared again as it swerved. I tumbled to the sidewalk, skinning my arm and knee. The car skidded passed and just across the street, I caught a glimpse of a dark figure slip into the shadows of the adjacent alley.

An eerie chill ran down my spine just as my doorman rushed to my aid.

"Ma'am. Ms. Wood, are you alright?" The older man in his doorman's uniform bent down to help me up.

"Yeah, I think so." I reached out and took his hand, letting him help me up. He was extremely fit for a man in his sixties and he lifted me with ease. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Are you sure you're alright?"

“Yes, I’ll be fine.” I dusted myself off and picked up the spilled items from my clutch. “I just need a good night’s sleep.” I offered him a reassuring smile.

He nodded and returned the smile. “Goodnight, Ms. Wood.”

“Goodnight.”

I limped up to my apartment, more shaken up than actually hurt though my arm and leg burned. I cleaned up my scraps and went to bed without another incident, though, sleep didn’t come easy. I kept thinking of that shadowy figure until I finally passed out from exhaustion.

Chapter 4

Saturday and Sunday were lazy days. I did housework and caught up on binge-watching some of my favorite shows. I even did a little online shopping, because a girl really can never have too many shoes.

I was off work Monday for some corporate thing, but I still didn't feel like going out to do my usual errands. Instead, I went to my apartment's gym to burn off some of the anxious energy that had built over the past couple of days.

Usually, there were a good many people in the gym when I'd go, especially in January when everyone's New Year's resolutions were still fresh and new. But, on a Monday afternoon, there were only a couple of women — housewives, no doubt — and one man of retirement age working out.

I shoved my earbuds into my ears and cranked up the music before hopping on an elliptical. I started to jog, funneling my stress and anxiety into the run and before long, I'd lost myself in the music.

As the distance on the machine neared two miles, I felt that familiar prickle of being watched. I paused my music and slowed my pace. Looking around the room, I hadn't even noticed the other people finishing and leaving. I was the only one left in the gym. I stopped my machine and took a better look around as I climbed off and grabbed up my things.

Two miles was enough anyway. I hurried back up to my apartment, looking over my shoulder the whole way. Once I made it back, I locked the door behind me and leaned against it.

"You're being paranoid," I told myself aloud. But my mind argued the point, summoning up the image of that shadowy figure from Friday night. I checked every room in my apartment before finally letting down my guard and relaxing.

I needed to get out of the apartment. I was in a funk and staying locked up was not the answer. I needed to go out, be around people, and do normal things. I couldn't obsess over something that was probably nothing at all.

I decided it was as good a day as any to go get my nails done. Then maybe do a little shopping and pick up some dinner at the little bistro a few

blocks away. I wasn't one of those people who minded eating alone. I enjoyed it on occasion since I spent most days talking to a hundred different employees — such is life in HR.



I walked into the bustling little bistro and was immediately welcomed by Janelle, a part-time intern where I worked. She waitressed at the bistro to help pay the bills between going to class or working at my office. Janelle was a hard worker and so sweet. We clicked instantly and I'd taken her under my wing after her first week.

“Hi Hailey, just you eating today?”

“Hey. Yeah, it's just me.”

She furrowed her brow and studied me curiously. It couldn't be because I was eating alone. That wasn't a rare occurrence. “You okay? You look ... stressed.”

“That's just a nice way to say I look like hell.” I chuckled.

“Oh no, I didn't mean it like that.” She began to backtrack quickly.

“I'm just teasing.” I laughed.

She smiled, looking relieved. “Let me get you seated.” She turned to walk me to a small table, glancing back at me as she came to a stop. “Are you wanting your usual or will you need a menu?”

“My usual, thanks.”

“Sure, coming right up.” She jotted down my order on her pad before twirling around on her heel and bouncing off toward the kitchen.

I sat back and people-watched while I waited for my glass of white wine and my grilled chicken panini. There was a couple sitting at a booth, clearly on a first date the way they were both fiddling with their cloth napkins and squirming nervously.

It made me smile.

There was a group of four older ladies with varying shades of silver and gray hair all tightly curled and styled. *All old ladies must go to the same hairstylist. They all seem to have the same look. Maybe it was the granny special or something.*

I chuckled to myself.

Motion near the door caught my attention causing my smile to drop from my lips.

Mikhail, along with two of his men walked into the restaurant. Janelle greeted them and led them to a table. *What the hell are they doing here? I can't come to their club but they can come to my neck of the woods like it's no big deal?* Technically it wasn't like I owned the bistro but it didn't stop me from being furious.

Mikhail spotted me looking at him and gave me a nod. I nodded back, trying to play it off but that backfired. He bypassed his table and walked right over to mine.

"Hello, Hailey. So good to see you again."

"Is it?" I crossed my arms and leaned back in my chair. "I wouldn't think you'd be happy to see me after you *banned* me from your club."

He scoffed. "That was for Andrew's benefit, not mine. He is a — good friend and I did that as a courtesy for him. You apparently flustered him."

"Apparently," I said dully.

"May I sit?" He motioned to the empty chair across from me.

I had no excuse to say no, so I just nodded casually toward the chair. Mikhail seemed nice enough considering he'd banned me from his club. I'd wanted to hook-up with him Friday night. A part of me wanted to even more just to spite Drew even if he never actually found out about it.

"I am very glad to run into you here. I want to apologize for the other night."

"You were just being a good friend I suppose."

"You must have quite the past with Andrew to have him reacting the way he did. I've seen him in all sorts of situations and never seen him rattled like that." Mikhail leaned in toward me.

"It's a long story."

"I have all the time in the world for you. Please?" Mikhail was smooth, I'd give him that.

"It's nothing I'd like to waste my time lingering on if it's all the same to you."

"Ah, let the past be in the past I suppose."

"That's how I like to live." I flashed him a coy smile that always worked with men like him.

"Mikhail, what are you doing here?" I knew Drew's voice even before looking up to confirm.

“Drew, what the hell? Are you following me?” I was unable to hide my anger.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” He snapped.

“Hello Andrew, look who I happened upon during my dinner.”

“Just happened upon, huh?”

“Of course.” Mikhail kept his tone so calm and cool. I had no idea how because every time I saw Drew, I just wanted to punch him in his lying, cheating face.

“Can you give us a minute?” Drew actually had the nerve to look at me like he expected me to leave the restaurant I always came to.

“No. This is my table. You can leave if you want privacy.” I huffed and recrossed my arms.

“Fine,” Drew said but he didn’t budge. Instead, he began rattling off words I could only guess were Russian. Mikhail responded always with a calm and cool tone. I admire that about him.

I was dying to know what they were saying but didn’t know much Russian passed a simple *da or nyeht*. I noticed Drew repeated one phrase with extra emphasis. This was the twenty-first century, so I pulled out my phone and typed in the phrase to try to get some idea of what was going on.

Ona moja. She’s mine.

Oh hell no.

I jumped up from my seat. Fury raged inside me. How dare he say he had some sort of claim on me. What was he thinking? Did he really think he’d ever have a chance with me after what he’d put me through?

“Yours? Like hell —.” I started

“Not here.” Drew glanced around the crowded restaurant as people started to look at us. “Let’s go,” Drew said, taking hold of my arm and pulling me along with him.

I yanked my arm from his grasp, “I’m not going anywhere with you. What the hell were you thinking?”

“We are *not* doing this here. Come on.” He grabbed my bicep tight and drug me out the side door which led to a parking garage. If he thought I was going to go with him, he was sadly mistaken. I jerked my arm and refused to move my feet. “No, Drew, I’m not going anywhere with you until you tell me what the hell is going on.”

“Hailey, for once in your life will you just listen to me?” He seemed angry. What the hell did he have to be angry about? I was the angry one.

“Did you or did you not tell that guy I was yours?”

“I did.”

“I'm no one's property, *especially* not yours,” I bit out.

“You saw how he was looking at you — ogling you. I couldn't let him think you weren't already claimed.”

“Do you know how many guys have looked at me like that? It's nothing I can't handle. I was trying to pick him up.”

“Hailey, listen to me. These guys aren't like normal guys. They don't flirt and hope a girl will reciprocate. These guys, they have a — a game they like to play.”

“A game?” I stopped struggling merely out of curiosity.

“It's sick really.”

“What is it? What do they do?” I demanded to know.

“Can't it just be enough that I'm telling you it's bad?” Drew stepped closer to me, face to face, our chests almost touching as he gazed down at me. I hated how I still felt the magnetism pulling me toward him after all this time. “Can't you just trust me and leave it at that?”

I didn't even try to hide my scoff.

“Damn it, fine.” He dragged me farther into the parking garage and pushed me against a concrete pillar. His body pressed against mine, hardness against my softness and his lips brushed against my ear.

I tried to push him away but he held me secure. “Drew, what the hell? Let me go.”

“We're being watched.” he inclined his head behind me and I glanced over my shoulder to see one of Mikhail's guys discreetly watching us. “Gotta make this look good.” He whispered in my ear and I stiffened. *What the hell had I gotten into?* “These guys like manipulation. It's too easy if a girl *wants* to be theirs. They like knowing they have the power to make her give them what they want.”

I gasped and turned my face toward his, “You mean they...?”

His face was right in mine. Our lips were almost touching. “No. Like I said, they like manipulation to feel powerful, not force.”

“What does that even mean?”

“There's always something they can use against the woman.” He took a deep breath as if trying to calm himself. By the anger in his eyes, it wasn't working. “They always find a way. They get a thrill by making a girl who doesn't want to, agree to belong to them of her own will.”

“I don't understand. How can they —?”

“They always find a way. They use surveillance, watch the girl until they find something they can use. One girl's mom was sick and needed money for treatment. They offered to pay — under their terms.”

“That's awful — wait, they *follow* the girl?”

“Yeah. Another girl's uncle who raised her from childhood happened to work at the mechanic shop owned by one of the members. He was barely getting by as it was. If she wanted him to keep his job...”

“Seriously?” I couldn't believe that these men would do such things.

“And if the girl changes her mind at any time those things could be put into action. She must obey or risk whatever threat they hold over her being executed.”

“Obey, like what?”

“Working at the club, sex, cleaning, whatever they want.”

A sickening feeling twisted in the pit of my stomach. I glanced back at the man but Drew gripped my hair and turned my face back to his. Instinctively, I fought against his touch.

“Look at me. Not him.” He whispered close to my ear before moving down my neck. His warm breath tickled my neck. He kept his lips just close enough to feel their warmth without touching.

It was distracting as hell but knowing Mikhail's guy was spying on us helped keep me sober. Drew was putting on a show so we could talk.

“I think they were following me,” I whispered.

“They were. And I was following them following you. I sort of work for them —.”

“You work for those sick f—.”

“Undercover. I'm trying to bust them on all this.”

“And you went and told them I was yours? Knowing how they are?” Anger filled my chest until I thought I might explode. “How dare you, you asshole.”

I lifted my hand to slap him but he caught my wrist and pinned it to the pillar.

“Don't you see? Mikhail had his eye on you and you were practically giving him an open invitation. He would have found a way to make you agree to be his,” Drew hissed. I opened my mouth to argue but he cut me off. “You think you wouldn't but you would. They always find a way.”

“You could have found another way to get me out of that.”

“Not one without more risk, and not one that let me keep my cover. I've been working for years to establish this cover and it's not just me I'd be exposing. The men were already suspicious of me because they knew things went down badly in my last job yet somehow, I just so happened to make it out okay. I'll keep you safe and you'll help add the depth I need to my cover.”

“And if I say no? Are you going to force me just like those other guys do?”

“You know me better than that.”

“I would have thought so but after everything, I don't know anymore.”

“I'd never force you.” He looked so hurt. *Why would he even care what I thought about him after all this time? After what he did...and why did it bother me so much to see my words hurt him after what he'd done to me?*

“But Hailey, I'm asking you to think of those other girls. The ones who really are forced to stay with these men. You have a rare opportunity to help. Are you really going to turn your back on them?”

Shit. He still knew how to pull all the right strings.

“I've had to pretend to be buddy-buddy with them. These guys make me sick. The more I learn about them the more I want to take them down. What do you say, Hailey? Will you help me?”

I didn't want to be stuck with him for any amount of time. I couldn't stand to be around him after everything we had been through, but how could I turn my back on all the other girls going through so much worse? If I could help, I knew I had to. But I didn't have to like it.

“Fine.”

“Great.” His shoulders slumped with relief. “It won't be easy, and I'll need you to follow my instructions. This is dangerous but we are so close.”

“I said I'd do it. It doesn't mean I have to be happy about it. You may not have forced me but you sure as hell didn't give me much of a choice.”

He smiled and ran his nose up the bridge of mine. “You haven't changed a bit.”

“I've changed a lot. You'll be lucky if you even recognize who I've become.”

“No, you haven't. I still see the same Hailey I've always known.” The corner of his soft lips curled into a devilish smile and it felt like a

whole swarm of butterflies had been let loose in there. *Hailey, you know better.*

“This is only for a short time, to keep your cover, but the minute you find a way to get me out of this, I'm out. And I don't want anyone to know about this.”

“I have to clear it with my boss and keep my team in the loop. You got a boyfriend you're worried about?”

“No, I don't date.”

“You mean you aren't dating anyone right now?”

“No, I mean I don't date. Period.”

“Why the hell not? I know you get offers; I mean... look at you.”

“I just don't, okay?” I snapped, feeling my patience running extremely thin.


“Okay, struck a nerve. Interrogation over, at least for now.”

“For good. Just leave it alone, Drew.”

He slowly pulled back, releasing me from between him and the pillar. I readjusted myself and took a deep breath. “So, what do we do next?” I crossed my arms as though that might protect me.

“We don't have time to go over everything right now. We'll talk at my cover's apartment.”

He led me to his sleek black sports car that was way too flashy for the Drew I'd known. He opened the door and made sure I was secure before rounding to his side.



The apartment building we pulled up to was nothing like what I'd imagined. It was elegant and expensive. A leap and jump above the little studio apartment he had when we were dating.

There were security guards at the front and access was strictly limited. I wasn't sure if that should make me feel safe or trapped.

As if he knew what I was thinking, Drew leaned down and whispered in my ear as we passed the front doors into the lobby. “The security here works with the agency. We are safer here than anywhere else.”

I nodded and he led me to the elevator. I stepped inside and Drew followed. As the mirrored doors shut, the space felt too small and I had to take a step away from him. We rode up to the penthouse which was bigger and more extravagant than anything I'd ever seen.

“What exactly is your cover?” I said as I spun around the vast living room decorated in modern white and black.

“Trust fund brat who's working to make his own money so he can get out from under his father's thumb.” He shrugged. “It wasn't my choice. The agency thought I looked the part and it also gives me some leeway with keeping separate lives.”

“Clever.” I flopped down on the soft white leather couch.

“Yeah, so listen, next time we are around those guys, I need you to be extra careful to act the part.”

“What do I need to do?”

“Act scared. You can act a little mad too if you want. I'm sure that will come naturally enough. But I need you to act pretty shaken up too.”

“Shaken up?”

“These guys saw you disrespect me. They don't let their girls get away with that shit. If it looks like I didn't put you in your place, it will make me look weak.”

“Seriously?”

“We haven't even gotten to the hard part yet, if you don't think you can do this you need to say so now.”

“No. I can do it.”

“Good.” He sat on the oversized chair opposite the couch. “Come here.”

I raised a brow. “You're the one who sat down way over there. If you wanted me next to you, you come over here.”

“It's not about what's logical. It's about you obeying. Now, come here.”

I scowled and clenched my jaw but did as I was told, leaving the couch to join him on the chair even as my mind screamed to turn the other way. He brushed my hair back over my shoulder and cupped my cheek. He slowly brushed his thumb over my lower lip and electricity radiated from the touch, spreading over my whole body.

I wanted to blame my racing heart and shallow breaths on the danger ahead of us. But, if I was honest with myself, it was the danger right in front of me that sent my body into a frenzy.

Drew threatened every wall I'd carefully built up around my heart. He threatened to tear open every old wound I'd finally managed to heal. And, I'd just agreed to pretend to be his.

Chapter 5

I stood out on the balcony of my apartment, pulling the blanket tighter around my shoulders to fight the cold January night. I needed the cold and its numbing effects after the night I had. I stared out at the city. The sun crept from its hiding place, disrupting the night sky. I lit another cigarette and took a long drag. I hadn't smoked in two years. I didn't plan to make it a habit, but if anything earned me the right of a small relapse, I think it was last night.

I'd been able to go back to my apartment because Drew told the guy that was following me, I was just staying there for a housesitting job I'd taken. They wouldn't know it was where I lived unless my cover was blown.

In my defense, I'd tried to sleep. I really tried, but I couldn't turn off the reel of last night's events replaying through my mind. A late-night text from Drew making sure I was okay didn't help. We'd decided since he had to tell Jason what was going on that I would tell Rebecca too. She was my best friend and I knew I was going to need her during this.

We would be meeting them for breakfast at their house in a little over an hour. I snubbed out my cigarette on the railing and tossed the butt into the trash as I walked back inside. I had to pull myself together. Rebecca would be able to see through my cracks and she'd try to convince Jason not to let me do this. I couldn't *not* do this. It was partly my fault. I picked the wrong guy to pick up at the club. I put Drew in a bad spot and me not doing this could risk his whole operation — not to mention those poor girls trapped for real with no way out.

Coffee. I needed coffee. I set up the pot to brew and went to take a shower hoping it would thaw out my numb limbs from being out in the cold for so long.

The warm water sluiced over my body making my hands and feet sting as the heat pierced through the cold. I closed my eyes and thought of the reasons why I was doing this and the risks involved.

It's funny, I was less worried about being around those horrible men who liked to play those games of manipulation and more afraid of being near Drew. He had the power to break me once before. And he had. I

couldn't let my walls down around him. He might be one of the good guys in the big picture, but in my own little narrative, he was the villain that had once destroyed me.

I imagined those girls, trapped and held captive by invisible ropes they couldn't break. I couldn't imagine being in a situation where there was no hope of rescue. I needed to be that for those girls. Hope.

I finished my shower, threw on my white fluffy robe, and welcomed the aroma of the coffee wafting through the air as I made my way to the kitchen. I'd just finished my first cup of coffee and was pouring my second when there was a knock at my door.

"Who is it?" I said through the door since I didn't have a peephole.

"It's Drew." *What the...?*

I unlocked the door and opened it with more irritation than I should have. We'd talked about him picking me up for breakfast. And by talking about it, I mean we argued when he insisted and I told him no.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to pick you up for breakfast."

"I told you I could drive myself."

"And I told you I had to pass right by anyways."

"But I told *you* I was driving myself."

"Is that what we agreed on?" His gray eyes sparkled and the corner of his lip lifted into a slight smirk.

"Yes, that's what we agreed on." I still stood blocking the doorway.

"My mistake, but since I'm already here..." He pushed past me and walked into my apartment like it was his right.

"Oh good, coffee. I could use a cup." He went into the kitchen and began making himself a cup of coffee. "You look like shit. You might want another cup, yourself." He handed me my coffee.

"You sure know how to make a girl feel good about herself." I took the cup irritably and took a sip. *Damn him for remembering just the way I liked it.*

"Did you sleep at all last night?" He leaned against the counter and studied me.

I shook my head. "Had a lot on my mind."

"It will all be okay; I'll be with you the whole time to make sure of it." I didn't tell him that was the part I was most worried about. "You're doing a good thing here, Hailey."

I took another sip of coffee before setting it down on the counter. I couldn't just stand here talking to him like this. It felt too...normal. "I should go put on a little makeup. Try to cover up some of these bags."

"Take your time."

I cast one more glance at him still leaning so casually against the counter like it was where he belonged before I walked into my bedroom.

I'd barely started working on my make up when Drew startled me by entering unannounced.

"You're jumpy." He stated flatly as he came in and sat on the edge of my bed watching me through my vanity mirror.

"Why are you in my bedroom?"

"I thought we could talk about some of the basics before we get to Jason's."

"Okay..." I raised a brow at him expectantly through the mirror.

"You're going to need a cover apartment."

I stopped doing my makeup and looked up at him. "I'm not moving."

"Not moving. A cover apartment. You need a whole cover story or they are going to go digging into your real-life and neither of us wants that."

"Oh. I guess I hadn't thought about how deep this would go."

"They already know your name's Hailey; I've got a guy at the agency working on your cover using that first name but new last name. We have to work fast because Mikhail sure as hell won't waste any time. You'll need to take some time away from work too. We can't have them following you there."

"I can't just take off from work indefinitely." I snapped, realizing my makeup was a lost cause, I turned around in my seat to face him.

"You can work from your laptop. I'll have the guys set up a secure line for it."

"And what am I supposed to tell my boss?"

"Tell him you have a family emergency." He shrugged like it was no big deal to turn my whole life upside down. "We'll get you a small, older apartment for a week. You can stay most nights with me, then we'll have you move in with me. That way you'll be more secure."

"I don't like this." I sighed and put my head in my hands.

“Hailey, look at me.” He was right in front of me. His hand gently lifted my face to look at him. He was kneeling on the floor, sincerity in his eyes as he spoke. “Everything is going to be okay; you’ll see. And, I’ll protect you no matter what, you have to know that.”

I nodded. Deep down I knew Drew would protect me from any outside danger that came near. But I refused to tell him the danger I feared most was the one in front of me. The one who had already stirred an ache in my heart I’d worked to keep numb for so long.

I thought the ride to Rebecca and Jason’s would be filled with awkward silence or the temptation to rehash old wounds, but, to my relief, Drew filled the time with more useful conversation.

“So, a little more about the men we’ll be dealing with...” He glanced at me before looking back to the road. “As you’ve probably deduced, they are Russian mafia. They entered the country legally because their records were somehow erased back in Russia. The club and vodka trade are used to cover up more extreme means of revenue.”

“What kind of extreme means of revenue?”

“Drugs, hits, suspected human trafficking but that hasn’t been proven.”

“God, what have I gotten myself into?”

“Now do you see why I was adamant about making sure those men knew you were claimed?”

“Do you have to use that word?”

“What word?”

“*Claimed*. It sounds so... barbaric. Like you tossed me over your shoulder to haul me off to your cave somewhere.”

“If *claimed* bothers you, you’re going to have a tough time with these guys. Think of the worst misogynist you’ve ever been around...then times that by at least a hundred.”

“Great, so loads to look forward to.” I sighed and dropped my head back against the headrest.

“Just pretend for a little while that you are an actress in one of those crime shows you love so much. And, it’s okay to act offended by what they say. Remember, you aren’t supposed to be there of your own will. You are there because I’ve manipulated you into feeling there’s no other way.”

“Well in a way...”

“Don’t even think of comparing this to what those men do. You know damn well this is different — I’m different. I’m not one of them.” He spat the last word as though it left a horrible taste in his mouth.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

“It’s okay.” He squeezed my knee which sent a warm tingle through my body. *No Hailey, just no.*

The last ten minutes of the drive, I spent staring quietly out the window, reminding myself of the man Drew really was. The man who had ripped my heart from my chest and shattered it into a million little pieces.

We pulled up to Rebecca’s house ten minutes later. Drew rounded the car as though he was going to try to open the door. I had to remember who he really was and I wanted to keep this as cold as possible. I opened my door before he had a chance and climbed out.

“We’re late. Let’s go.”

I made it to the door and knocked before Drew was even up the steps.

I heard Rebecca call out in the distance, “they’re here.”

“I got it.” Jason’s voice came through the door moments before he opened it. He smiled but studied us carefully. “Hey, you two. Come on in. Becs’s in the kitchen finishing up.”

“Hey.” I smiled and made a beeline for the kitchen.

As soon as I walked into the kitchen, Rebecca grabbed my arm pulling me further into the room.

“Are you crazy, getting involved with Drew again?” She whispered conspiratorially.

“I’m not getting *involved* with him again.”

“Well, how do you explain helping him with his mission then?”

“I take it Drew already told Jason instead of waiting for us to talk to you both about it like we’d discussed.”

“Jason told me about it this morning. So, start explaining.”

“After everything with Jaxon then with Drew, I just felt like I needed to go blow off some steam, you know?”

“By which you mean picking up some random stranger at the bar. Go on.”

I smirked at her; she knew me so well. “Yeah, well, I was tired of the same old crowd and I found a club that was having a grand opening. It

seemed perfect. So, this hot Russian guy started chatting me up, and invited me to the VIP balcony. Turned out he was the owner..."

"Oh god, that's the guy Drew is working against?"

"Yeah, Drew found me with him, had to think quick. Said I was his to keep the other guy away. Apparently for all the horrible things they do, taking another man's girl is off-limits." I shrugged.

"Hailey, of all the messes..."

"I know, but if I don't go through with this..."

"I get it. Jason tells me enough about his work for me to get it. But what about you and Drew? I mean, how are you going to handle being around him with that kind of history?"

"He hasn't brought it up and I'm going to do my best not to dwell on it too much. I just have to remember why I'm doing this. But I can't let myself forget who he really is."

"From what Jason's told me, it doesn't sound like Drew's that type of guy to do what he did. Maybe he's changed? Maybe this can be the closure you need?"

I scoffed.

"Breakfast about ready? Us guys are starving." Jason called out and Rebecca smiled.

"You guys are always starving. Be right there."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"We've got it. You just sit and look pretty." I called back to him as I grabbed a plate of bacon and a big bowl of grits.

Rebecca grabbed a large platter with pancakes and smaller bowls of toppings arranged neatly around it. She really had gone all out.

"Wow this looks great" Drew said as we entered.

"It sure does." Jason agreed as he reached for a pancake before Rebecca could even finish putting the tray down. Rebecca smacked his hand and he pulled it away.

"Ouch."

"Guests first." She chuckled and poured us all coffee and orange juice while Drew and I started filling our plates.

We both reached out to get a pancake. Our hands bumped and as cliché as it sounds, a small jolt of electricity shot all the way through my body. I jerked my hand back and Drew froze. "Sorry, here." He picked up a pancake with his fork and put it on my plate.

“No problem.” I tried to cover the action by going for a piece of bacon but both Jason and Rebecca looked at us with concern.

“I don’t know if you guys can pull this off,” Jason said bluntly. “I know you wanted to do this to help save the mission but this could blow up in both of your faces if you can’t handle pretending to be together.”

“I agree.” Rebecca glanced from me to Jason. If I was honest with myself, I had to agree with them, too.

“We can do this. We just haven’t been around each other much. Besides, we don’t have to act like a happy couple. I’m supposed to be holding something over her head to coerce her into this. So, if she pulls away at my touch, so what?”

“He’s got a point.” Jason shrugged and looked at Rebecca.

“What is it you’re supposed to be holding over her head?” They were carrying on the conversation without me and I really didn’t have much to add so I busied myself digging into my pancakes.

“I’ve been giving it some thought. The guys got her set up with a run-down apartment so we have an excuse to move her to my place sooner rather than later. I was thinking maybe a struggling actress or writer?”

“I’ll need to be on my laptop for work a lot so maybe a writer would make the most sense?”

“That works. Just make sure you keep your laptop where only you can see the screen when you work. Pay attention to reflective surfaces, windows, etcetera.”

“You mean they’ll be watching me?”

“Most definitely,” Drew confirmed and a shiver went down my spine at the eerie thought.

“That’s just creepy.”

“Those are the type of guys we’re dealing with.”

I sighed and caught Rebecca’s concerned glance. “Are you sure you want to do this?” She placed her hand on mine and I gave it a squeeze.

“I’m sure.”

“If there’s any problem and Drew isn’t around, I want you to call your brother, Jay.”

“I don’t have a — Jay?”

Jason nodded and gave me a look that said he was talking about himself.

“I don’t have *Jay’s* number.”

“It will be programmed into your new phone.”

“My new phone?”

“You can’t have your friends or work calling you while you’re undercover and risk being exposed.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that.”

“I have your new phone, I.D., passport, bank info, credit cards, and the lease for your apartment to give you before you leave.”

“Wow, you guys work fast.”

“We have to.” Drew piped in. “We’re meeting the guys at the club tonight.”

“Tonight?” I couldn’t hide the surprise in my voice.

“You thought the guys would wait on us to get our cover set up before they’d expect to see us again?”

“I guess I hadn’t really thought about the when.”

“Well, the *when* is tonight. We’re going to your new apartment from here to get you settled in.”

“I need to go get a few things from my apartment first.”

“We can’t risk you going back there. It was hard enough to get here without being followed, your place is closer to their territory.”

“But, my laptop, my clothes...”

“You’ll have new clothes already set up at the apartment.”

“Rebecca went by your place to get your laptop and a few things she thought you’d need.”

I looked at Rebecca in shock. I couldn’t believe she’d been a part of all this without saying a word to me.

“I thought you knew.” She shot Drew a look. “Besides, I figured you’d rather me go through your stuff than some stranger.”

“Thanks, Becs.” I smiled at her and she relaxed.

“You two have a busy day. Better eat up.” Jason said as he shoved a big bite into his mouth.

We ate, though my appetite was off considering how my whole life was about to be turned upside down. After breakfast, we said our goodbyes and Jason handed me a large manila envelope with all my new papers inside. I pulled out the shiny new I.D. and read the name aloud. “Hailey Reid?” I raised my eyebrow at Jason and he chuckled, looking over to Rebecca.

“I may have suggested the last name.”

“After my favorite character —.”

“This is a tough situation but I want you to remember who you are and even though you can’t use your last name, this one is still totally *you*.”

I laughed and hugged Rebecca in a full-on bear hug. It was silly that a fake last name of a fake character from one of Rebecca and my favorite shows would make me so happy, but it did. It was a little piece of who I really was that I could hold onto.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“You’re welcome.”

Chapter 6

Drew and I drove through an old, run-down neighborhood before pulling off into the dark parking lot of an old apartment complex. The bars on the windows made the place look more like a prison than the apartments I was used to. I suppose in that neighborhood it was more to keep the criminals out rather than in.

“This is where I’m going to be staying?”

“No.”

“I thought you said I would be staying here for a week then —.”

“I did.”

“But...?”

“But now I’m looking at it and I’ll be damned if I let you stay here for one night.”

“So, then what are we going to do?” I didn’t want to stay in that apartment any more than he wanted me to.

“Now it's time I play a spoiled trust-fund kid. Don’t look, but we are being watched so it's time to get in character.” He led me into the apartment building and waited for me to fish out the new keys Jason had given me so I could unlock the door. I snuck a glance over my shoulder and spotted a homeless guy on the sidewalk. At first glance, he looked like any other man down on his luck. But, as I studied him closer, I noticed tan lines on his hands from a watch and rings. Odd for someone living on the street.

“What does that mean...playing the trust-fund kid?” I whispered so I wouldn’t be heard.

“That means, you’re going to show me your place, then I’m going to make a scene and make you pack your stuff and move in with me right here and now.” He whispered into my hair, a gesture that would look as if he was being affectionate to the prying eye.

I stiffened and fumbled with the keys, nearly dropping them.

“Here let me.” He took the keys from me and easily unlocked the door.

Drew waited for me to enter and followed me in, shutting and locking the door behind us.

The studio apartment took minimalism to a whole new level. There was a bed with a blue threadbare blanket, a T.V. that belonged in a museum, an

old desk and a chair that looked like it came out of the trash, and a couch to match. It was absolutely pathetic.

“This place is shit,” Drew said and winked at me. *Were they listening to us? There was no way that that homeless man could hear us in there.* He pulled out his phone and typed something out before holding it up to me.

They scanned for bugs before we came. There is a mic but no cam. I told them to leave it so they wouldn't get suspicious. Well, that made more sense but it would have been nice if he'd thought to warn me.

I nodded and he put his phone away.

“It's not that bad.”

“I'm afraid to even sit down in here. I might catch something.”

“Don't be ridiculous. Besides, not all of us have daddy's money to get by.” I spat out. It was easier to play this part than I'd imagined.

Drew pulled his hand back and came down toward me. Instinctually, I cried out and cringed hearing a loud crack but never feeling the sting. I looked up at him, bewildered. He'd slapped his forearm to make it sound like he'd slapped me.

Drew nodded and I began to sniffle as though I were fighting back tears but as I looked at him there was pain in his eyes. When I met his gaze, he shook his head and the pain was gone but it hadn't gone unnoticed.

“I'm not staying here and I don't trust you not to run your mouth to someone about our little — arrangement. You're going to stay with me. Pack a bag.”

“But Drew, the whole point of our arrangement was so that I wouldn't get kicked out of my place,” I argued but I really was a bit confused. Our whole cover was that I was about to be evicted and couldn't pay my rent. Others had loaned me money but now I was in serious debt with no way out.

“Well, the arrangement just changed. I'll still help you pay off your debts but I'm not paying for you to live in this.” He said *this* like it was the most disgusting word to pass his lips. “Besides, I want you at my beck and call. Having you at my place means I have you whenever I want,” he said the words so easily I almost believed it myself.

I caught myself gawking at him. His acting skills both impressed and scared me how he could jump into a role like this so easily. I had to

think like an actress. What would *my* character say to this? Drew widened his eyes and tilted his head as if to say ‘well?’

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Moving was not part of the deal. I’m not gonna be stuck with you twenty-four seven.”

He scoffed. “Fine. Good luck finding a way to pay off your debtors without me” He turned his back on me, reaching for the doorknob. “I’m sure the stand-up guys you borrowed from will be willing to work out payment plans.”

“No wait, please? Those guys...”

He turned back with a cocky smirk on his face. *God, he was too good at this.* “That’s what I thought.”

I rolled my eyes at him and caught his real smile for only a moment before he was back in character. “Now, be a good girl and pack up anything worth anything to you. I doubt it will take very long.”

I let out a huff but did as he said. I found a decent suitcase in the tiny closet and packed the clothes I’d never seen before that hung inside. I picked up my laptop and slipped it into the carrying case hanging on the old office chair.

“That everything?” He said from the door. He hadn’t moved to help me. “Let’s go.”

I struggled to lift the heavy suitcase but again, Drew did nothing to help me carry it as he opened the door and walked out without looking back.

I had to sit the suitcase on the ground while I locked up. Drew had always been a gentleman when I’d known him before. I couldn’t help the aggravation his lack of chivalry stirred, until I glanced to see that same homeless man, now sitting on the curve close to our window pretending to be asleep under the small awning. He’d heard everything. I knew I’d have to be careful to stay in character at all times. These guys were thorough, to say the least.

Drew climbed into the car and popped the trunk, leaving me to load my stuff alone. Once we hit the main road, he glanced over at me with a genuine smile.

“You did well.”

“Thanks.” I sighed and gazed out the window.

“You okay? I’m sorry about that back there —.”

“It’s just part of the act. Don’t worry about it.”

“So, you saw the guy, huh?”

“Yeah. Do those guys usually keep such a close eye on their people?”

“No. They’re suspicious of me already because of what went down with my last job.”

I turned to him with surprise. “They know about your last job?”

“They know a version of it.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’d been building a cover with these guys for a while but wasn’t getting far with a case against them. When the last gig came up the agency wanted to pull me. I convinced them to merge the two covers. Once things were about to go down with the cartels, we timed it around the time they were sending me up to Mexico for a drop.”

“So, it looked like blind luck that you weren’t caught.” I filled in the blanks and he nodded.

“When I came back here, I reconnected with Mikhail and his guys. They’re suspicious of everyone, more so when someone disappears only to reappear after cops take down the people they were working for.”

“Right. Makes sense.”

“If we can make this look real. Having you could really add depth to my cover.” We pulled up at his apartment and Drew parked in his reserved spot.

“How dangerous are these guys?”

He turned toward me, his mouth pulled down and his jaw tightened. “Very.”

My heart sank into the pit of my stomach. I knew this already but somehow hearing his confirmation made it all the more real.

Drew must have seen the look on my face because the grim expression turned to concern. His hand rose to cup my face and I flinched, not from fear of physical pain, but emotional pain in feeling his touch again. He lifted my face to look at him. “I will protect you. You’re with me, I will keep you safe.”

I nodded, not trusting my voice and hating how vulnerable I felt around him.

“Let’s get inside. They could still have eyes on us.”

We got out of the car and I went to the trunk to get my things but was stopped by the doorman who insisted on helping me. I thanked him and

we entered the large, intricate apartment that still managed to take my breath.

“The second bedroom is made into an office and I can’t really go changing that in case the guys stop by so we’re going to have to share.”

“I can sleep on the couch or something,” I suggested.

Drew raised his brow. “It’s not like we haven’t slept in the same bed before. Besides, this place is checked for bugs, but it still has windows. If someone wanted to see in bad enough, they could find a way. I think it’s better we stay in the same room to keep up appearances.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes.

“Careful doing that when we’re in public.”

“What?”

“Your famous sigh-eye-roll combo. Most of the men would backhand their girl for something like that.”

“Would you? To keep your cover?”

“Not if I could help it, but if you make me look too bad around them, there’s a chance I’d have to do something to keep up appearances.”

“You’d hit me?” I gasped and gaped up at him.

“Like I said, not if I could help it —.”

“But if it meant keeping your cover, you’d hit me,” I said with exasperation, regretting ever agreeing to this. “I see where I fall in the line of what’s important.” I crossed my arms and turned to look out the window.

Drew snatched me by the arm and whirled me around to face him. I stepped back, hitting the window and he closed in, successfully pinning me between his body and the cool glass at my back.

“Don’t you dare pull that shit on me.” He was right in my face. “Don’t you understand, Hailey? These guys are dangerous beyond what you can imagine. If it comes down to me slapping you to keep our cover or blowing my cover and getting both of us killed you better believe I’m gonna do what I have to do.”

“You really think not slapping me would blow your cover? Really, Drew?” I spat the words.

“Maybe not, but it would definitely make them suspicious and if they didn’t suspect anything, it would make them respect me less —.”

“Respect? So that’s what this is all really about? You want those assholes to *respect* you?”

“Hailey, damn it.” He hit the windowsill by my head and made me jump. This was not the man I’d known all those years ago. “You don’t get it. Listen...” He hissed. “Respect is everything to these guys. Do you know what happens to the girls of guys they don’t respect? They take them for themselves. They share them among themselves. They disrespect them even more than the girls who belong to one of them because to them they are nothing. Don’t you get it? How the men regard you is a direct reflection of their respect for me. In their eyes, you are mine which means they respect what’s mine as long as they respect me.” His shoulders sagged as he let out a ragged breath. He jerked away from me and walked out of the room leaving me leaning against the window to reflect on what he’d said.

After several minutes, I realized Drew was right. I needed to make sure those men respected him to keep us both safe. If that meant acting like a meek little mouse... who was I kidding? I could never act like the meek little mouse but for this to work, I was going to have to try.

I walked into the kitchen to find Drew at the counter, pouring himself a glass of whiskey. “Isn’t it a little early for that?”

“Considering everything? I think it’s called for.” He drained the cup in one go. Grabbing up two plates, he dropped one unceremoniously on the island beside me. “Eat.”

“Getting into character a little early, aren’t you?” I couldn’t help the irritation in my tone.

“I think you could use some practice before tonight.”

“Practice?” I said around a bite of sandwich.

“You don’t seem to understand the role you are playing so let me make it clear to you.” This was a new tone for Drew. So matter-of-fact but with a cold undertone. “You got into debt with some scary guys who would do God knows what to you if you don’t pay them back. Now you belong to me while I pay your debts back. Trading one evil for another. I’m no longer the ex you left years ago. I own you. You do what I say, when I say, and how I say or suffer the consequences which could be some form of punishment from me, or having me handing you and your life over to those guys you owe. The choice is mine. As long as you make yourself useful to me, you’ll be safe.”

I stood there gaping at him, my half-eaten sandwich in my hand frozen mid-air. I couldn’t even speak.

“Good. It seems you are starting to grasp the situation a little better. Now, finish your sandwich. I’m going to take a nap before we have to start getting ready for tonight. You might want to do the same. It’s going to be a long night.”



Chapter 7

If Drew thought I'd be able to take a nap after everything he'd said to me, he was an idiot. After he'd retired to the bedroom, I took my sandwich to the couch and turned on the T.V. but nothing could overshadow the words he'd said running loops in my mind until time for us to get ready.

We rode in the back of a shiny black town car toward the club. I stared out the window silently with too much on my mind to put into words. I'd taken an hour picking out the right outfit and getting ready. Drew was quieter after his nap. It put me on edge and made me even more nervous about tonight. He'd said he wasn't the same guy. Had he meant because of the role we were having to play or had time really changed him? *Either way, he's still the guy who cheated on you, shattered you into a million pieces and left you broken and bleeding all those years ago. Never forget that.* My optimistic mind reminded me.

The car came to a stop and the driver got out. Drew turned to me, a heavy look on his face I couldn't define. "You ready for this?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

He climbed out of the car and offered his hand to me but I got out on my own, not out of disrespect — I just couldn't bear to touch him. He must have known, but he didn't allow that to go on for long. The moment we walked into the club; he placed his firm hand on my exposed back. I'd chosen a simple black dress, high necked, but with a large oval hole that exposed most of my back. As the warmth of his hand burned my flesh, I regretted my choice.

We'd barely made it past the crowd at the door when two of Mikhail's men found us. "Boss sent us to escort you to the balcony." The larger of the two spoke fondly, but the demanding hint was not lost on me.

"We were just heading to the bar for a drink." Drew definitely pushed past the men. He had a funny way of staying on their good side if you ask me.

The second man grabbed Drew's arm and pulled him back. "Boss said now. You can order your drinks up there."

A growl rumbled from Drew's throat and his whole demeanor shifted. He yanked his arm free from the man's grip. His already muscular

shoulders and chest seemed to puff out more as he jumped into the man's face. "Touch me again. I dare you."

"You dare —? Bring it on, *Pindos!*" The smaller man jumped toward Drew who pushed me out of the way. I gasped and just as the man pulled back his fist, Drew's made contact with his jaw, sending him stumbling back.

He regained his footing and charged at Drew just as Mikhail's voice cut through the commotion causing everyone to freeze. "Enough. Andrew, let's go."

The moment he spoke, everything stopped. Drew's face was red as he let out a loud puff of air and followed Mikhail up the stairs where I'd gone once before. The larger of the men motioned for me to follow them and he took up the back.

By the time we made it to the balcony, the men acted as if nothing had happened. Mikhail seemed in full host mode as he sat on the couch and motioned for us to follow him.

Drew sat first, leaving a place on the end of the curved couch for me, placing himself between Mikhail and me. As I went to sit, Mikhail motioned between the two men. I looked at Drew and he nodded so I sat between them uncomfortably tense.

"It is a pleasure to see you again," Mikhail spoke in his thick Russian accent, taking my hand and pressing it to his lips as he had the night we met. Before it was charming, now that I knew who he was, it made me sick.

"It's nice to see you again." I could barely get the words out around the lump in my throat.

"Ah, your tone has changed since last we met. I assume Drew taught you your place and what he expects?" The smirk he flashed Drew made me sick but I fought back any disrespectful retort and simply turned my gaze down.

Mikhail's sudden laugh made me jump. I glanced up as he slapped Drew on the back. "Seems you do well, my boy. And not a noticeable mark on her." He held my chin, turning my face to examine me as though I were a prized horse. "I might need you to teach me how you do that." He chuckled and released my face. "Lacy, where are your manners? Come. We need drinks."

I followed his gaze to a girl on the pole in the corner, noticing her for the first time since we'd arrived. She was scantily dressed in white lace lingerie, matching stockings, and heels which added to her already leggy figure. She was beautiful with her long dark curls, tanned skin, and big brown eyes. The girl quickly lowered herself from the pole and hurried over to the minibar to prepare drinks for the men.

As the men talked, I watched Lacy. She clearly knew her way around the bar. I wondered if she was hired help for the club or if she was one of the girls here against her will. *Like you're supposed to be.*

"Is your girl not staying at that shit hole apartment anymore?" Mikhail's words caught my attention. They were talking about me. He wasn't even trying to hide the fact that they'd been watching us.

"Are you kidding me? I had to take a shower after just walking into that place. I'm not about to slum it like that." Drew sounded so different than the man I knew.

"Having her in hand at all times would have its appeal." Mikhail's index finger drew slow circles just above my knee and his lascivious tone made my stomach turn.

Drew's whole body tensed next to mine but he didn't move to stop Mikhail from touching me. Instead, he kept his gaze on Mikhail while placing a possessive hand on my upper thigh. "Yes, I'm looking forward to it."

Lacy was a welcome interruption from the pissing match I was stuck in the middle of. She leaned in, sitting the tray of vodka shots and platter of finger foods on the table. Mikhail's eyes instantly left Drew's to stare at her generous cleavage even I couldn't help but notice. It was then that I spotted the hint of bruising hidden beneath her makeup. Just around her left eye, were what I could tell to be fading yellow and blue bruises. My eyes moved to study her more closely and I noted the faint discoloration around her neck as well.

My heart sank. My earlier question of which category of girl Lacy fell into now answered. She didn't say a word as she set up the drinks and food. When she turned to leave, Mikhail slapped her ass hard enough to make both me and her jump.

He chuckled and placed his hand higher on my thigh. "No need to be so jumpy — as long as you behave. Right, Andrew?"

“I like her a little jumpy.” Drew moved my hair to expose my neck and lightly ran his fingers down the sensitive flesh, sending shivers down my body and making my breath hitch. “It keeps her on her toes.”

Mikhail seemed to enjoy laughing at my expense. He let out an amused chuckle. I, on the other hand, was disturbed by how much that simple touch had affected me.

“Please, let's drink.” Mikhail motioned toward the shots and I reached out to take one. “Do you allow her to drink?” Mikhail looked to Drew. My hand froze mid-air and I looked at Drew who nodded at me. I eagerly picked up my shot, wanting the alcohol to help calm my nerves.

The men raised their glasses and I did the same as Mikhail made a toast. “*Vashe zdorovie*, to your health,” he exclaimed before downing the shot.

To which Drew replied “*vashe zdorovie*” and we followed.

Mikhail ordered Lacy back to the pole and I frowned as I watched her retreat. The men laughed and drank many more shots. I was grateful after the second, Drew denied me *permission* to continue drinking. I didn't know much about the Russians, but I knew had I refused the drink it would have been seen as an insult and my head was already buzzing. Drew not allowing me anymore was him looking out for me while maintaining the image of control.

Being at this club, with these people so different from who I was used to, sitting next to Drew of all people — the whole night felt like I was trapped in some strange dream.

I caught Drew sneaking his vodka into the wastebasket as time went on but he acted as though he'd drank every last one. Mikhail became more and more relaxed with each shot, letting his guard down slowly.

“Lacy, come over here and dance for me. I want an up-close show.” She timidly returned. I'd been watching her. While dancing, she seemed looser, almost free but the moment she was within his reach, her demeanor shifted to become tense and timid. She began to dance for him. His grimy hands grabbed her and pulled her to straddle his lap. “There. Now, dance for me.” He commanded, sitting back with his arms draped over the back of the couch. She began to give him a lap dance all the while Drew and I sat uncomfortably close to them.

“I think it's about time I get back home. I want some time with this one before it gets too late.”

“Ah, you should stay have a little fun in one of our VIP rooms.”

“Maybe another time. Tonight, I plan to go until we pass out and it's not easy carrying a lifeless woman home. People give you funny looks, you know” Drew chuckled and Mikhail followed. I didn't see the humor and was more than ready to leave.

“Until next time, my friend.” Drew patted Mikhail's shoulder and stood up, taking my hand and guiding me out in front of him.

I'd never been so glad to see Drew's apartment in my life. Being on edge, never knowing what might happen or who might say what was exhausting. I felt like I'd just ran a marathon by the time I collapsed on the couch.

I laid down with my head in the middle of the couch. My legs thrown over one end. The light in the apartment was dim but still hurt my tired eyes. I threw my arm over my face to shield them. “I don't think I can move,” I mumbled.

“That tired?” I heard the amusement in his voice and the clinking of glasses as he poured himself a drink at the cart in the living room. The couch shifted as he sat down on the one cushion I wasn't on.

“How can you drink more tonight? You two probably put away a gallon of vodka.”

“Probably, but I only drank two.”

“What did you do with the rest?” I uncovered my eyes to look up at him.

“I dumped it in the planter. That's why I always sit right there.” He laughed.

“You're going to kill that poor plant.” I chuckled.

“No, I'm not,” he said, so sure of himself.

“What? Russian plants drink vodka too?”

“No,” He laughed and looked down at me. “It's fake.”

I burst out laughing at that. Maybe it was the vodka still in my system or the whole situation in general, but something about Drew watering a fake Russian plant with vodka hit me as hilarious.

“Okay, I think you've officially lost it. It's time to get you to bed.”

“But I don't want to go to bed. I'm comfortable right here.” I stopped laughing, remembering the conversation we had earlier about the sleeping arrangements. While Drew and I had been getting along fairly well

under the circumstances, it didn't mean I wanted to climb into bed with him.

"We already talked about this. Bed. Now."

"You're so bossy and I don't remember actually *agreeing* to anything." I sat up and crossed my arms with a huff.

"Are you going to walk or am I going to have to carry you?" He gave me a challenging stare.

"You wouldn't." I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Try me." He leaped up and before I could do more than squeal, Drew threw me over his shoulder and carried me to his room.

"Drew, put me down." I squirmed, kicking and hitting his back with my fists."

"You had your chance."

"Put me down. Now." I hit harder.

"Now?" He said as if just realizing what I'd been telling him all along.

"Yes, now," I demanded.

"Okay." He slapped my ass hard enough to elicit a yelp before tossing me off his shoulder.

My whole body tensed and I was flailing threw the air ungracefully as I screamed before hitting the soft, fluffy mattress of his king-sized bed. Drew laughed and I wanted to hit him. So, I did, right in the stomach with the heel of my bare foot.

He doubled over but only for a moment before he was pouncing onto the bed. He sat on top of me, pushing my thighs to the bed with his weight and pinned my arms above my head with one strong hand. I tried to twist and turn to get out from under him but I was efficiently restrained.

"Now, that wasn't very nice. Perhaps I should teach you a lesson."

"That's not funny."

"You know if we were in front of Mikhail or his men, I'd have to rough you up for something like that."

"But we're not, and I was good when we were around them tonight."

"You were. You were very good." He rubbed the back of his hand down the inside of my arm and I shivered under him.

"Drew, let me up."

“Put you down. Let you up. You don’t know what you want do you?” He brought his smirking face close to mine. Drew’s eyes softened. His hand gently stroked down my cheek and I swallowed hard.

This man affected me more than I cared to admit. Even after all these years, just a simple touch sent my heart racing and my body igniting. How was I ever going to keep my cool and do what we needed to do to take down Mikhail when he touched me like that? I needed some distance. I needed to get out of his bed.

“I need some fresh air.” I pushed him off of me. That time he let me and I jumped off the bed.

“Hailey...” His concerned voice faded as I hurried from the room.

I made my way through the living room and had just reached out to open the balcony door when Drew snatched my arm and twirled me around.

“What’s wrong?” He looked down at me with intent eyes studying my expression. I fought to keep cool.

“Nothing. I just need some fresh air.”

“Bullshit. You ran out of that room like the place was on fire. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just — I need to remember why I’m here. We need to remember why we’re doing this and not let our history muddle things up.”

“Not let our —.” His expression hardened. “So, you’d rather me treat you like any other cover?”

“Yes.” I crossed my arms, suddenly needing to feel protected. “I think that’s best for everyone involved.”

“Fine. Have your air then come back to bed. We still need to keep up appearances.” He snapped, turning away from me before I could respond.

He disappeared back into the bedroom before I retreated to the balcony. I couldn’t bear the thought of climbing back into bed with him how he was acting. *Had he thought I’d just forget what he’d done to me in the past? Did he think I was going to give him another chance to break my heart all over again?*

I needed time to clear my head so I made myself comfortable with a large fuzzy blanket out on the lounge chair and stared up at the night sky. I had no idea why I cared that he seemed upset. I had to remember why we’d broken up, to begin with. It was time to refortify the walls I’d built around

my heart.

Chapter 8

“Get up, you need to get ready.” Drew’s voice was cold and commanding as he sat on the foot of the bed to put on his shoes — so different from his usual warmth.

“Where are we going?” I sat up in bed, not remembering how I got there and rubbed my eyes.

“I have to meet Mikhail for some business. He said to bring you along. We leave in half an hour.”

“Half an hour? I haven’t even had a cup of coffee or a shower yet.”

“Well, I suggest you move quickly then.”

I rolled my eyes and threw the covers off of me before climbing out of bed. I was still in my dress from last night.

I was almost into the bathroom when Drew spoke up. “By the way, if you want to kill yourself by freezing to death out on the balcony, find another balcony to use. It’s not something I want to have to explain to people. And, if you’re that desperate not to sleep in the same bed I’ll have a place set up for you in my office.”

I turned around in the doorway and gaped at him. I couldn’t believe how cold he was acting. “I didn’t try to kill myself. Don’t be ridiculous and what about what you said about keeping up appearances by having me in your bed?”

He shrugged as if none of this concerned him one way or another. “I’ll come up with some excuse to not want you in my bed.”

Fury built up inside me for reasons I wasn’t sure. He was being such a jackass. *This is what you wanted — to remember who he really is.* Anger was better than pain from letting my guard down.

“Fine,” I snapped as I turned back around and hurried to get ready.

I was out of the shower in ten minutes and was brushing my hair when Drew came into the bathroom without even knocking. “We’re going to be going to Mikhail’s club to handle some business. After lunch, we’ll be driving out to his place in the country for an event tonight.”

“An event?”

“Yeah, so pack what makeup you’ll need to make yourself presentable. I’ve already packed an overnight bag for you.”

“We’re staying overnight with them?”

“Yep. Most of his events are overnight.”

I had so many questions but before I could organize them into rational thought Drew retreated out of the bathroom. I emerged a few minutes later dressed casually in a fitted pair of skinny jeans, calf-high boots, and a long sweater. Drew eyed me up and down before shrugging. “I guess that will do. I’m glad you left your hair down but tonight I want it up. I already sent our bags down to the car. Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

As we rode the elevator down, I couldn’t handle the silent tension any longer. “So, are you going to keep acting like an asshole the rest of the day or are you just not a morning person?”

“You wanted me to act like you were any other cover, so I am. What? Now you want something different? Why am I not surprised?”

“I assumed you wouldn’t act like you couldn’t stand your cover.”

“You obviously don’t want to be here. You don’t want to be near me. Let’s just get this whole thing over with so we can move on with our lives, okay?”

That hurt and the fact that it hurt made me angry. I shouldn’t care how he acted toward me. This was just to help bust these guys and protect everyone involved. This was not about Drew or about our history. I should just let it go and do what has to be done but somewhere deep inside, I wanted to hurt him just as bad as he’d hurt me.

“Fine by me. The sooner the better.”

We rode to the club in complete silence. Drew didn’t even look at me as we pulled up at the curb and he climbed out. I slid over to his side to get out the same way he had when he stopped me.

“Stay here and let the men handle their business. I’ll be back shortly.” He turned to one of Mikhail’s men standing by the door and motioned back toward the car with a jerk of his head. The man nodded and Drew disappeared into the club.

I sat there gazing out the window as people walked around so casually having no clue what shady business was going on all around them. Then again, neither did I since Drew hadn’t told me any details.

A knock on my window made me jump. It was Mikhail’s guy. The one who’d fought Drew the other night. He motioned for me to roll down

the window. I didn't want to but knew I needed to do what he said even though he made me nervous.

I rolled down the window and looked at him expectantly.

"Drew asked me to keep an eye on you while he's in with the boss."

"I figured."

"You two don't seem on as good of terms today. Last night you couldn't pry you from his side with a crowbar. What'd you do?"

"What makes you think I did anything?" I snapped irritably at him.

"It was that attitude wasn't it? A girl in your situation would do well to learn not to challenge the man who holds your fate in his hands."

I crossed my arms and scooted away from the open window back to my side while pretending to be interested in something outside my window. I heard a quick succession of the door clicking open then slamming closed. I looked over to see my babysitter now sitting beside me in the backseat which suddenly felt much smaller.

"What are you doing?" I leaned against my door for maximum distance between us.

"It's cold out there. Not as cold as Russia but I like it better in here." He rolled up the window and turned to look at me. His eyes dragged up my body slowly until he finally came to my eyes. "You know, some guys don't like to be challenged. Weak men see a strong woman as a threat." He motioned his head toward the club.

I raised a brow, curious about where he was going with this. It was the most I'd ever heard one of Mikhail's men talk. "Weak men...like Drew?"

He let out a snort. "He's just a trust fund boy. He can't handle a woman like you. I can see that fire you possess even as you try to hide it." He scooted his large frame closer to me and the car suddenly felt suffocatingly small.

He rested his hand on my upper thigh sending my instinct to run or slap him into full gear. My hand reached for the door but he grabbed hold of my wrist and pulled me to face him. "You know, I make a good living doing what I do. I could help you pay off those debts for a similar arrangement."

"I doubt that would make Drew very happy."

"I don't care if pretty boy is happy or not."

I'd never heard anyone refer to Drew as a *pretty boy*. He was ruggedly handsome but with a great sense of style. He pulled my wrist,

forcing me closer to him until he could snake his arm around my waist and press me against his hard chest.

“I would have fun breaking such a willful thing.” He rasped into my ear.

I tried to pull back but his strong arms wouldn’t allow me to budge. He continued whispering in my ear as his hand slipped down to squeeze my ass hard. “I’d have you trained so well by the time your debt was repaid, you’d beg me not to give you away and I might even consider keeping you for a little while as long as you behaved to my liking.”

“Drew isn’t going to like this. Let me go.” I pounded on his chest and he finally backed off but not because of anything I’d done.

He pressed a finger against his ear and listened before responding into his sleeve. “You got it, boss. I’ll have them bring the car around.” He lowered his hand and opened the car door to climb out. “You’re lucky the meeting is done and your boyfriend is coming out. Maybe I’ll start playing nice with him so I can convince him to loan you to me once he’s finished with you.”

I was left gaping at him as he climbed out and shut the door, returning to his post and talking into his sleeve again.

When Drew came back into the car, he began speaking to me in that cold tone once more. I realized then, I was completely on my own here. I was surrounded by strangers — none of which I could fully trust to be around in one way or another.

“We’re going to a little pub for lunch before we hit the road.” He spoke without even fully looking at me. I nodded and looked out the window. After my little encounter with the man he’d put in charge of watching me, I wasn’t feeling particularly chatty.

“What’s the matter with you?” I felt the seat shift as Drew turned to face me.

I shrugged as I glanced over at him and back out the window.

“Hey, I’m serious. What’s wrong?” Drew forced me to turn toward him. Tears stung my eyes but I refused to let them escape down my face.

“Nothing, I’m fine.”

I could tell by his sigh; he wasn’t satisfied with my answer but he didn’t push. It was only a few minutes down the road to the small pub where we were going to have lunch. I was dreading being in the same room as all these men again. I felt so on edge.

Drew placed his hand on the small of my back and led me into the pub. The little bar and restaurant was cozy with dim lights and Irish decor. I was surprised that the Russians would be going to an Irish pub.

We sat at a large corner booth in the farthest corner of the room. A handsome red-headed guy a few years younger than me came up to the table to take our order without ever giving us a menu. I opened my mouth to order something from the chalkboard behind the bar that listed the specials when Drew interrupted.

"I'll have a burger and fries. She'll have the same." The man nodded and moved on to the others.

I leaned in and whispered in Drew's ear. "I could have ordered for myself."

"You could have, but I did."

The guy from the car motioned to Drew when the waiter was at him "put his meal on my tab. The girl's too."

Drew and I both snapped our heads over to look at him, surprised considering how things had been between them. He smiled and held up his drink to us both but he only spoke to Drew. "To make up for last night."

Drew held up his cup in a mock toast. "Thanks, Dmitri."

It felt like forever before the food came but checking the clock told me it had actually only taken a short time. Listening to the men's *shop talk* was so dull although something told me a DA would be most interested in hearing about their shipments and deliveries. We all ate which was the most normal I'd felt in a while. I just focused on my burger and fries. Small comforts. I'd just put a fry in my mouth when Dmitri's words made me choke.

"So, Drew, you going to put the girl in the pot tonight?"

Drew's hands froze, holding up his burger to his mouth. "Probably not this time."

"Pot?" I looked at Drew.

"Oh, come on, Andrew. Have some fun." Mikhail spoke up from across the table.

"I don't like to share." Drew's jaw tensed as his words came out.

"What pot?" I demanded.

"Tradition of Boss's party, we put our girls' names in a bowl and let others draw names to use the girl for the night."

"Use?"

“But apparently Drew wants to be a selfish bastard and keep you all for himself.” Dmitri spat out the angry words.

“What kind of party are we going to?” I demanded.

“Whatever the hell kind of party I want to and you’ll do what you’re told.” Drew boomed and my blood boiled.

“Like hell, I will.” I stood and stormed off toward the front door of the restaurant.

I could hear footsteps following me out and Drew calling my name from behind me but I didn’t care. I stormed out into the sunlight and stomped off down the sidewalk, not sure where I was going. I didn’t care as long as I was going as far away from Drew as possible.

I was so focused on just getting away from him that I didn’t even see the guy in front of me as we bumped into each other.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” The familiar voice made me pause and I looked up to see a familiar face looking down at me.

“Conrad,” I said surprised.

Conrad and I had met the same night Rebecca had met her Jason. We had fooled around pretty regularly for a while until he eventually wanted something more. He was a great guy and I hated that I’d hurt him so much. If I was honest with myself, it had hurt me to break things off too. I really enjoyed my time with Conrad. I cared about him but I never could bring myself to love him. I doubt I’d ever really love anyone again after all the hurt my heart had endured.

“Hailey, it’s so good to see you again. How are you?” He wrapped me in a hug and as much as I wanted to enjoy it, I knew Drew would be closing in on me soon.

I grabbed his wrist and pulled him into the alley between the two brick buildings.

“Hailey, what are you doing?” Conrad looked at me like I’d lost my mind.

“Shhh.” I covered his mouth but he pulled my hand away gently and whispered.

“When you ran into me, it looked like you were running away. Are you trying to hide from someone? Are you in trouble?” Conrad was always such a sweet guy. He was concerned about me even after everything.

“I’m hiding from someone, I just need to stay here for a few minutes,” I whispered.

“My wife’s going to be looking for me. I can’t stay here.” He was careful to keep his voice very quiet.

“Your wife?”

“Yeah.” He smiled fondly. “I met her not long after we broke up. We’ve been married for six months. Just found out I’m going to be a dad.”

“Oh my god, Conrad, that’s amazing. I’m really happy for you.” I gave him a real hug this time. I truly was happy for him.

“I don’t want to leave you like this. If you’re in some kind of trouble, we need to get you somewhere safe and maybe call the cops. We can —.”

“Look what I found.” Dmitri’s sickening voice chimed with amusement.

Two of Mikhail’s goons followed before Drew came into sight. I looked over at Drew with a pleading expression. Fear gripped me as the men closed in on me and Conrad.

“Seems the bitch has a secret boy toy. You may not like to share, my friend, but it seems you have been without even knowing it.” Dmitri spoke to Drew but his stare bore into me.

“He’s not my boyfriend. Just an old acquaintance I ran into.” I grew more nervous as the men surrounded us.

“That you happened to be alone with in an alley. Seems the little slut likes —.”

“Don’t you talk about Hailey like that.” Conrad stepped forward but I moved my body in front of him.

Dmitri grabbed me by the arm and slung me in Drew’s direction. If he hadn’t caught me, I would have fallen onto the rough gravel. By the time I regained my footing and turned around, two of the men held Conrad by the arms while Dmitri punched him in the gut with a sickening thud.

“No, stop it. Leave him alone. He has nothing to do with this.” I screamed at the top of my lungs and lunged toward them but Drew held me tight around the waist as I fought against him.

Conrad grunted and doubled over but they didn’t stop. Dmitri continued to punch him in the stomach and ribs then moved to his face. All the while, I continued to scream and fight against Drew.

I punched at his chest, clawed his arms and hands. “Let me go. Stop them. Do something, please. Please stop. Leave him alone.” I pleaded as Drew held me.

Conrad dropped to the ground and the men began to kick him over and over.

“Drew, stop this. Please. Please stop them. They’re going to kill him. He didn’t do anything.” I screamed. Hot tears poured down my face. Drew was the only thing holding me up as I watched the bloody face of the man who had never done anything but care too much for a girl who couldn’t love him back.

Finally, Drew spoke up. “Enough. Enough.” He yelled and the men finally backed off. “Leave us. I’ll meet you back at the restaurant when we’re done here.” He ordered the men and they left the alley.

As soon as the men were out of sight, Drew released me and I ran to Conrad, dropping to my knees beside his bloody body. “Conrad. Oh my god, I’m so sorry.” Tears poured from my face as I laid my cheek on his chest.

“I’m okay.” The raspy, pained voice rumbled from under my cheek and I looked up to see Conrad looking at me from his swollen, bruised face.

“Conrad,” I cried, now from relief and pain for what had happened to him because of me. “I’m sorry. I’m so so sorry.” I wept heavy, sobbing tears like I hadn’t cried in years.

“It’s okay. A couple of broken bones. Are you okay?” He struggled to talk. When he coughed, he winced and there was blood on his lips.

“I need to call an ambulance.” I felt around for my phone but couldn’t find it.

“There’s already one on the way but Hailey, we have to go.”

“Like hell we do. I’m not going anywhere with you.” I swatted away his hand as Drew tried to lift me by my arms.

“If they don’t see us at the restaurant soon Mikhail’s men will come back for him and probably us too. Is that what you want?” Drew hissed at me and forced me to my feet.

“I can’t leave him.” I fought Drew’s grasp futility.

“I’ll be okay, Hailey. The ambulance is coming.” Conrad rasped out.

I could hear the ambulance’s siren off in the distance and knew help was coming but I just couldn’t leave him. Drew lifted me off my feet and I kicked and squirmed to get away. “If they see us here, they will question us then we’ll have even more problems. Let’s go.”

He forced me out of the alley and back onto the main sidewalk. He nearly dragged me back to the restaurant, stopping just outside, he pushed

me against the wall. “Listen to me. That guy is going to be okay but you have to pull yourself together or things are going to get bad fast. Now chill the hell out and pull yourself together before we go in there.”

I hated him. At that moment I truly hated Drew. I scowled at him and spit in his face. He let out a frustrated sigh and wiped his face with his sleeve. I took the opportunity to jerk away from him and he let me.

“Good, glad we got that cleared up,” he said with a sarcastic bite.

Drew turned and went into the restaurant, keeping a tight grip on my left bicep to make sure I followed. The men were all sitting at the table talking until we got to the table.

Mikhail stood and the others followed. “We’ve paid the tab. Is there anything my men need to handle before we go?” *Like what disposing of a body because that’s the sort of thing you do?*

“Nah, it’s handled,” Drew said so casually it made me want to claw his eyes out. I gritted my teeth and held my breath, counting the moments until I could get away from these monsters. Every last one of them.

Once we were in Drew’s car again, he closed the privacy divider and turned to look at me as we took off to god knows where.

“We need to talk.”

“I have nothing to say to you.” I pulled my legs up into the seat and hugged them to me as I kept my eyes out the window and away from Drew. It hurt to even look at the man I’d once loved.

“Then just listen. I had to let them do that. If I hadn’t, they would have suspected something. Sometimes we have to let bad things happen to prevent worse things.”

“Bullshit.” I snapped and turned to glare at him. “You keep lying to yourself if you want. But that’s bullshit and you know it. You wouldn’t even let me help him. It was three against one.” Tears spilled from my eyes again as the memories flooded my mind.

“Hailey, they would have hurt you even worse. These men — they hate women — truly hate them. It’s why they enjoy torturing them with these manipulative games. You have to understand, to see you hurt like that would have killed me.”

He placed his hand on my arm and I jerked away as if he’d burned me. “Don’t you dare touch me.” I hissed at him.

“Fine, sulk all you want for the next two hours. After that, you better pull your shit together for the party tonight.”

“Party? You really expect me to go to a party with you after all this?”

“Yes,” he said bluntly, expectantly.

“You are just as bad as those bastards you’re working to take down.”

Before I knew what was happening, Drew had pinned me to the seat. His red, angry face right in mine. “I am nothing like those men.” He roared. “You don’t know what the hell you are talking about. You sit around pointing fingers and thinking you know how the world is but you don’t. Things are not always black and white in this world Hailey. So, wake the fuck up and see things for how they really are.”

This was the first time I was ever truly scared of Drew. Not scared he might break my heart. Not scared he might emotionally hurt me, but scared he might rip my head from my body at any moment. I’d never seen him so angry in all our time together.

He backed up, retreating to his side of the car. Leaning on his door, he stared at the window with as much distance as the car would allow for the rest of our trip.

Chapter 9

The feel and sound of the road changing underneath us woke me from my accidental nap. I must have fallen asleep crying because my cheeks were wet with tears. I wiped them away with the back of my hand and sat up straighter.

Drew was watching me. “You’re so beautiful when you sleep. It’s the only time you ever look that peaceful.”

“I can’t imagine it was very peaceful today.”

“Other than the tears it seemed to be.” Drew’s voice sounded much different. Almost — sorry?

“Where are we?”

“Almost to the estate. We’ll be shown to our room once we arrive so we can rest and clean up before the party tonight.”

“Okay.” I didn’t really have anything to say to him anymore.

“I made some calls about your friend.”

I perked up immediately and turned to face Drew. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah. Had two broken ribs, a broken nose, and fractured arm but he’s going to make a full recovery. Rebecca’s going up to the hospital later to check in on him too. Jason’s going too so he can clear things up a little bit.”

“Oh, thank god.” I sagged down in my seat and let out a calming breath.

“You two involved or something?”

“What?” I sat back up and looked at Drew.

“Are you sleeping with him?”

“No. I mean — I was over a year ago but not recently.”

“That explains a lot.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“He risked a lot to stand up for you. He’s in love with you — can’t blame him. It’s easy to do...to fall in love with you.”

I scoffed and rolled my eyes at him. “Love isn’t for me.”

“It used to be. What happened to change that?”

“What happ — ?” I started but the car suddenly came to a stop.

“We’re here.” Almost immediately there were men in suits opening the door for us.

I climbed out of the car after Drew and looked up in awe at the mansion with huge white pillars and balconies overlooking what I could tell would have been a lush garden landscape in the warmer months. The evergreens planted along the large brick wall that surrounded the entire property suddenly filled me with a sense of panic. We were closed in completely once the iron gate we’d driven through closed. I looked over at Drew in a panic. His hand on my back brought me calmer than it should. Somehow after everything, he was still the only one there that made me feel safe.

I didn’t like that one bit. I pulled away from him and he scowled at me before glancing over at Mikhail and his men climbing out of their large limo.

I took a deep breath to calm my nerves. As the three men who’d beat Conrad in front of me walked toward us, I realized how much danger we were really in. I wanted to run, to get out of there but there was nowhere to go.

“Glad to see you got your woman under control now.” Dmitri’s smirk made me sick. Part of me wanted to run and hide from the evil man. The other part of me wanted to jump on him, claw his eyes from their sockets, kick him in the nuts until he was in as much pain as they’d caused Conrad.

Conrad. Poor Conrad was in the hospital broken, bleeding — hurt because of me. I thought about his poor pregnant wife. I wondered what he’d tell her happened. Tears stung my eyes again as the bloody images and painful grunts ran through my mind again.

“Hey, could you at least try to keep your head in the game here?” Drew snaked his arm around my waist and whispered into my ear.

I tensed at his touch but didn’t pull away with the men so close. Mikhail strolled casually up to our group.

He held his arms out in a grand welcoming gesture. “Welcome to my estate. My men will get your bags set up in your room. I assume you wanted the girl in with you?”

“Yes, thank you for your hospitality.” Drew nodded at Mikhail. “We’d love some time to freshen up before the festivities begin.”

“Of course. The guests should start arriving in about three hours, but we have some business to attend to first. So, shall we meet in my study in two hours? Is that sufficient for you, my friend?”

“Two hours should be plenty of time. Thank you.”

“Very good. I have some catching up to do with my Lacy before the event starts anyways.” He rubbed his hands together and grinned devilishly at us before turning away to go inside.

“Lacy? The girl from the club?” I whispered to Drew.

He frowned and nodded. “She’s his latest conquest.”

“She looked so miserable...” I started but Drew stopped me.

“We can talk later about that. While we are here, never break your role. He’s known for having surveillance so we’ll have to be extra careful the next couple days.”

“A little heads up about this would have been nice.”

“I told you right after I found out. I think he did it on purpose.”

“Why?”

“He’s still suspicious which means we have to really put on a good show. If you need to talk out of character, ask me if we could take a walk in the gardens. We can talk quietly there.”

One of Mikhail’s men led us into the house where we were met by a girl in a dress that barely covered her ass and looked like it was painted on. “Natalia will take care of you from here,” The gruff man said as he gave her an appreciative once over before leaving us.

Upon further study of the house, I noticed many girls dressed similarly walking about as though they were all on an important mission. It was like the freaking Playboy mansion Russian edition.

“Welcome back, sir. It’s good to see you again.” She smiled her first genuine smile when she looked at Drew.

“It’s good to see you again as well Natalie. This is Hailey.”

“Hailey.” Her genuine smile replaced with a forced one was such a contrast that it confused me until realization hit. *She had a thing for Drew.* “You mean they finally convinced you to join in their game?” She spoke in a lower voice almost conspiratorially.

“It was bound to happen sooner or later.” Drew shrugged but I knew him well enough to know he was having a hard time with this conversation. “Hailey offered an opportunity I couldn’t pass up.”

I glared at him as his hand squeezed my side and pulled me closer.

Natalia or Natalie as Drew had called her, seemed temporarily ruffled but being around these men had clearly taught her to push her feelings aside. She plastered a passive expression on her beautifully tanned face and nodded. “Well, please, allow me to show you to your suite. I’m sure you’re ready to get settled in after your drive.”

“Thank you, Natalie.” Drew guided me with a hand on the small of my back as he followed her down the long corridor with large, ornate, wooden doors.

We stopped in front of one with the door opened. Natalie stepped aside to allow us entrance. “Here you are, sir. Is there anything I can get for you before I go?”

“No, thank you. We can manage from here.”

“Very well.” She nodded to excuse herself.

Once she was out of earshot, I looked up at Drew with a knowing look.

“What?” He scowled down at me.

“You slept with her, didn’t you?” I accused.

“Watch your tone.” He pulled me into the room and shut the door. The room was spacious, masculine and classic with dark woods and deep red tones. “We spent the night together. Not that it’s any of your business. Mikhail loaned her to me the last time I was his guest here. He’s very hospitable that way.”

“Loaned her to you, like she’s some possession of his you can just borrow?”

“Exactly like that. I won’t remind you of your tone again.” Drew warned, towering over me. He grabbed around my waist and pulled me to him, his face nuzzling against my neck. “God, you smell so good. I just can’t get enough of you.”

“Drew what the hell?” I tried to push away but he held me close.

“Watch yourself. Remember there could be bugs in here. I have a scanner in my cell so until we know what we’re dealing with, you need to act the part even here.”

Knowing he had a good reason for acting the way he was brought me some comfort but I still didn’t like it.

He released me after another minute and pretended to be interested in the decor of the room, walking around the perimeter with his hand in his

pocket I knew held his phone. He paused, looking out the window then turned to me.

“I need to hit the bathroom. Sit or lay on the bed but do not get off of it for any reason until I come back and say you can. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” I nodded and climbed up on the large four-poster bed while he disappeared into the bathroom.

I laid back and stared up at the ceiling. The crown molding was dark and matched the exposed beams that stretched the length of the room. I noticed an anomaly in one of the planks. A small, inconspicuous black spot that reflected the sunlight from the window. A camera lens. I was being watched — and it was over the bed. *What a sick freak.*

Drew came back into the suit a few minutes later and climbed onto the bed with me. He pulled me against him, my back to his front. “Now, where were we?”

He nuzzled his face in my hair. “I never want you to use any other shampoo than what you use. You smell like vanilla cookies and jasmine. It’s intoxicating.” His voice lowered to a whisper I could barely hear so bugs couldn’t detect. “There’s at least one camera feed in this room with audio.”

He shifted to press his hips into my ass and his hands moved around to rub my stomach under my shirt. I stiffened at the unfamiliar touch. His hands were firmer, rougher, and more confident than they’d been all those years ago.

“There’s a camera feed in the bathroom but no audio so we’re a little safer in there but not by much. We’ll have to be extremely careful while we’re here.”

I wrapped my hand around the back of his neck, pulling his mouth further onto my neck. The closeness to him felt awkward but I needed to tell him about my discovery.

I twisted to bring my lips close to him, letting them brush against the shell of his ear as I whispered. “There’s a camera above the bed. Third beam over. Little black dot.”

Drew rolled onto his back, pulling me on top of him. I felt extremely uncomfortable being like that with him. I had to fight my instincts at every turn. Part of me wanted to push him away, to tell him he lost his chance. Another part of me wanted to let myself go, to feel his touch again and relish in it like I had when we'd been together.

He adjusted me to straddle him as he held my hips and ground against me. My body heated and that all too familiar ache started deep in my core. I fought the urge to grind my hips on him. I reminded myself that he was putting on a show for the camera but my body didn't seem to care as my nipples tightened and my desire built.

My breathing hitched at the feel of him hardening beneath me. The ache in me grew and I rolled my hips, hoping for more friction.

His gaze met mine, then drifted over my shoulder to study the beams. I couldn't help but wonder if this was a clever ruse on his part or if he was using the camera as an excuse.

A deep growl vibrated from Drew's throat as he suddenly tossed me off of him and onto the bed beside him. "You're lucky we don't have time for this right now. We need to get ready for the party tonight."

I was flustered and panting. I didn't want him to see me like that so I got up and turned toward the bathroom door. "I should take a shower. I'm sure you want me to be fresh and presentable for tonight."

"Yes, and make it quick. We only have a little over an hour now before I have to meet Mikhail."

"Okay."

"It's yes sir."

"What?"

"Your answer should be *yes sir*. I've been too lenient on you this far as you adjusted to our new arrangement. You need to learn to be respectful at all times. It's ``yes sir." He reiterated.

I pulled my lips into a thin line, not liking this one bit but knowing a snide remark would not be tolerated while the cameras were on so I said the only thing I could under the circumstances. "Yes, sir."

I turned and went into the bathroom, closing the door with a bit more force than intended. I started the shower and was just about to get undressed when I remembered the hidden camera in the bathroom. I didn't know where it was or who was watching but I didn't have much choice in the matter since I wasn't even supposed to know it was there. It was a good thing I wasn't shy. I hoped whoever was watching enjoyed the show.

Chapter 10

I stepped out of the steam-filled shower in nothing but a white fluffy towel. I couldn't help but tease Drew a little after his rejection earlier. He glanced at me from the chair in the corner and raised an eyebrow. I gave a little shrug, fighting a smile. He finished putting on his shoes, stood up, and walked toward the bed.

"Come over here. I have something to show you."

"What is it?"

"Your dress for the night," he leaned over the bed and cradled a long flowing forest green gown and I practically ran over to see it better.

I ran my fingertips from the jewel-embellished sweetheart neckline to the flowing chiffon overlay, "it's beautiful."

"I'm glad you like it."

"I love it."

"Even better," he smiled at me before draping the dress over the armchair. "I'd like you to wear your hair up tonight. I think it would accentuate the neckline of the dress well that way."

"Since when are you a stylist?"

"I just know what I like. Go on and do your hair and makeup. I'd like to see the dress on you once it's complete."

"Yes, sir," I said with a little bit of teasing in my voice and Drew raised his brow just before I turned and went back into the bathroom.

He wanted my hair up, so I curled it and pinned it up, letting a few tendrils fall around my face. I went light with my makeup except for my smokey eyes. I was just putting the finishing touches on my makeup when Drew knocked on the bathroom door.

"Hailey? Are you done? We're going to be late."

I pulled the towel around me again and opened the door. Drew froze for a moment, his eyes grazing from my hair, down my face, to the tops of my breasts peeking out from the towel.

He cleared his voice, breaking the trance he'd been in. "Good. You're ready. You need to get dressed. We're going to be late."

With my back to him, I let my towel slip from my body, puddling onto the floor, exposing my lacy black strapless bra and matching panties.

Drew's breathing hitched and I secretly smiled. I slipped on the dress. It was breathtaking. The sweetheart neck was embellished with enough jewels that a necklace was unnecessary. The dress fit me like a glove, hugging every curve to my mid-thigh. A longer, flowing chiffon layer gave the impression of a long ball gown but the slits in it exposed my long legs. It was elegant and sexy all at once. If we weren't about to join a bunch of psychopathic Russians in the next room, I might have even been excited to wear something so elegant.

I glanced over my shoulder. Drew was still staring at me and I fought back a grin.

"Zip me up?" I asked while looking over my shoulder.

"Huh? Oh, sure," Drew startled and stepped up behind me.

His hand brushed against my skin as he zipped me up and I swore a small electrical pulse shot through me and I held my breath. Drew lightly stretched a curled tendril, making me shiver. He ran his palm over my shoulder and down my arm. I couldn't help the way my body responded, leaning into his touch.

"You look beautiful," Drew rasped near my ear. He ran the back of his hand down the side of my neck and down my shoulder and I closed my eyes, letting out a relaxed sigh. "I like this."

There was a knock on the door and I froze.

"I'll get that," Drew said as he stepped away from me to answer the door.

"Natalia, what are you doing here?" Drew asked.

Natalia was dressed in a super sleek black gown with silver jewelry and her hair pulled up in a tight bun. I recognized Lacy beside her dressed in a surprisingly innocent-looking white flowing gown with cream lace overlay. It seemed Mikhail liked his girl to look like the sweet and innocent type — when she's not spinning around a stripper pole at his club.

"Hi, Lacy. We met at the club the other night."

She offered me a shy smile and nodded without saying a word.

"She's not allowed to speak unless one of the men allows it," Natalia explained.

"Oh." I frowned.

"Mikhail asked me to make sure you weren't having any issues. He wanted me to point out the time..." she spoke timidly.

Drew glanced at his watch and looked surprised, “We’re running late. Hailey, are you ready to go?”

“Almost. I need to put my shoes on and a few last-minute touch-ups.”

“Okay. Natalia, will you escort Hailey to the party once she’s ready. I really shouldn’t keep Mikhail waiting any longer.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Thank you,” Drew smiled at Natalia then looked at me. “I’ll see you in there.”

Once Drew left, I touched up my makeup one last time, suddenly nervous about the party.

“Hurry. We don’t want to keep the men waiting.” Natalia warned.

“I know. I am.”

I slipped on my strappy green heels and did one last check in the mirror. The whole thing was like being in some weird dream.

“They do not like to be kept waiting.”

I grabbed my clutch and shut the door behind me before we left.

Chapter 11

We walked down the long hall in silence until we reached a large set of wooden double doors. They were rounded into an arch and reminded me of something you'd see in a medieval castle. Come to think of it, the whole place had a modern medieval fused feel to it. It was a strange combination but it made for a stunning look.

I'm not sure what I was expecting from these horrible monsters I'd fallen in with but what I saw when the door opened was definitely not it. The elegant ballroom was huge and designed like something from a fairytale. Though in this fairytale, the dashing men were not princes at all — they were the monsters. And, the beautiful women were not princesses but one step above being slaves.

There were more people than I'd expected and everyone was dressed in red-carpet attire. A few couples danced in the middle of the room. The majority of people stood around laughing and talking, sipping champagne or taking shots of vodka.

The moment we were in the door, Natalia abandoned us but I sensed Lacy still lingering close to me.

"I suppose we should find Mikhail and Drew."

"I suppose." She said with a sigh of dread. I was surprised to hear her speak after what Natalia had said. The fact that as soon as she was gone, Lacy found the courage to break the rules and speak led me to believe that Natalia was probably reporting back to Mikhail.

"With so many people here, it could take us a while to find them." I smiled at her and she smiled back which I suspected she didn't do often.

"Champagne?" One of the girls in a server's uniform stopped in front of us with a tray of champagne glasses and shots of vodka.

"Well, this is a celebration." I smiled and took two glasses. I offered one to Lacy and she looked like it might bite her. "Are you not allowed to drink?"

"I don't know. I've never asked."

"How long have you been with Mikhail?"

"Six months." She looked down at the floor.

"Has he ever given you alcohol?"

“Yes.”

“Then why wouldn’t he allow it now?”

“I’d rather not risk it, but thank you.”

“I get it.” She looked at me skeptically as if saying *you have no idea*. “I saw the bruises.” She nodded but didn’t say a word. “So, what does he have on you?”

She pulled her lips between her teeth and looked down as though she were about to cry.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to tell me. Why don’t we go try to find some food? You’re allowed to eat, aren’t you?”

She was silent a moment and I feared my nosy nature caused her to close off but suddenly she spoke in a very soft voice so no one else could hear.

“It’s my younger brother.” She kept her eyes to the floor.

“He needed money or something?”

“No. He’s going to college up north. He’s so smart. Got a full scholarship — even covers living expenses up to a point and his part-time job is more than enough to cover the rest.” She smiled and I heard the pride in her voice.

“He sounds like quite an impressive guy.”

“He’s going to be a doctor. He wants to study new cancer treatments since that’s what took both of our parents.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear about your parents but it’s wonderful that he’s using that as motivation instead of letting such a tragedy limit him. I’m not exactly sure how Mikhail is using him to control you, though.” I knew I must be missing a piece of the puzzle. From what Drew said, these men liked to use something against a girl to control them — a job, money, something.

She took a deep breath before finally looking up at me. “I met Mikhail at a club. I was a *dancer* to pay for my community college classes. I was never as smart as my brother but I was going to be a nurse. Oh, and by the way, my name isn’t really Lacy, that was the name he gave me. My real name is Laura.”

I listened on, waiting for things to connect. “Mikhail said that the moment he saw me, he knew he had to have me. He offered to pay for my classes in exchange for a certain arrangement.”

“But I thought you said it had to do with your brother?”

“It does. I told him no. I was fine working to pay for my education. I may not have liked dancing for those creeps but at least I was supporting myself.”

“I take it Mikhail didn’t like hearing no?”

“On the contrary. He loved it — still does. He likes the challenge.” She took the champagne glass from my hand and downed it in one gulp. “I thought he had accepted my answer, until one night he and two of his creeps were waiting for me outside in the parking lot after work. He told me he had eyes on my brother. That pre-med and medical school can be very stressful. A lot of students end up taking drugs to help them through. Some even o.d. He said if I wanted my brother to continue to live the good life and not show up dead in his dorm, that I needed to do what he said. I thought he was full of it — I called his bluff, then he showed me a photograph. It was a picture of the newspaper from the day before, in the background was my brother walking to his dorm from his car.”

“Oh my god.” I gasped.

“So now you know why I have no choice. What’s your reason?”

I hated the idea of lying to Lacy after she just told me her whole story but she’d be in more danger knowing the truth. Besides, I had no idea if I could really trust her or not, though I felt like I could.

“I got into some debt — with some dangerous guys. If I want to pay them back, I need money fast. Drew found me and said he could help.”

“For a price,” Lacy added.

“Isn’t there always?”

She nodded before tensing. Her eyes grew wider and more alert than moments ago. Following her gaze over my shoulder, I spotted Drew and Mikhail heading our way.

I took the champagne glass from her and set it on the table, hoping they hadn’t noticed just in case she had reason to fear.

“There you girls are.” Drew chimed and pulled me to him, holding me at arm’s length and gazing over my dress. “I knew this dress would look great on you but... wow.”

I couldn’t help but smile at his compliment.

“Drinking instead of looking for us?” Mikhail said, picking up the champagne glass while keeping his gaze locked on Lacy.

I knew I might regret it but I’d be damned if I let her take the fall for the drinks. “One of the waitresses offered us a glass as we were rounding

the room to look for you both. Lacy declined but I encouraged her. I thought you'd appreciate her relaxing and loosening up a bit since this is a special occasion and all. She said you never said she couldn't —."

Drew eyed me worriedly but I forced the polite smile to stay on my lips, hoping That If I acted like it was no big deal, Mikhail might see it that way as well.

"You're right. But let's limit it to just the one, hm, Lacy? To make sure you keep your wits."

"Yes, sir. Thank you." She whispered timidly. I noticed how her whole demeanor had shifted the moment Mikhail was near.

"I think the one is enough for you too," Drew said to me and I nodded. I needed to keep my wits about me more than just about anyone at this party. A slip of the tongue could be detrimental and we both knew that. It was one thing we could actually agree on.

The music switched to another beautiful instrumental piece and Drew held his hand out to me. "Dance with me."

I was still unsure about what to feel about him. I hadn't liked the man I found him to be all those years ago when he cheated on me and I didn't like him most of the time still. He was a total asshole when around Mikhail, but there were moments when he looked at me, and it was like looking back in time to before everything had fallen apart.

On top of all that, I was still angry and hurt over what had happened to Conrad. A part of me knew what Drew said was true, he was trying to protect us both and the mission, but there had to have been some way to protect Conrad too. I didn't want to dance with him and I would have told him just that, had Mikhail not been standing right there watching us.

I timidly placed my hand in his and he led me out onto the dance floor. Once he found our spot, he gave my hand a short yank pulling my body against his. He cradled my hand in his while slipping his other around to rest on the small of my back.

"Do you have to hold me so close?" I said irritably.

"No." The word was said so matter-of-factly but his arm tightened around me until my breasts were squashed against his hard chest.

Before I could say more, he swirled me around the dance floor as though we were floating. The sheer Chiffon of my dress swirled around my legs, dancing on its own accord.

“When did you learn to dance like this?” I asked just before Drew spun me out, his arm fully extending and he drew me back into his arms.

“I’ve learned a great deal since we dated.”

“Clearly.”

He pulled me closer, his breath on my ear as he whispered softly, “You look absolutely stunning this evening.”

I pulled back so that I could look at him with hard eyes.

“No one can hear you out here. You don’t have to lay it on so thick.”

He raised a brow, “I was being genuine.”

“Oh.”

“You take a compliment worse than any woman I’ve ever met. You know that?”

“Well, I—”

“Just say thank you.” He smirked at me and pulled me tight against him.

I scowled at him and pursed my lips. “Thank you,” the words left a bitter taste in my mouth.

“You’re welcome.”

“I’m still mad at you, you know.”

“I know. And, I really am sorry about your friend. The doctors said he’s going to be okay, though.”

“He’s married now.”

“That guy?”

“Conrad, yeah.”

“You used to date?”

“We used to hook-up. Like I told you, I don’t date.”

“You don’t get that upset over someone you hooked up with a few times.” He looked down at me skeptically.

“We saw each other pretty regularly for a while.”

“So, you dated,” he said flatly.

I shrugged. “I guess — maybe.”

“What happened?”

“He wanted more.”

“More than hooking up regularly?”

“Yeah, more than hooking up regularly.”

“So, he ended it?”

“No, I did. He wanted to keep hooking up if that was all he could have. He said he’d rather have me however he could than not at all. I knew he wouldn’t be happy with that so I ended it.”

“Do you regret breaking things off with him?”

“No. I wasn’t the one for him. He was looking for love, the possibility of marriage. After we broke things off, he met the woman he’s now married to.”

“So, you never want to get married or just not to him?”

“Marriage, love, and all that stuff isn’t in the cards for me.”

“Why not?”

“It just isn’t.”

“Hailey, what happened?”

“You happened.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I thought you and I were the real deal. I thought we were —” Tears pricked my eyes. I couldn’t do this here surrounded by these people.

“You thought we were...?” Drew looked at me expectantly.

“I thought — it’s stupid. I was stupid.”

“Hailey, what are you trying to say?” Drew was losing his patience but I had no desire to rehash all my stupidity now or ever.

“May I cut in?” Mikhail interrupted.

Drew looked hesitant but then moved aside, allowing Mikhail to take his place.

I hated being in his arms. He held me close as Drew had done but with him, the sensation made me sick. I couldn’t believe I’d actually hit on this guy the first time I met him in his club.

“You look positively stunning this evening,” he said as his hand slid down, boarding between the small of my back and my ass.

“Thank you.” I fought the urge to knee him right where it counts. “Where’s Lacy?”

“She is entertaining some of my important guests.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, knowing how this man worked. I was concerned for Lacy and I found myself looking around the room for her.

“It is rude not to give your dance partner your full attention.” Mikhail chastised.

“I’m sorry.” I looked down at his chest but his finger lifted my chin to look up at him.

“Looking for your owner like a good loyal girl?”

“My owner?” I couldn't help the bite in my tone.

“Andrew. He owns you, does he not?”

“No, he doesn't own me.”

“He paid a lot of money to some dangerous men for you, did he not?”

“Well, yes. I mean he—”

“And now you are his to do with as he pleases. He owns you.”

“I don't like the word *own*.”

“Like it or not, it is what it is. You are new to all this so let me give you a tip. When he loans you to someone else for dancing or anything else — it's best to focus on that person fully and work extra hard to be found pleasing. If you insult them, it is insulting him and no real man will put up with that.”

“Loan me?” I looked up at him confused.

“Right now Andrew is caught up in the newness of having you to himself but it is not uncommon for my men to share their girls among themselves or with me and believe me, there is already a mile-long line of my men who would jump at the chance for a night with you. I'm still trying to convince Andrew to place you in the drawing for this evening.” I stiffened in his arms and temporarily forgot how to breathe.

“Drew wouldn't do that.”

“You've only just met him. How do you know what he would or would not do?” Before I could come up with an answer, Mikhail continued. “If I set my mind to it, I'm sure I could convince him. I might even take you out of the drawing to make sure I'm the one to get you. I haven't forgotten the night we first met.”

I couldn't breathe. I knew Drew wouldn't agree to that no matter what Mikhail said or did. *Didn't I?* Then again, I never thought Drew would be the type to stand by while three men beat up an innocent man either.

“Please excuse me.” I tried to pull out of his arms but he held me tight enough that it hurt.

His words were soft and quiet but they still managed to come across as a threat. “I will have you before this is done. Make no mistake about it.”

I couldn't speak, I pushed against his chest and he released me. I hurried off the dance floor, looking for Drew as Mikhail's sickening laugh faded off in the distance.

I searched everywhere but couldn't find him. *Why would he have left me here without a word?*

I spotted one of Mikhail's men standing by the door. At the club, he'd seemed less threatening than the rest — the way a cottonmouth might seem less threatening than a cobra.

"Where's Drew? Have you seen him?"

The man smirked, and looked me up and down silently for a long moment before finally speaking. "He said he had to take care of something. He wanted you to meet him back in your room as soon as you were done with the dance."

"Thank you," I said, rushing from the ballroom to find Drew. He wouldn't have just left me like that. He wanted to meet back in the room? Had something happened? Was something wrong? I needed to get to him.

It was everything I could do to not run down the corridor but that would bring more attention to myself. Instead, I walked as quickly as I could without looking too suspicious.

I found our room and slowly opened the door as to not startle him. If something was wrong, I was sure he would be on guard.

"Drew?" I called out quietly as I crept through the dark room. "Drew?" I lifted my voice slightly in case he couldn't hear me.

I couldn't see him anywhere. *Maybe he's in the bathroom?* I glanced into the closet just to be sure before going to the bathroom. I flipped on the light but there was no one. I turned around just as I heard the front door click shut.

"Drew? Is everything okay?" I walked out but it wasn't Drew. It was Mikhail.

I stumbled to a stop just outside the bathroom door. Something in his eyes had changed. They looked darker. "I— I'm looking for Drew. I was told he would be here."

"He's not." Mikhail said casually as he looked around. "Perhaps you got your message wrong. Perhaps he was sent away to handle some business far on the other side of my estate. Urgent business that couldn't wait."

He prowled toward me. The lion stalking his prey. I knew then what the antelope felt like just before the pounce. I stepped back, but there was nowhere to go. There was only one way out of the room and he was successfully blocking it.

Mikhail must have seen me eyeing the doorway because he responded accordingly. "Two of my men are just outside that door. They have been instructed that no one enter and no one exit. It'd be best to accept what is going to happen here."

He continued to stalk toward me. I glanced around for anything I might be able to use as a weapon but there was nothing. My eyes fell onto the lamp on the nightstand. I lunged for it but Mikhail was too quick. He grabbed me and threw me onto the bed. I landed on my stomach and pushed up but he pushed me back down, pinning my shoulders with his forearm.

His other hand fought with the flowing fabric as he bunched it in his hand, pushing it up my legs. I kicked and screamed, squirming under him to escape. I heard the sound of his zipper and screamed again as adrenaline gave me the strength to push up against his arm just enough for him to slam me back down again.

I heard a loud slamming sound from the entryway followed by Drew's voice. "Get off her. I told you I don't share."

Mikhail's weight lifted off of me and I turned over on the bed to see Drew pinning him to the wall by his throat.

"You son of a bitch. You don't touch her."

"Why not? She's just another whore like all the rest."

Drew's fist came inches from Mikhail's face as he punched the wall. "I told you. I don't share."

Mikhail's men came storming in. They grabbed Drew and pulled him off Mikhail who was laughing like a mad man.

"You still see her as a person. She's nothing. These women -- they are nothing but things to be possessed but I do like your spirit, my boy. You'll learn. It will take some time but you will learn. Teach him a lesson."

Mikhail walked out of the room and the two large men threw Drew to the ground and began punching and kicking him.

"No. Stop it," I screamed. "Leave him alone."

I lunged at the men but the larger of the two slung me across the room as if I weighed nothing. I slid across the hardwood floor and into the side of the small wooden desk. Stunned, I barely saw the men dole out two more kicks before they stopped, leaving Drew barely conscious, groaning on the floor.

Chapter 12

I crawled over to him as fast as my arms and legs would carry me. Hovering above him, I rolled him over to see his face.

“Drew. Are you okay? Of course, you're not okay. How bad are you hurt?”

“I'll be alright.” He tried to force a smile but I could see the pain in his expression.

“No, you're not. Should I call an ambulance or maybe Ja—?” I turned to look for a phone but he reached his hand out and grabbed me.

“No. No calls.” He cut me off. “Just help me up.”

“I don't think you should move.”

“Help me up and take me into the bathroom to check my wounds.” He gave me a determined look. “Help me to the *bathroom*,” he said again.

The bathroom. No audio, only a camera in there.

“Okay, if you say so.” I struggled to help him up, realizing just how much larger he was than me. After finally getting him upright, his arm around my shoulders helped support him as he limped.

I closed the toilet lid and helped him sit. Seeing him in the bright lights made every cut and bruise look worse. There was already a nasty bruise forming on his cheek. I could only imagine what the rest of him would look like.

“Are you sure you don't need to go to the hospital?”

“Move over in front of me a little more.”

“Okay.” I looked at him, confused.

“Good, now our mouths should be blocked from the camera so we can talk openly. Just don't forget they're watching. Can you help me out of these?” He reached for the buttons on his suit jacket and cringed.

“Of course. Let me.” I knelt down in front of him and unbuttoned each button before peeling his jacket from his shoulders carefully. I repeated the steps with his dress shirt, exposing his rippling, chiseled chest and abs that were already turning blue and purple.

I gasped, gently running my fingers over the angry bruises. I looked up into his face with tears in my eyes. “You saved me.”

“I swore to you that I'd protect you.”

I stood, wet a washcloth in the sink, and took my place once more kneeling in front of him as I carefully washed the cuts and scrapes. “I guess your cover is blown now.” I frowned as I worked, not looking him in the face, thinking of Lacy’s story and so many other girls who probably had similar ones.

I wanted to get the girls away from those horrible men even more now. Those other girls didn’t have a Drew to rush in to save them. I thought of what almost happened and began to tremble as tears ran down my cheeks.

Drew took the washcloth from me and set it on the counter, carefully wrapping me in his arms and holding me against his chest. “My cover hasn’t been blown. Men in this business get in fights all the time. Mikhail will see the beating as my punishment for going against him.

Tomorrow he’ll act as if nothing ever happened. It’s how he is — the psychotic motherf—.”

“Wait, you mean you plan on staying?” I gasped and pulled away to gape up at him.

“Of course. The mission isn’t over yet, but I will have to find a way to get you out without raising suspicions.”

“You can’t be serious. You can’t stay with these men.”

“Hailey, this is nothing. These men have killed. They are dangerous. I already told you that.”

“Yeah but —.”

“I’ll find a way to get you out of this.”

“Won’t that raise more suspicions since I’m supposed to be indebted to you?”

“Let me worry about that.”

“They could end up killing you.”

“It won’t get that far but this has gone far enough with you. You need to get out.”

“No,” I stated firmly.

Drew’s forehead creases and he looks at me as though I’d lost my mind. “What?”

“I’m not leaving.”

“Hailey, Mikhail tried something before. I’m not going to have you anywhere near him.”

“So, don't. We'll make sure I'm never alone with anyone but you from now on. They wouldn't blame you for that after everything. But I'm not leaving you here like that. I said I'd help. Besides. I talked to Lacy tonight — her story is horrible and I can't imagine how many others there are. I want to help them.”

“God, you're incredible.” Drew looked at me with such admiration. Before I knew it, his hand reached out and cupped the back of my head, pulling me towards him as his lips crashed onto mine.

I leaned into the kiss. My lips parted as his tongue demanded entrance. It wasn't the kiss I'd remembered from him when we dated. This was more confident — more demanding. This was the kiss of a man who knew what he wanted and took it. Not the kiss from the timid boy he used to be.

He ran his tongue along my lips. He nipped at my lower lip, pulling it into his mouth and letting it slowly slide free before he kissed my lips again. He tangled his fingers into my hair and held me firmly in place. His other arm slipped around me, pulling me against him.

He hissed through his teeth as my body pressed against his bruised torso. I pulled back but he stopped me. He kissed me again, feverishly, desperately. My body heated and desire pooled between my thighs. After what Mikhail had tried, I shouldn't want any man anywhere near me but all I could think of was wanting Drew's touch, craving his kisses, needing him to wash away all the thoughts of what almost happened to me.

Drew gently ran his hands down my spine and I shivered. God, I wanted him. I'd wanted him since I walked away from him all those years ago. *All those years ago when he cheated on you.* My mind reminded me.

Maybe he wasn't the same man he used to be. He certainly kissed differently. *Once a cheater, always a cheater.* Damn my mind.

I pulled away, breaking the kiss, panting with need but refusing to give in. Not that anything could happen anyways in his condition. He had just been beaten for Christ's sake.

“I should see about getting you some ice for your ribs.”

“Hailey, don't do this.” Drew knew me too well. He knew my mind had gotten in the way.

“You need ice.” I stood, deciding on a course of action.

“Don't go. Don't talk yourself out of this. It feels right to you too or you wouldn't have kissed me back. You know I'm right.”

“Where can I get ice? I assume you’d prefer me not going around on my own looking for it so it’s better to tell me now.”

Drew sighed. He knew there was no fighting me on this. “Go to the phone. Dial 8 for the kitchen. You can order food, drinks, ice, whatever you want.”

I followed his directions then got him settled into the bed. Within fifteen minutes there was a knock on the door.

“Who is it?”

“I’m from the kitchen, ma’am.” It was a clear, American female voice but I was still hesitant when opening the door, knowing Mikhail was somewhere in the estate — probably plotting his next move.

I cracked the door open and peeked out to see a pretty blonde girl in waitstaff uniform standing with a rolling cart. I opened the door and allowed her to roll the cart inside.

She quickly made her way to the small table by the window where she began placing the drinks and a bucket of ice. She didn’t even glance around the room or to the bed where Drew was laying. Mikhail’s staff was discreet if nothing else. She kept her eyes lowered toward the floor though I wasn’t sure if it was shyness or fear I detected in her.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, ma’am?”

“No, thank you very much.”

“Oh no, thank you, ma’am.” The girl rolled the cart back out as fast as she came.

I shut and locked the door. I used a shower cap I’d found in the bathroom to wrap some ice in before slowly placing it on Drew’s ribs. He tensed but made no other sounds or movements.

“Sorry.” I looked up at him, sitting on the edge of the bed while I helped hold the ice in place.

“It’s just cold.” Drew forced a smile.

“I still think you should see a doctor.”

“I agree.”

“You do? Should I call for an ambulance?” I jumped off the bed but Drew caught my hand.

“No. There’s an in-house doctor here. You’d be surprised how often he’s needed in this business.”

I frowned. “No, I wouldn’t — not after what I’ve seen. Are you sure you can trust this in-house doctor?”

“Yeah. He’s a professional even if he’s a little unethical in who he treats and what he reports.”

“Okay. How do I get him?”

“Dial 9-1-1 on the phone.”

“911? Won’t that connect me to you know — 911?” I wondered if maybe those guys had kicked Drew in the head during the beating.

“The room phones don’t make outside calls.”

“Of course, they don’t.” I rolled my eyes and went to the phone.

“911 on that phone connects you to him.”



It only took the doctor twenty minutes to arrive and about fifteen to examine Drew’s wounds.

“Well my boy, I’d say you got lucky. You somehow managed not to break anything during this — encounter.” He gave Drew a knowing look. “Seems the blows hit just right to apply the least amount of damage which is usually not the case in these situations. You either knew how to shield yourself or were very lucky.”

“Oh yeah, luck’s my middle name.” Drew joked but the laugh made him wince.

“You’re going to be in a good deal of pain for a few days but you should be fine. Take some aspirin, or I can have something stronger brought to you.”

“I’ll be fine, thanks Doc.”


The doctor turned to me as he was walking toward the door. His voice lowered to a whisper. “Call me back out here if anything changes and you should both try to be more careful. Next time, one of you might not be as lucky.”

“Thank you, doctor.” I smiled and watched him walk out before locking the door behind him.

I returned to the bed and climbed up beside him. I sat in the middle of the bed facing him. “We need to go. Please?”

“We leave tomorrow morning anyways. There’s no point in leaving tonight. It’s over with now.”

I let out a sigh and curled up beside him on the bed still dressed in my gown but too tired to bother changing. I quickly dozed off to sleep.



I didn't see Mikhail when we left the next morning which relieved me more than anything. One of the doormen had taken our bags and placed them in the trunk.

"Will you please let me help you to the car?"

"I'm fine. I can walk on my own." Drew argued as we walked out to the yard.

The driver stood by the car waiting for us. His body tensed and there was a flash of something in his expression when Drew limped toward the car. I suspected then, that the driver was probably also one of Drew's men undercover to provide safety and backup if it was needed.

He left the car and met us halfway. His professionalism was shattered as he ground out a low growl only Drew and I could hear. "What the hell happened?"

"Nothing to worry about, Philip. Minor incident. We'll discuss it on the drive home."

"Yes, Sir." The driver — Philip — regained his composure, opening the door and allowing me to help Drew into the car before shutting us both inside.

Once we were on the road, he adjusted the rearview mirror and spoke with a much more casual tone than I'd heard before.

"One of you want to fill me in now?"

"Mikhail decided he wanted to try to fuck Hailey while sending me on a wild goose chase on the other side of the estate," Drew said in a matter of fact voice.

Philip pumped the brakes. His concerned eyes darted to me in the mirror.

"I'm fine. Drew got there before anything could happen."

Philip relaxed a bit and glanced back at Drew. "I'm guessing Mikhail didn't like being interrupted?"

"Nah, he had a couple of his goons rough me up. Doc says there's nothing broken but it still hurts like a bitch."

"Do we need to stop by the office and see our doc?"

"Nah, they'll be watching us even more now. Gotta keep the cover tight."

"So, you are staying the course? Both of you?" He glanced back and me to check my response.

"Both of us," I answered.

The drive home was pretty quiet. At least it was until Drew decided he should probably call Jason and fill him in on what was going on. I could hear the yelling through the phone followed by a demand Drew put the phone on speaker.

“Am I on speaker now?” Jason’s angry voice boomed through the phone.

“Yes, you’ve got me and Hailey and Philip is driving.”

“Hailey? Are you alright?” Jason’s harsh voice softened slightly.

“I’m fine. Drew took the brunt of it.”

“Drew’s an idiot but he’s trained to take a beating with minimal injury. I’m not just talking physically, Hailey. Are you okay?” He emphasized each word.

“Yeah.”

“And you are wanting to stay the course. Even after all this?”

“Yes. I don’t want to leave Drew in a bad position.”

“We can figure something out. Say a distant relative died and gave you the money you needed in their will, or that they are sick and need you to come stay with them for a while. We can figure out a way to get you out without risking Drew.”

“Thanks, Jason, but... I met one of these girls you guys are trying to help. I get it now and I want to do what I can to help.”

“It’s admirable you want to help but you aren’t trained to deal with this stuff.”

“I’ve got good guys to help with that.”

“Okay Drew, I’ll approve this — for now. But I swear, if you let anything happen to her, these Russians will be the least of your problems. Understood?”

“Thanks for the support boss and yes, I’m fine. My injuries will heal before too long. Thanks for the concern.” Drew smirked and hung up the phone. “Well, we clearly know who the favorite is here.”

I raised a brow at him and smirked. “Did you ever really think it was you?”

“Not for a minute.” He chuckled and winced.

I looked out the window at the cars passing by as we headed back into the city and let my mind wander. I thought about my life, about Drew, our past, how he seemed so different now. I thought about Mikhail, Dmitri, Conrad, Lacy... There was this whole other world right under my nose all

this time. I wanted to help. I wanted to do more than my silly HR work that seemed so insignificant now.

We parked at the apartment and Philip opened the door for us. “Go ahead and get him upstairs. I’ll bring the bags up.”

“Thanks, Philip.” I smiled and wrapped my arm around Drew.

We settled onto the couch while Philip brought in the bags. “You can just put those anywhere. I’ll put them up later.”

“If you’re sure.”

I nodded. “It’s been a long drive. I’m sure you could use a break. Can I get you a drink?”

“No thank you. I have an apartment in the building too, so I’m just going to slip out and go home. Call if you need anything.”

“I will. Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome, and ma’am?”

“You can call me Hailey, you know.”

“Hailey,” The word sounded awkward on his tongue. “I think what you are doing is incredible. Just be careful.”

“I will.”

I walked Philip to the door and came back to see Drew sleeping on the couch. He was awake when I’d fallen asleep and awake before me that morning. I doubted he slept at all. He had to be completely worn out. I covered him with the faux fur throw and gently brushed a stray hair from his forehead.

I hadn’t eaten anything since the night before and that had only been a couple hors d’oeuvre before all the trouble started. I hadn’t even noticed how hungry I was until half an hour before we got back to the apartment.

I rummaged through Drew’s fridge and settled with making a grilled cheese sandwich. After I devoured the sandwich, I checked on Drew, who was still sound asleep. I figured he would be out for a while.

I went into his office and found my laptop still in its bag. I opened it and logged in to the secure network. Diving into my usual work for about an hour was good for me. It helped reset my brain and reminded me of what was real and what wasn’t.

It might sound strange, but after only those few days, I was already feeling unhinged. I needed the normalcy to help bring me back.

After a bit of work, I decided to take a bath. I ran the hot water into Drew’s clawfoot tub and added in some of my vanilla-jasmine bath oil

before climbing in. The hot water stung my skin but it felt good. I sunk down until the water came to my neck. I loved the curve of the tub. It cradled my head perfectly as I leaned back and closed my eyes.

I breathed deep and let the warmth consume me.

Chapter 13

I woke up still in the tub. The water was cold and my eyes were wet from tears. I'd been dreaming. I wiped the tears away as I sat up, hugging my knees to my chest. I closed my eyes and thought about Drew. I'd dreamed of the day my whole world had turned upside down.

I really had thought we'd end up getting married and living happily ever after. I was a fool. There was no happily ever after — not for me. Drew had given me a crash course in reality the day I walked in on him making out with that girl in the bar. I could still hear her moans and giggles as he kissed her ear and down her neck to the crook of her shoulder.

Tears streamed down my cheeks again. *You can't let yourself fall for him again.* Drew was the only man with the power to completely destroy me. He'd done it once and if I let him, he'd do it all over again. The first time shattered me. It broke my heart and left me guarded against loving any man ever again. A second time would be more than my poor heart could bare.

Drew's soft voice from the door caught me off guard. "What were you dreaming?"

I jumped guiltily and swiped away the tears. "I— I can't remember."

"You've never been a very good liar." He walked right into the bathroom without invitation and leaned against the sink.

"The water's cold now. Could you hand me the robe?" I pointed to the robe that hung well within my reach. I'd just needed something to change the subject.

Drew handed me the robe but his gaze lingered on my body as I reached for it. He turned away to allow me privacy while I slipped it on.

"Okay. I'm covered."

"Too bad." Drew said as he turned back to face me with a smirk.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head at him. "You're impossible."

"At least I'm consistent."

My smirk fell. As it did, so did Drew's. "What? What is it?" He stepped closer to me but I turned away toward the door.

"I'm hungry. What do you want to do about dinner?"

I could hear the defeat in his voice. “I could order some take out. Pizza or Chinese?”

“Chinese.” I forced a smile and Drew walked past me out of the bathroom to make the call.

It had been a long emotional few days. I slipped on my pajamas Rebecca had packed from my apartment. It was nice to wear something that was really mine. I bet she knew that. Rebecca knew me better than just about anyone. I missed my best friend. Once this was all over, I decided I was going to kidnap her for a girls’ spa weekend.

I lazily wandered out of the bedroom and down the hall toward the living room when I heard Drew’s angry voice radiating down the hall from his office.

I quickened my steps and stopped just outside his almost closed office door as his voice lowered.

“I don’t care what the hell you do to me. Send all the Russian bastards you’ve got, you are not going to touch her you son of a bitch.”

I held my breath, listening and praying he wouldn’t find me snooping.

“No. I don’t care if it’s *common practice* to share with the leader. I’m not one of your lackeys.”

Mikhail was still trying to sleep with me. He wanted what he couldn’t have and the events of this trip had made me the biggest challenge of his life. Not only did he need to convince me, he had to deal with Drew. It was a rush for him — a power trip.

I walked into the room and whispered to get his attention. “Drew...”

His eyes widened, probably unsure of how much I’d heard. He held his finger up to tell me just a minute, probably expecting me to leave but I didn’t.

“I don’t care. I told you I don’t share.”

“Drew...” I whispered.

“This discussion is over.” He went to hang up the phone but I could hear Mikhail’s booming voice over the line.

“This is not over.”

“Sorry about that. How much of that did you hear?” Drew looked at me hesitantly.

“Enough to know Mikhail still wants me and is threatening your safety to get me.”

“I will never let him touch you.” Drew stepped forward and ran his finger down my cheek. I instinctively leaned into his touch before catching myself. I took in a sharp breath and stepped back.

“That’s what you were dreaming about, wasn’t it? About the attack?”

“No, I —” I waved my hand like I was fanning away the words. “Mikhail isn’t going to give up on having me.”

“I won’t let him hurt you no matter what I have to do.”

“Drew, there are more people involved in this than just me.”

“I don’t care. I’ll blow up this whole mission if it means keeping you safe.”

“But that won’t keep me safe. That won’t keep anyone safe — except for Mikhail and his men.”

His jaw tensed. He knew I was right.

I took a deep breath, not believing what I was about to say. “You need to voluntarily *loan* me to him to get back on his good side.”

“What? Have you completely lost your damn mind? You want to —.”

“I don’t *want* to, but think about it, Drew. What better way to show him you’re on board with him? That would erase any doubts about your loyalty to him. It would prove to him you’re with him.”

Drew’s head looked like it might explode like in the cartoons. “You have got to be kidding me. Or you’ve lost your mind. Damn it, Hailey, why would you even say something like that?” He turned away from me angrily.

I rushed to him and pulled on his bicep until he turned to look at me. “Tell me it’s not true. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“Do you even know what that would mean for you? For me?”

“Before you came storming into the club and interrupted things, I was going to go home with Mikhail that night.”

“So, you *want* to be with him?” His accusatory tone was filled with pain.

“No of course not, not now that I know who he is. But that’s my point. Most of the time with things like this, I don’t take time to find out much about the guy before hooking up with him. At least this would be to help the whole operation.”

“Hailey, you are half stupid if you think for one minute, I’d let you go off alone with him.”

“So that’s it then? Protect me in exchange for saving all those poor girls who are stuck with him and his men for the rest of their lives or until they get bored of them. Then I don’t want to even think of what they do to the ones they tire of.”

“That’s not fair.” Drew roared.

“No, it’s not fair. I know what I’m getting into. It would be a one-time thing. Then I wouldn’t be such a challenge to him and he’d trust you completely. He’d never suspect you if you allowed that.”

“If I allowed him to — . Hailey, no. I can’t do that?”

“Why not? What makes me better than all those girls that are being held against their will? Why am I special?”

“Because I don’t love them.” He yelled.

“You don’t — ? Drew, that’s ridiculous.”

“Hailey, I don’t care about what happened in our past. I know you can feel it too. I still love you. I never stopped. Tell me you don’t feel it too.”

I did love him. I’d never stopped. Even when I hated him for what he’d done to me, I never stopped loving him. But, if I told him that, there’d be no going back. My heart would be opened, vulnerable and raw, ready to be broken all over again when his true nature took back over. *Once a cheater...*

He stepped forward to be right in my face. “I’ve seen it in your eyes. Tell me you don’t feel the same. Tell me you don’t love me and I’ll agree to this.” He demanded.

I took a deep breath and fought back the tears that threatened to spill from my eyes because if they came, I didn’t know if I could ever get them to stop.

“I don’t love you.” I nearly choked on the words and Drew looked as if I’d just slapped him in the face.

“You’re lying.” He yelled. “You love me. I’ve seen it in the way you look at me. In those moments before you guard yourself again.” His loud roaring voice made me back up but he stepped forward again, enclosing me between him and the wall, with one hand on either side of my head.

“What you saw was concern and care for someone I used to love.” It was so hard to speak with the lump in my throat but I pushed on.” I don’t want to see you get hurt. Which is why I have to do this.”

Drew turned away. I gasped as he slammed his fist into the drywall.

“Drew!” He didn’t look at me. He just pulled his bloody hand from the wall and stormed out of the room.

I waited, not wanting to follow him so that he could cool down. He locked himself in the bathroom probably cleaning up his wounds.

I went to the living room and sat on the couch. About ten minutes later, I heard the bathroom door open. I looked up but only saw his back as he shut the office door behind him. There was a click of the lock and that was it.

I curled up on the couch and hugged a pillow while I cried. I let the tears finally fall freely. I loved him but I couldn’t let myself ever be that vulnerable again.

Drew was worried about me sleeping with Mikhail because I’d be vulnerable with an evil man who could hurt me. What he didn’t realize was that he was the real danger. He was the one that could hurt me more than anyone else ever could.

A random, emotionless hook-up I could do. I’d been doing that for years. It helped dull the pain and kept me numb.

I laid down on the couch and cried some more as I thought about Drew and the whole mess, I got myself into. If I hadn't gone out that night, if I'd stayed home eating ice cream instead of trying to find some random guy to hook-up with everything could have been different.

But if I hadn't gone out, I would have never seen Drew again. The irony is that what happened between us in the past is what drove me there that night. And finding him that night, finding myself in this position is what had me regretting being this way.

I heard the buzz of the door and hurried over to the intercom as I've seen Drew do.

“Yes?”

“Ms. Reid?” I recognized the voice of the night doorman.

“Yes. Is everything alright?”

“Yes, ma’am. I was just buzzing you to let you know that your Chinese delivery has arrived. I paid using the designated credit card and the food has cleared security. I'll be sending it up momentarily.”

“Oh, okay. Thank you.” I hadn't realized just how much trouble it would be to simply order takeout. A few minutes later there was a knock on the door.

“Who is it?”

“Elliott, from the front desk. I'm delivering your dinner.”

I opened the door and the man from the front desk offered the bag to me.

“It's already been cleared so you're good to go. I hope you enjoy.”

“Thank you.”

“Have a good evening, ma'am.”

He left me standing in the doorway as he headed back toward the elevators. I shut and locked the door behind me before going back to the couch.

I sat the food on the coffee table and hurried to Drew's office door. I've been wishing for an excuse to talk to him but had yet to build up my nerve. This was the perfect opportunity.

I knocked gently but there was no answer. So, I knocked a little harder.

“Drew? The food's here. Can I come in?”

No answer.

“Drew, please answer? I'm worried.”

“Eat what you want of the food and stick the rest in the fridge.”

“We need to talk.”

“I don't have anything to say.”

“Well I do.”

“You've said enough, Hailey.”

I let out a loud frustrated sigh and stomped back to the living room. I had barely eaten in two days. I was angry but I was still hungry. If he wanted to stay in there and starve, let him. I was going to sit and watch television and enjoy my dinner. Or so I thought.

I sat on the couch alone in Drew's large living room. I watched TV and ate my dinner. But I couldn't tell you what it tasted like. I couldn't tell you what I even watched. The minutes and hours ticked by and Drew never came out.

It was late and exhaustion took over. As much as I wanted to stay awake to wait up for him, I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer.

I climbed into the big king size bed alone. I clung to his pillow which smelled like him and cried until my eyes ran out of tears. My mind finally shut down letting me drift off into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter 14

Early the next morning, I was startled awake by a loud banging from the living room. I jumped out of bed, nearly tripping in the tangle of sheets as I rushed into the entryway. The banging started again coming from the front door.

The building security wouldn't allow just anyone to get in. I worried that there might be something wrong.

"Who is it?" I called through the door.

"Jason and Rebecca. Open the door." Jason barked. *What the hell?*

I swung the door open and they both stormed in. I had to step out of their way or risk being trampled. "What's wrong?" I shut the door and followed them into the living room. I froze when I saw Drew sitting in his overstuffed chair with his arms draped casually over the back and one ankle resting on the opposite knee. "Drew, you're out."

"Drew called us early this morning and told us what you want to do. Have you lost your mind?" Jason's face was red. I'd seen him angry before but this was the first time it had been directed at me.

"Let me explain." I scowled at Drew but he just smirked and crossed his arms.

"Hailey, seriously what were you thinking to even consider sleeping with Mikhail? He's a dangerous man."

"You think I don't know he's dangerous? You think I didn't watch as his men beat Drew until he was barely conscious or when his men beat Conrad until his ribs broke? I damn well know he's dangerous. That's why I need to do this."

"That makes no sense," Rebecca spoke with a calmer tone, trying to diffuse the situation as she stepped closer and led me to sit on the couch with her.

"Becs, you didn't see those other girls. There's one girl, Lacy, her story is terrible and she's trapped there being Mikhail's punching bag if she doesn't want them to kill her brother. Her brother is a good guy. He's going to school to be a doctor." Rebecca and Jason both opened their mouths to argue but I stopped them.

“No, listen. I know what you are going to say. You’re going to say it's too dangerous. That I don’t know what I’d be doing. That I’d be sleeping with some strange man. But here’s the thing, I was going to sleep with him before I ran into Drew that night. I was trying to pick him up at the club because I wanted a random hook-up. Would I sleep with him knowing who he was now if I didn’t need to? Of course not. But my point is, at least this time it could be for a *good* reason. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking and I want to change. I don’t want to keep on with the meaningless sex but I do want to do this.”

“Hailey...” Jason started.

“Do agents sometimes have to sleep with targets to get close to them for a mission?”

“Sometimes, but those are trained agents. You’re—”

“I’m not going into this blindly. I’ll have undercover agents nearby in case I need to scream or something but this is the perfect opportunity. Drew said before that you guys were close to busting them and that his role is vital. He said that he just needed to earn Mikhail’s trust. If Drew lets Mikhail sleep with me, just one time — just one night out of my whole life that I’d have to sacrifice — then there’s no way he’d suspect Drew was anything less than totally loyal. I know what I’m getting into but I don’t care. I want to help those girls and if giving this guy what he wants for one night is how I can do it, well hell that’s what I want to do.”

Once my rant was over, I sagged back onto the couch and took a deep breath. “So, will you help me to bring down this guy or not?” I looked from Rebecca to Jason, not bothering to look at Drew. After his professed love, I knew he’d never agree on his own.

“Hailey, this is... You’d be sleeping with this guy...and it's not even a guarantee it would work.” Rebecca said, taking my hands in hers.

“It will work,” I said confidently.

“How do you know that?” Jason stepped forward. He was interested and not completely shutting down my idea now which was good.

“Mikhail likes control but he doesn’t like to take it — usually. He prefers to manipulate and control that way. That’s what Drew told me and I’ve seen it firsthand. Mikhail sees me as a challenge. He won’t stop until he’s put away even if you take me out of this, he’ll keep trying to find me and he’ll be more suspicious of Drew than ever.”

“How close are you to busting this guy?” Jason asked Drew.

“Pretty close. He’s got a major shipment coming in soon. I can tell because all the guys get this anxious buzz about a week before a big shipment.”

“Can you get back in good with Mikhail before the shipment?” Jason continued his questions while Rebecca and I sat listening.

“He never invited me in on a big shipment before. He’s always been too skeptical. I’ll admit, having Hailey there has helped him see me more as one of them. I felt like I was close but I think the other night probably shattered that.”

“How long will it take to recover?”

“Knowing him? Months.”

“Damn it.” Jason let out a loud sigh. “One of our friends in Russia said he suspected they were planning to bring in a large shipment of girls sometime soon.”

“When they get a good-sized shipment, they usually hold a big auction but they’ve always kept a tight lid on the details of when and where. I’ve never been invited.”

“It could be next week or it could be next month. We need an inside man sooner rather than later so we don’t miss it.”

“Shit.” Drew jumped up and started pacing. “If I hadn’t brought Hailey in, in the first place — if I hadn’t put her in danger I’d still be in his good graces.”

“Chances are he wouldn’t have involved you. Let’s not forget it was bringing Hailey into the fold that built his trust in you. You just need to regain his trust somehow, get in there and find out the intel on when and where that auction is taking place. Mikhail is known for having all the big players at his events.”

“There’s no faster way to earn back his trust than by *loaning* me to him for a night — as a peace offering.” I interjected. “These are innocent girls that are going to be sold to those deplorable men.”

“And what are you? You’re innocent too and you’re wanting me to give you over to the monster all those *deplorable* men fear.”

“I’d have back-up ready just in case. Those girls would be on their own.”

“We can find a female agent willing to do this,” Drew argued.

“He’s right.” Jason added.

“But he wants me.”

“Don’t be so arrogant. You aren’t special to him. You’re just another body he wants to claim.”

“I’m not saying I’m special. I’m saying he’s got this fascination with me because he saw your protectiveness and that made me a challenge. He likes challenges so he’s going to be less likely to suspect anything when he’s focused on winning against you.”

Jason looked from me to Drew. “She’s got a point.”

“Damn it.” Drew roared and turned away to the window. “No. You cannot ask me to do this.”

“Do you really think I want to send one of my best friends into a situation with that man? Of course, I don’t. I also don’t want to see a dozen innocent girls sold off. Hailey understands the risks. She also understands what’s at stake and we will make sure she’s got people ready to charge in if she needs them.”

My ears began to roar and my heart pounded in my chest. Jason had made up his mind. It was happening. Drew dropped his head and pressed it against the window.

“Can you do this?” Jason asked, studying Drew.

“Yeah.” He murmured.

“Are you sure? Because if you can’t then this whole thing —.”

“I can handle it.” Drew’s voice rose with added determination.

“Good. We have to go get the kids from my parents’ house. Keep me updated as things progress.”

“I will.”

“Call me if you need to talk.” Rebecca said as she wrapped me in a tight hug. “Be careful.”

“I will.” I forced a smile to reassure her and Jason before walking them to the door.

I closed the door and whirled around at the sound of Drew’s voice right behind me, “You’re really going to go through with this.” He spoke quiet and eerily calm compared to just moments ago.

“It’s the best option with such a short timeline.”

He stepped forward until I was pressed against the door. “We can find another way.”

“Don’t do this. Do you really want to see Mikhail get away? Do you really want to let all those girls be shipped and sold like cattle?”

“Of course not. You know I don’t.”

“Then why are you trying to sabotage the only hope we have of nailing this guy?”

“Nailing?” He raised a brow and looked irritated.

“Poor choice of words.”

“No kidding.” He snapped and turned away from me.

“Drew, this is just one night. I’ve had a lot of one-night stands. I’ve never been ashamed of them but at least this time it's for a good reason.”

“You’ve already convinced Jason. I’m going to go along with it because he’s my boss and my friend but I don’t have to like it.”

“Drew...”

“We’ll do it tonight. I’ll take you to him and tell him I overreacted and that he’s welcome to borrow you for the night.”

“So soon?” The reality of it all sank in my stomach like a rock.

“Is that a problem? We don’t want to waste time. If it's going to happen, we might as well get it over with.”

“Well yeah, I just thought —.”

“Having second thoughts?”

“No, I just —.”

“Then it's settled. Tonight, it is.” He turned away and walked off.

I wanted to follow him. To yell at him and ask him why he was acting that way but it wouldn’t help anything. Drew said he loved me — that he’d always loved me. I couldn’t go there again. How could you love someone and still do what he’d done to me? The sooner this was over the better. The sooner they took down Mikhail and saved those girls, the sooner I could move on with my life and get back to normal. I wanted to put him in the back of my mind where he’d been all these years. Or better yet, I wanted to forget all together so I could finally move on with my life.

Drew went back to his office so I went into the bedroom and back to bed. If I was going to pull the plan off tonight, I needed some sleep to clear my head. I laid in bed and tossed and turned. Sleep didn’t come easy with all the thoughts running through my mind.

Chapter 15

The whole day went by so fast and so slow all at the same time. I dreaded what I had to do that night, but I wanted the whole ordeal to be over with. By the time we were ready to go, my nerves had my insides tied into a million knots. My hands trembled as I put on my makeup but I somehow managed to pull it together enough to look presentable.

I kept it simple with a short black dress, my hair in loose curls, smoky eyes, and red lips. Nothing could seem off. Nothing could make Mikhail suspicious or it would all be for nothing.

I took a deep breath and walked out of the bedroom. Drew was in the kitchen pouring him a drink of whiskey. His shoulders were slumped. He looked wary.

“Is that a good idea? Don’t you need to be sharp for tonight?”

“I’ll be fine but if I’m going to get through this night, I’m going to need a little something. You want one?”

“No thanks.”

“Since when do you turn down a drink?”

“Since I want to keep my wits when dealing with a psycho Russian mob leader.”

“I thought you’d want a little liquid courage before jumping into his bed,” Drew said coldly and downed his drink.

I fought the urge to start an argument. It wouldn’t have done any good. “We should be going.”

“Sure, let’s go.” Drew slammed the glass on the counter with enough force that I was surprised it didn’t break.

The ride to the club was silent, tense, and completely uncomfortable. By the time we pulled in, I was ready to do a tuck and roll to get out of the car.

Philip opened the door and we climbed out. I felt like I was doing my last walk on death row as we walked down the red carpet and into the club without being stopped by security.

They must have alerted Mikhail’s men because the three of them met us just inside the door.

“Well, look who’s come crawling back.” Dmitri sneered.

“I need to see the boss.”

“After how you left things last time, I’m not sure he’s still considered your boss.”

“Just take me to him.”

“I don’t work for you, asshole.” One of the other men gave Dmitri a warning glance and he sighed. “Follow me.”

Dmitri led us while the two other men followed behind. It was a power play to intimidate and although I couldn’t speak for Drew, for me it worked.

We walked single file up the stairs to his regular VIP balcony. Mikhail sat on the couch taking up as much space as possible with his arms spread along the back of the couch.

“Andrew, so good to see you. You are looking well — all things considered.” He smirked and looked me up and down. “And you look as lovely as ever.” He reached to kiss my hand and I tensed, forcing myself not to pull away. He must have synced my reaction because he took my hand with a little more force and held it at his lips for a beat longer than usual.

“Good to see you too, Mikhail.” Drew sat and guided me to sit on his other side away from Mikhail.

“My men tell me you wished to speak with me. I assume it isn’t to exchange pleasantries.” He took a shot of vodka. I noticed he didn’t offer either of us a drink as he had before.

“Yes. I wanted to apologize.”

I looked down at my hands, I knew this wasn’t easy on Drew which made me feel even worse about the whole situation.

“You wanted to apologize?” Mikhail confirmed.

“Yes. I was out of line the other night.”

Mikhail sat quietly, nodding and listening while Drew continued.

“I tend to be — possessive. I’d blame it on the only child syndrome, but I’m not one to make excuses. I apologize for the lack of respect I showed you. I want you to know that I’ve seen the error in my ways and I hope you’ll allow me to continue working for you.”

“We might possibly be able to work something out. I am a forgiving man, Andrew. And, I like you.” Hearing his voice, one might have thought he was being genuine, if his gaze hadn’t been roaming up and down my body the entire time.

“I am glad to hear you say that. I think our previous arrangement has proven beneficial to both parties. I would hate for our arrangement to be terminated as it would be a mutual loss.”

“Agreed. But, I’m afraid after your behavior the other night some sort of restitution is in order.”

“Restitution?” Drew raised his brow as if he didn’t know what Mikhail was hinting at.

“I want the girl.”

“The girl?” Drew looked from Mikhail to me with feigned upset. At least I think most of it was fake. “I don’t know...”

“It’s only fair considering the transgressions.”

“One hour,” Drew stated firmly.

“Andrew, a man like myself doesn’t like to rush these things. I want her for three days.”

“Three —.” Drew was losing his cool. He needed to remain calm. “I’m a man with needs too and I’m just starting to get her trained. One night — delivered back at breakfast the next morning.”

“Done.”

“Delivered back — unharmed. I like to dole out my own punishments on what’s mine.”

“As long as she behaves there should be no issue there.”

Drew cast me a warning glance. I swallowed hard. It was settled. Mikhail would have me for one night.

It would be a long night.

“We need drinks to seal the deal,” Drew said as he stood from the couch.

“Oh yes, vodka all around.” Mikhail called out and Drew went to work at the minibar.

Mikhail took the opportunity to scoot closer to me, his hand dangerously high on my thigh where his thumb drew little circles. It made me feel sick. “I have been looking forward to having you since you first walked into my club. You are in for a night you will never forget.” He leaned in, his lips brushing along the shell of my ear. “But know, just because you are his does not mean I will take it easy on you.”

I felt as though I’d been sucker-punched right in the stomach. What the hell had I gotten myself into?

Seeing the disturbed look on my face, Mikhail laughed and moved back to his spot as Drew returned with three poured shots and the remaining bottle of vodka.

He handed out the shots and held up his to toast. "To your health."

"*Vashe zdorovie*," Mikhail replied.

The men took their shot and I hesitantly followed. I'd never been one to shy away from a good drink but I'd have to be careful or the alcohol might loosen my tongue and get me into trouble. I nearly choked at the unexpected water that poured into my throat in place of the vodka I'd expected. Drew had replaced my shot with water. *Clever*.

"Another," Mikhail demanded, taking our glasses and filling them. "*Za milyh dam!*" He toasted, his stare blazing into me. "To lovely women."

"To lovely women." Drew repeated and we took the shot.

This one was real vodka. A little liquid courage would probably do me some good so I took the shot. I'd never seen Drew push the alcohol as much as he had that night. Maybe he needed the alcohol himself to dull the knowledge of what I'd be doing or perhaps he thought a sloppy drunk Russian would be better than a sharp, cruel one? I had to agree.

The men took turns taking shot after shot of vodka. They toasted to all sorts of things — the motherland, family, the business, partnership, young women, loose women. There was no way I was going to drink that much and after my second shot, I began dumping my drink in the fake plant like I'd seen Drew do. And, the men still drank.

The night drug on. A part of me wanted to get the whole night over with while the other part of me dreaded the moment Mikhail would decide he was ready to be alone with me. The anticipation and gnawing dread were too much. I needed a moment to collect myself.

"Will you excuse me a minute? I need to go to the ladies' room."

"Of course." Mikhail chimed. "I will send one of my men to escort you. So, you don't get lost." He gave me a suspicious look. It seemed even drunk Mikhail was cautious not to let what he wanted get away.

I went to the bathroom while Mikhail's lackey waited outside the door. With no windows, it wasn't like I could go anywhere.

Luckily the bathroom wasn't busy. I went to the sink and splashed cold water on my face before blotting it dry with a paper towel. When I looked up, Lacy was standing nearby.

"Geez Lacy, you scared me half to death."

“Sorry. I just wanted to talk to you and I knew this would be my only chance.”

I raised my eyebrow and waited, wondering what she was wanting to talk about.

“I heard about the men’s arrangement for the night.”

“How did you hear that?” I felt slightly defensive but more embarrassed than anything that people were already hearing about how I was being loaned out for the night like a pair of earrings.

“One of Mikhail’s guys.” Lacy shrugged before pulling a small plastic bag from her purse. “I thought these might help.”

She offered the bag to me and I took it, examining the contents which consisted of two small white pills. I looked up at her puzzled.

“They’re prescription. To help with anxiety. They help take the edge off when doing what has to be done.” She fidgeted uncomfortably. “He doesn’t know I take them so don’t let him see, but they’ll help. Just take one at a time and it won’t affect you enough for him to tell. He’ll just think it’s the alcohol relaxing you.”

“I don’t want —” I stretched my arm out, trying to give her back the pills but she wouldn’t take them.

“Trust me, you’re going to need it.”

“I don’t like the idea of taking something...”

“Then just hold on to them just in case.”

“Okay.”

I slipped the bag in my purse, considering what Lacy said. Tonight, was going to be a long night. Maybe I would need something to get me through.

The trip to the bathroom did nothing to calm my frayed nerves. As I walked back to the balcony, the music in the club seemed too loud, the lights too harsh against the dark backdrop. My head swam and my heart pounded in my ears as the realization of what I was going to do hit me hard.

I was grateful to return to my seat, my legs too wobbly to hold me up much longer. Drew’s brow furrowed with concern as he leaned over to check on me.

“Hey you okay?”

“I’m good. I just don’t think I can keep up with you men.” I tipped my head toward the vodka.

“I think the girls had enough — unless you enjoy your girls comatose.” He joked with Mikhail.

“Oh no. I like a little fight left in them.” Mikhail laughed but neither Drew nor myself found the humor in it. Drew faked a laugh but I just sat there quietly.

What the hell are you doing, Hailey? You are way out of your depth here.

I felt like I might throw up. Drew’s hand landed on my thigh in a seductive move and he shifted close to my ear “You can still back out. I’ll figure out a way to get you out of this.”

Yes, I wanted to scream. Get me out of here. Take me far away from this horrible man so I never have to see him again. I wanted to tell him but I couldn’t. There was no backing down now. Too much was at stake so I said the only thing I could. “No, I’m fine.”

“I believe she is mine for tonight.” Mikhail interrupted. “And I think it’s time for us to go back to my place so we can really get this night started.” He stood up and wobbled. He was drunk. Unfortunately, he was still a sharp drunk.

He rounded the coffee table and pulled me up by my arm. “Let’s go.”

Drew jumped up with some urgency he was fighting back. “Already? I thought we were going to celebrate our renewed partnership.”

“And we have. But now I’m going to go enjoy my prize for the night.” Mikhail threw his arm around my waist and pulled me hard to his side until I was sure I’d have bruises on my hip.

“But —.” Drew started, his eyes flashing with panic as they met mine.

“We’ll meet for breakfast in the morning at our usual place, but not *too* early. We are going to have a late night.” Mikhail smirked at me and I glanced at Drew whose fingers curled into fists. It was the last thing I saw before the curtain closed behind us.

Chapter 16

Morning sunlight from the large picture window woke me from a dreamless sleep. I had stayed up most of the night, not wanting to fall asleep next to the monster in bed beside me but had passed out sometime in the night. Mikhail snored beside me and I tensed. Objectively, he was a handsome man. Older than me, but still in great shape. His muscles were hard and unrelenting even in sleep. And yet, I couldn't believe I'd ever found him attractive. Just the sight of him made me sick.

I pulled the sheet around my body to keep covered as I gathered my clothes from the floor and went into the bathroom. I'd made it through the night. I just had to make it to breakfast and I'd be safely back with Drew.

While in the bathroom, I used my finger to brush my teeth with the cinnamon toothpaste. I could still smell his cologne on me like wood and spice and vodka. I couldn't stand it, having his scent on me like some sort of claim. I slowly cracked the door open and peeked out to make sure Mikahl was still asleep. I turned the doorknob and closed it so that it wouldn't click shut before taking the quickest shower of my life. I didn't want to risk him coming in to join me. I was bathed, dried off, and dressed in fifteen minutes.

I crept out of the bathroom, careful not to make a sound but Mikhail's deep rumbling voice startled me and I jumped, letting out a yelp, "there you are."

He stood just to my right with his arms casually crossed, "you're not trying to sneak out on me are you?"

I forced a smile, reminding myself why I hadn't told him off already. "Of course not. I didn't want you to see me such a mess after last night." I looked down and fidgeted with my hair.

"Yes, last night was wild. It's all a bit of a blur. The alcohol hit me hard with all the excitement, but what I do remember..." He pulled me to him, gripping the back of my hair hard and forcing his lips onto mine. "You are an amazing woman. If you ever tire of Andrew..."

I wanted to kick him in the nuts for bringing up Drew after everything but I managed a smile. "Speaking of, what time are we supposed to meet him?"

“Eight sharp.”

“Oh, then we should probably get going. It’s already seven-thirty.”

“Seven-thirty? I never sleep that late. You must have really worn me out last night, woman.” He pulled me in for one more kiss. It was everything I could do not to push away each time he touched me.

I was relieved when he finally took his hands off of me and I could step back, letting out a sigh.

“My kisses make you breathless, huh?” the overconfident asshole smirked as he asked.

I bit my tongue -- hard. Forcing a smile and nodding.

“Go make us some black tea while I grab a quick shower, kotyonok.”

I walked into the kitchen, filled the tea kettle with water from the tap, and put it on the stove. Mikhail disappeared into his room. I waited until I could hear the water start running from his en suite bathroom to pull out my phone and text Drew.

Hailey: Hey. I wanted to let you know I was okay. Will see you at breakfast.

No answer.

He could have been getting ready or driving. I shrugged and went to put my phone away when I got an idea. Earlier, Mikhail had called me kotyonok and I was curious about what that meant. I had no idea how to even start to spell it so I used the voice to text feature on my phone and whispered the word into the phone. Kitten. Of course, he’d call me something like kitten. He thought I was just a weak, pathetic little thing that couldn’t take care of herself and would let a man like him run all over me. What he didn’t know was this kitten had claws.

The teakettle whistled and I hurried to finish the tea. I was just fishing out the second teabag when Mikhail’s shower turned off.

“Ah, good timing.” Mikhail walked up behind me, wrapping his arm around me so that his body pressed against me and I tensed.

He ran his hand down my belly and thigh until he reached the hem of my dress. He hooked his fingers under the hem of my dress and began running his hand back up my thigh. I took a deep breath. I didn’t want him touching me. I felt slightly dizzy as his hand reached dangerously close to the apex of my thighs. I had to do something or he was going to want an encore from the night before.

I grabbed up his cup of tea and turned around, letting the hot liquid slosh out of the cup onto his stark white dress shirt.

Mikhail let out a hiss and jumped back from me. “Stupid blyat,” he lifted his hand to strike me but I moved away.

“I’m so sorry. It was an accident,” I feigned shock and remorse.

The front door burst open and two of Mikhail’s men stepped inside. “Boss, what happened?”

“Just an accident. I’m fine. Go back to your posts.” Mikhail glared at me.

“I am unbelievably sorry. Let me grab some towels.”

“Don’t bother. I need another shirt anyway,” Mikhail waved me off before disappearing into his room to change.

I let out a relieved breath and let my shoulders slump for a moment before he came back.

“Are you okay? Again, I am so sorry. Can I fix you a new cup?”

“No. We need to go. We shouldn’t be late,” Mikhail was clearly irritated with me and with as hot as the tea had been, I was sure he was also in a good deal of pain.

He didn’t say another word as he led me to his car, opened the door for me, and I climbed inside. I’d swear the drive to meet Drew took at least a year and the tense silence wasn’t helping. We couldn’t get there fast enough. I wanted to be away from this man as quickly as possible.

We entered a small coffee and pastry shop where Drew sat waiting. He stood when we approached the table already filled with food and coffee.

“Mikhail, good morning.”

“Oh, it is a good morning indeed,” Mikhail smirked and we took a seat.

It amazed me at how his tone had changed when speaking with Drew. Was he really over the ‘accidental spill’ or was he just trying to make Drew think things went better than it had?

I was so glad to see Drew. I offered him a small smile when Mikhail couldn’t see but he only glanced at me with something that looked a lot like disappointment in his eyes.

What did he think was going to happen when we agreed to this?

Mikhail pulled a chair out for me across from Drew before taking the seat next to me for himself.

“Eat, drink, kotyonok. I know you had to have worked up quite the appetite.”

I hated his new nickname for me and grit my teeth behind my smile as I took a bite of the food in front of me and took a sip of the coffee to distract myself.

“I take it you enjoyed your night with the girl?” Drew’s words were like ice.

“Very much. You are a lucky bastard.

Drew shrugged and took a drink of his coffee.

“I have some business to take care of so I can’t stay long,” Mikhail continued. “But I’d like for you to meet me for dinner tonight. There are some business opportunities I’d like to discuss with you if you’re interested.”

“Oh, definitely.”

“Wonderful. I’m sure you have some catching up to do with your girl. I hope she’s not too worn out for you. And, she may be a bit sore.”

“If so, she’ll deal with it. Can’t have her neglecting her duties.” Drew smirked at me in the way Mikhail did and it made my stomach turn.

Mikhail laughed. “I must be off. Enjoy yourself, Andrew.”

As soon as he was out of earshot, I leaned over the table and whispered angrily, “What is your problem?”

“I have no problem.”

“You are acting like him.”

“I need to get on his good side. He likes himself so who better to mimic?”

“Whatever.” I sat back and took a bite of my bagel.

“Let’s go.” Drew stood abruptly.

“But I’m not done.”

“Work up a big appetite last night, huh? You can eat back at the apartment.” He sneered and started walking toward the door.

I tossed my bagel onto the table and got up from my chair. Drew was already halfway to the door and didn’t even look back to see if I was following him. We were in Russian territory and he knew I wouldn’t want to stay there where Mikhail or his men might return. I got up and followed him out but I was fuming with anger.

Chapter 17

We arrived back at the apartment without another word between us. I knew if I opened my mouth at that moment it would be disastrous. I did not go through everything I did last night to have it ruined now that we were so close.

I walked into the kitchen and fixed myself a bowl of cereal, grabbed the remote, and plopped down on the couch like I owned the place.

“I have some errands to run before I go to this meeting with Mikhail tonight so I probably won’t be back until late.”

“Whatever, have fun,” I mumbled around a bite of cereal and propped my feet up on the coffee table.

“Do not leave this apartment.”

“Wasn’t planning on it. I’m still pretty tired from last night so I could use a day to chill.” It was a low blow but Drew was making me so angry with his cold detachment. I’d trade that for a heated argument any day.

“After all those random hook-ups you like so much, I’m surprised you aren’t used to it by now.” He jeered as he walked out the door.

“Asshole,” I yelled out as he slammed the door shut. He made me so mad that I wanted to scream. His words hurt me more than I should have let them.

It had been awhile since I’d had a place all to myself for more than an hour and I planned to make good use of it. I changed into some baggy sweats and one of Drew’s big t-shirts because I was tired of having to look good all the time. I threw my hair up in a bun and made myself a cup of coffee. Then I grabbed the ice cream out of the freezer and ate it with my coffee while watching some obviously fake talk show about a girl and her cheating boyfriend.

I started getting tired of the show after the third episode and began flipping through the channels when my phone rang. I’d almost forgotten I had a phone since the cheap little flip phone was all Drew had provided me and no one really had my new number.

I rummaged for it in my purse and checked the caller i.d. *Aunt Audrey*. Who the heck was Aunt Audrey? Since the number was

programmed into the phone, I decided it was best to answer it.

“Hello?”

“Hi Hailey, are you where you can talk?” It was Rebecca.

“Oh my god, hey, I’m so glad it’s you.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. It’s just this whole situation. It has me really missing my normal life.”

“I get it. So, can I ask how things went last night or is that off-limits?”

“It went as well as could be expected.”

“I’m so sorry you got wrapped up in all this but I think what you’re doing is admirable.”

“I wish other people shared your feelings.”

“You mean Drew?”

“Yeah. He’s worse than ever after last night.”

“Can you blame him? I mean, really? The guy clearly still has feelings for you and to know you were going off to sleep with another man? And such a horrible one at that?”

“Last night was horrible. All I could think of was getting back here, being with Drew and feeling safe again but now that I’m here —.”

“Oh my god.”

“What?”

“You have feelings for him too,” She accused.

“Whether I do or not is not the issue.”

“Does he know you still care?”

“No. I told him I didn’t.”

“What? Why?”

“He told me he loved me. He said that if I could tell him I didn’t love him too that he’d agree to this whole thing with Mikhail.”

“So, you lied to him so he’d agree to last night?”

“That’s not the only reason.”

“Hailey, if you love him, you have to tell him.”

“No, I don’t. And you can’t say anything to anyone either. I know you think everyone’s happy ever after includes falling in love with the man of her dreams but not me. I can’t.”

“You can’t?”

“When he cheated on me, he nearly destroyed me. I can’t let myself go down that road again.”

“The people that can hurt us the most are the ones that we love the most. But the reward of loving and being loved outweighs the pain.”

“Not for me. I never want to hurt like that again.”

“Okay, consider it a dropped topic.”

“Thank you.”

“So other than that, though, you’re okay? I know being in this situation can’t be easy. It has to mess with your head.”

“I’m hanging in there. I just want this to all be over.”

“It will be soon from what the guys are saying. Oh no.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, Cole just dumped his whole sippy cup out. I don’t know how he managed to get the top off. I need to run but we’ll talk again soon.”

“Okay, give Cole hugs for me.”

“Will do.”

I hung up the phone and flopped back onto the couch with a loud sigh. I missed my best friend. I missed my normal life. It wasn’t perfect, but it was mine. Before long, these feelings for Drew would just be a distant memory again.



A loud thud woke me from a deep sleep. It was dark in the bedroom except for the glowing clock letting me know it was two in the morning. I sat up and turned on the lamp. Drew hobbled over to the bed and sat down hard.

“What the hell, Drew? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I hit my toe on the dresser and knocked something over. I was trying not to wake you.”

“Well, let me tell you, you are doing a great job of that.” I teased.

“Glad you think so.” His words seemed to slur more as he talked.

“Are you just getting home?”

“Yeah.” He undressed down to his white boxers and climbed up the bed, plopping down beside me.

He smelled of whiskey which I found odd. He usually drank vodka when he was with Mikhail. “Were you with Mikhail this whole time?”

“Nope. He went home hours ago.”

“What were you doing?”

“Drinking.”

“By yourself?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“I needed to get the images out of my head.”

I froze and turned to look at him. He was sloppy drunk. I’d never seen him like that before. “What images?”

“Mikhail thought it would be fun to show me some stills from the hidden camera in his bedroom from your night together. He figured I’d appreciate them as much as all his guys did.”

It felt like a bolder sunk to the bottom of my stomach and I spoke slowly, “He showed you pictures?”

“Yeah. I gotta say. The black panty, bra, and heel combo was a good choice. Very sexy.”

“Drew...”

“I guess you really can handle hooking up with just about anyone as long as there are no feelings involved. I think there’s a name for that. Whore? Slut? I’m sure you can pick whichever you prefer.” His words were so cold, like icy blades cutting into me. I wasn’t sure if I was more hurt or angry.

“Drew,” I scolded, keeping my voice hard but the pain was there. Tears pricked my eyes. I couldn’t believe the words he was saying. Some would argue it was the alcohol talking but, in my experience, when alcohol talks, it’s usually the truth that comes out.

“You’ll sleep with him, but not me.” His words were more slurred and I could barely make them out but there was more anger behind them. “Maybe if I could stop loving you, you’d sleep with me too.”

I couldn’t take anymore. I threw the covers off of my legs and jumped out of bed.

“Where are you going?”

“To sleep on the couch.”

“Why? Come cuddle with me.” His voice was muffled as he laid face down on the pillow.

“No thanks.”

“Fine. maybe you should go find Mikhail to cuddle up with instead.” He spit out angrily before I slammed the bedroom door to drown out any more of his drunken ramblings.

Lucky for me, Drew's couch was extremely comfortable but it didn't help me sleep the rest of the night. Drew's drunken words tore at my heart as I tossed and turned until sleep finally found me.

I was back in Mikhail's penthouse as I removed my clothes piece by piece. He sat back on the bed as he had before, watching me intently with lust in his eyes but this time he lacked the drunken haze.

"Go ahead, go to him," Drew said and for the first time, I noticed him sitting in a chair facing me.

"Drew, what are you doing here?"

"Watching."

"But — Why?"

"Go to him."

"Drew..."

"Stop talking to him and come to me my little whore."

"What?" I turned to see Mikhail sitting at the foot of the bed now, stunned by his words."

"Well that's what you are, isn't it?" Drew added. "Once you're done with him. I figured I could loan you to the rest of his guys too."

"Drew, don't say something like that." Tears blurred my vision and threatened to fall from my eyes. "Please, don't talk like that."

"Why not? Isn't that what you want? Sex without emotion? But what is sex without feeling? It's empty, hollow —."

"I know."

"So why do you do it?" Drew was right in front of me. I looked around but Mikhail was nowhere in sight.

"Because I don't want to feel. I don't want to love again just to get hurt."

"I wouldn't hurt you."

"You already did. You completely shattered me before. Don't you see? You destroyed me. I can't do that again."

"If you never feel, you might as well be dead. To love, to hurt, to feel, that's to live. If you don't, then you are already dead." He held up a gun and pointed it at me.

"Drew, what the hell are you doing? Put that down." I screamed at him.

"Why? You're already dead." I watched in slow motion as his finger slowly squeezed the trigger and the bullet exploded from the gun heading

straight for me.

I woke up in a panic, sweat pouring down my face and dampening my hair. My throat hurt and I was panting.

Drew came running into the living room. His face as white as a ghost. “Shit, Hailey, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” I wiped away the tears I didn’t know I’d been crying.

“That scream didn’t sound like you were okay. What the hell happened?”

“It was just a bad dream.”

Drew sat on the couch next to my feet and gently rubbed my leg. “You want to talk about it?”

I pulled my leg out of his reach and shook my head but even thinking about talking made the tears demand to escape once more.

“Okay, we don’t have to talk about it. Will you at least come back to bed?”

“Why would you want to share your bed with a whore?”

Drew’s face dropped and he looked down. “So, I really did say that, huh?”

“You really did.”

“Hailey, I’m sorry. I was upset and —.”

“And that’s how you see me. It’s okay, why wouldn’t you?”

“Hailey...” Drew pulled my legs into his lap and scooted to be closer to me. His touch felt good but at the same time, I didn’t want to be anywhere near him. My mind, body, and heart were all at odds with one another.

“Look, last night was apparently hard on both of us but I did what had to be done. Let’s just finish this mission and be done with it. Then we can go back to never having to see each other again.”

“Is that what you really want?” He looked so hurt.

“It’s what we both need.” I pulled my legs from his lap and curled up into a ball on the couch. I drew the covers up closer as though it might protect me and I looked away from him.

“If that’s what you really want.” Drew sighed and stood from the couch, disappearing back into the bedroom. The door clicked shut. That’s when the tears really came. Hot, heavy tears burned down my cheeks as hard sobs ripped through my chest. The pain wouldn’t last. Not like it would if I had

told him the truth — that I loved him.

Chapter 18

I woke up to the most delicious smell in the world. Waffles, bacon, and coffee. Familiar noises coming from the kitchen. Food sizzling, dishes clanking together. Before the haze of sleep faded, I thought I was at Jason and Rebecca's during one of my sleepovers when Rebecca cooked us a big breakfast in the morning. Then I remembered, I was in Drew's apartment, asleep on his couch.

The memory of his hurtful words flooded back into my mind. The words he most likely meant but was too nice to say when he wasn't drunk off his ass.

I was not looking forward to facing him. A part of me wanted to just stay under this cover, pretend to be asleep until he left or until this whole nightmare was over. My growling stomach was not going to allow that, though.

I sat up and attempted to smooth down the mess of hair only sleeping on a couch could cause. I'd hoped to slip off to the bathroom to freshen up before Drew saw me, but there was no such luck.

"Morning," he said in a surprisingly cheerful voice. Considering the copious amounts of alcohol he'd consumed the night before, I'd assumed he'd be more hungover.

"Morning," I muttered back with less enthusiasm.

"Breakfast is almost ready. Coffee's on and there's orange juice if you want some."

"Thanks." I walked into the kitchen and poured myself a cup of coffee. After the night I'd had, I needed it.

"You look like shit." Drew glanced at me as he plated the last of the bacon.

"Yeah, well." I looked at him, trying to find an insult but came up blank. He looked great. His hair was still damp from his shower. His bare chest and the slight V at his hips that disappeared into his low hanging pajama pants made my mind short circuit.

He caught me staring and smirked which only irritated me more.

"Shouldn't you look and feel worse? I mean, where's the hangover?"

“It takes a hell of a lot more than that to give me a hangover. Besides, I have my little tricks to combat that.”

“Clearly.”

Drew grabbed the plates of food and I helped by carrying our cups to the already set table. I took a seat and Drew sat across from me.

“Dig in.” He smiled and started filling his plate.

“This looks amazing. When did you learn to cook?”

“A man can’t live on take out alone.”

“That’s not what you used to say.”

His voice lowered to a more serious tone. “I’ve changed a lot since then. Some good, some bad.”

I didn’t know what to say to that so I busied myself with a bite of waffle.

“Hailey.” He placed his hand over mine and I looked up into pained eyes. I wanted to pull away but I was frozen. “I’m sorry for everything I said last night — I’m so sorry. I was a total ass to you. I was upset — hurt — angry, but there is no excuse for how I talked to you.”

I swallowed my bite around the lump forming in my throat. “I didn’t sleep with him.”

Drew’s gaze snapped up to meet mine. “What?”

“I didn’t sleep with Mikhail.”

“But — the pictures, the video, and he said —.” He pulled his hand back and sat upright in his seat.

I shook my head. “I faked it.”

“How the hell do you fake something like that?”

“He had a lot to drink.”

“That’s not the first time he drank a lot and that doesn’t explain how you faked it.”

I dropped my gaze and let out a sigh before explaining what had happened. “I *might* have slipped something in his drink back at his place.” I took a drink of orange juice to keep myself busy.

“You *might* have?”

“I might have.” A little smirk teased the corner of my lips. “I *might* have given him something that warns it can increase the effects of alcohol.”

“But the video he has. The photos he showed me looked —.”

“The drugs made him more drunk so he didn’t remember everything but I figured that he’d remember some parts, plus I knew he’d have a video

camera in the room after finding the one at his country estate. I had to make it look convincing but... I didn't sleep with him. I couldn't."

Drew practically lunged over the table, grabbing the back of my head and pulling me to meet him. Our lips crashed together. He kissed me with such passion, I barely noticed him swiping the food and dishes to the floor with a loud crash. He twisted me until I was laying on the table with his warm body pressing against mine. He nudged my thighs open with his hips and settled between my legs.

He tangled his fingers into my hair, controlling the kiss tenderly as his tongue invaded my mouth. He teased my lips and our tongues began to dance a sensual tango. I took his lip between my teeth, giving just enough pressure to tug his lip as it slipped from my grasp.

He caressed my body with firm, demanding hands, running down my neck, chest, and sides. His arousal pressed hard against the thin material of our pajama pants that was the only barrier between us. He ground against me and my body responded instantly. He pulled up my shirt, exposing my breasts. A flood of heat pooled at my core. He teased my nipples with his tongue, sucked one into his mouth and let his teeth graze over the already tender flesh until it hardened into a taught peak.

"Drew..." I moaned and lifted my hips, wanting — needing more friction there.

His hands moved down to grip my hips and he tugged at my pajama pants, bringing them down over the rounded globes of my ass.

I wanted him so bad. I'd wanted him for so long. From the moment I'd walked out of that bar, never to see him again, I'd craved to feel his touch one more time. *The bar. The night he cheated on you.*

"Drew..." His name on my lips was no longer a whimper but direct.

"I've wanted this for so long." He squeezed my ass, lifting my hips and pulled my pants down farther but I tensed.

"Drew, stop," I demanded.

He froze instantly, pulling his lips from my neck, he looked up at me. "What's wrong?"

"I can't." I squirmed to get out of his grasp and sit up but he kept me pinned to the table. Even though he'd retreat enough that he wasn't touching me, his body still hovered over me.

"Hailey, don't do this...We both want this, why are you fighting it?"

"Because I can't — let me up."

Drew moved off of me and plopped down in a chair. I pulled up my pants and started to slide off the table. He stopped me, scooting up so that he sat between my legs while I sat on the table. He appeared more than just disappointed. He was hurt.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Running away.”

“I can’t do this again. I’m not the same person I was.”

“Neither am I. But Hailey, we’re good together. I know you see it too. You are the most challenging, frustrating, infuriating woman I’ve ever met...”

“Gee thanks.”

“And I love you for it.”

“I can’t get involved with you again.”

He hung his head looking completely defeated before looking back up at me with a new determination.

“Then don’t. But, just give me this. I’ve wanted to feel you again for so long. Before long, this mission will be over and we’ll both go back to our regular lives. But I want to know how it feels to hold you in my arms again — just for a little while — give me this.”

“It’s not a good idea.”

“Some of my best ones aren’t.” He smirked and pulled me closer. “Just for a little while.” He whispered as he lifted my shirt and pressed his lips against my stomach.

“Drew...” I breathed out and closed my eyes.

He continued to kiss up my body, gently laying me back onto the table as his lips trailed a hot path over my skin.

I peeled my shirt over my head. He gripped my pants and panties all in one, pulling them off as I lifted my hips for him. We kissed again, slower, more deliberate this time. We drank each other in as if we were dying of thirst in the middle of the Sahara and this was our only salvation.

Drew squirmed out of his pants and kicked them aside before climbing back up the table again. He settled between my legs and this time there was nothing to inhibit me from feeling his massive shaft pressing against my needy mound. He rolled his hips, pressing against me — teasing a moan from my lips.

His lips trailed up my neck to my ear and he nibbled the lobe before sinking into me with one fierce, smooth thrust. One hand held him hovering above me while the other gripped my ass.

After a moment to adjust to his size, Drew reared up onto his knees, both hands taking my hips and pulling me hard against him. He began to thrust, hard and feral as though he couldn't contain himself.

His blazing eyes burned into me with such desire and need it lit my whole body on fire. I lifted my hips, meeting his thrusts, needing to feel him consuming me. The table shook and I feared we might break it from the force of each thrust.

He sat me on the edge, still inside me and at the perfect height. His hands held my ass, pushing me hard against him as he thrust into me. He took me deeper, pushing me against him with each forward thrust. It was like he couldn't get deep enough. Drew didn't just want to have sex with me — he wanted to consume me — and he did.

Each thrust brought me closer to the edge and I desperately wanted to go over. Pleasure built until I couldn't contain it any longer. He thrust again and I cried out in pleasure — a loud, carnal cry I couldn't recognize as my own. I gripped hard at his back, nails digging into his back, clawing desperately. My insides clenched around him and white spots exploded behind my eyes. His chest rumbled with a growl. "You're mine."

Another deep thrust and he exploded inside me with a guttural roar. His fingers dug into my hips as we rode out the waves of pleasure until neither of us had anything more to give.

He collapsed on top of me for a moment, barely holding himself up to not crush me. His damp face rested in the crook of my neck while we both struggled to catch our ragged breaths.

He was a man, fierce and primal, different from the timid boy I'd known years before.

After several minutes, Drew lifted me from the table, cradled me against his chest, and carried me to the bathroom.

"What are you doing?" I looked up at him as he sat me down on the closed lid of the toilet.

"Running a bath."

"Mmm. A bath sounds great."

"How about a bath for two?" He smirked as he adjusted the water temperature and plugged the tub.

“Even better.” I smiled. When he smiled back, I couldn’t ignore the fluttering feeling in my heart. *Shit*. This was just supposed to be a fling while we were still working the case. Could I walk away after this was all over? I reminded myself that it was what I had to do.

Drew helped me into the tub and climbed in behind me. I laid back against his chest and sighed as the hot water seeped into my muscles. He took a bath puff and dipped it into the water, lathering it, he ran the sweet-smelling lather all over my body.

“You’re amazing.” He whispered into my ear and kissed down my neck.

I let out a breath and my head fell to the side, allowing him better access. “You’re not too bad yourself,” I practically purred.

We stayed like that until the bath water turned cool. Drew wrapped me in a fluffy white towel and dried me off before leading me back to bed for a midday nap wrapped in his arms.

I’d never slept so well in my life.

Chapter 19

An hour later, the sun poured through the bedroom windows, dancing on my face, waking me from the most perfect sleep I'd ever experienced. I turned onto my back and was met with Drew's face gazing down at me.

"So beautiful," he murmured. "You're peaceful when you sleep." He brushed a stray hair from my face and softly kissed my lips.

"Not always."

"Just in my arms?"

I smiled; it was true but I couldn't bring myself to say the words. I knew the look he was giving me. Drew was falling more in love with me. If I was honest with myself, I was falling in love with him too. Or more so than the love I'd always carried for him. God, this was so hard. I couldn't let myself go down that road again. I needed to break the perfect moment before I fell into the rabbit hole and got lost forever.

I sat up in bed, wrapping the sheet around me as I moved. "So, what do you have going on today?"

"Mikhail is calling a meeting of all his highest guys. He invited me along."

"That's good right? That means the plan is working?"

"It's really good. He said he wants to talk about a special shipment coming in."

"That's great." I stood up and found one of Drew's white tees and slipped it on, along with a pair of blue panties from the drawer Drew had given me.

"We'll probably only have a couple more weeks before everything goes down."

A wave of sadness washed over me at his words. *Only a couple more weeks with Drew.*

I forced a smile and turned to face him, "And all those girls will be safe. Because of you and your team."

"And because of you." Drew grabbed my hand as I walked by him to find my jeans. "I couldn't have done this without you. Not in this time frame."

"I'm glad I could help."

“I’m glad we got the chance to reconnect.”

“Me too.” And, I was. Even though being with him like this had reignited the ache in my chest when I thought about going back to our normal lives once it was all over.

“So, when all this is done, will you let me take you on a proper date?”

“Drew...” I scowled and shook my head.

“Still determined not to see me again after this is all over?”

“Can’t we just enjoy the time we have?”

“Of course. I just — I thought that if we keep enjoying our time together, why does it have to end?”

“Because everything ends.”

“When did you become such a pessimist?” He released my hand and I bent down to grab up my jeans from the floor.

“I guess life will do that to you.” I lost my balance as I tried to put my second foot in my jeans and Drew jumped up to catch me.

“Careful.” He placed me back on my feet and I finished getting dressed.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll always catch you.” His smile was bittersweet.

I squirmed as he gazed at me. It held so much more meaning than just a look. “You’re staring.”

“I like admiring what’s mine.”

“I’m not actually yours, remember?”

“Honey, this morning on that kitchen table you were more mine than you’ve ever been anyone’s.”

“What makes you think that?” I pulled away from him and went to the mirror to brush my hair.

“Because I know you.” His confidence both irritated and thrilled me.

I rolled my eyes at him and just shook my head catching a glance of him through the mirror. He was sitting on the bed watching me with that devastatingly sexy half-smile playing on his lips.

“What is it?” I stopped brushing my hair and turned around with my hands on my hips.

“I love when I’m right and you have nothing to come back with.”

I tossed the brush at him but he just laughed as it flew past and hit the headboard. “That would have hurt if you had any real aim.”

I stuck my tongue out at him and turned back around so I could do my makeup but having him watch me in the mirror was extremely distracting. I could feel his stare burning into me.

I was relieved to hear his phone ring, making him take his gaze off of me finally so he could answer it.

“Hello?” His eyes found mine in the mirror and he grinned. The asshole knew what he was doing to me. “Hey boss man. Yeah, everything is going good here. I’m supposed to be mee—. What? You’re kidding? Shit.”

I knew that tone. I looked back at him in the mirror as he sliced his hands through his hair. He wasn’t looking at me anymore. He was looking down at the floor with his head in his hand.

“Are you sure? ... And you think it's me? ... Well that’s what it sounds like... okay...yeah...I’ll make up some excuse to get away but it’s not going to be easy to get on Mikhail’s good side like this. We’ll be there in two hours.” Drew hung up and tossed his phone onto the bed. “Shit.”

I’d completely stopped what I was doing. I hurried over to him and sat beside him on the bed. “What happened? What’s wrong?”

“There’s a mole in the agency. Some information on an agent was leaked. He was found dead in his personal residence last night. After some inquiries, they found a connection between me and him.”

“So, it was someone you knew?”

“Yeah. A guy I worked with back in South America. Now they suspect me of being the leak that got him killed.”

“You didn’t — did you?”

“Of course not. Damn it, Hailey, do you know me at all?” He stood up from the bed and walked to the window, turning his back on me.

“I was just —.” I had no excuse. He was right. I should have known him well enough to know he wouldn’t have done that. “I’m sorry. I just — what are you going to do?”

“I have to leave in an hour to meet at headquarters to answer some questions. I won’t be allowed back in the field until this whole mess is cleared up.”

“But what about Mikhail? You’re supposed to be meeting him around the same time. What about all those girls?”

“That’s why Jason called me personally. He wants to clear this up as soon as possible to get me back out there but he has to follow protocol.”

“What will you tell Mikhail?”

“That’s a good question. Start packing, I got to call him and make something up.”

“Okay.”

I went to the closet and pulled out my bag along with a suitcase for Drew. I packed my things first, listening in as he made his call.

“Hey Mikhail... Yeah...listen, I hate to do this but I’m going to have to miss the meeting today...no, no. I still want in... it’s my mom. Yeah, she’s sick. My dad called to let me know he needs me back home ASAP. It shouldn’t be more than a few days — a week at the most. Two weeks? You know I can work fast and I’m good under pressure. I’ll make it...Okay, send me the details? Thank you. You won’t regret it.”

Drew hung up the phone and I stopped zipping up my bag to look at him. “He’s still going to let me in on the job as long as I’m back in a week. The job is going down in two weeks.”

I left my half-zipped bag and went to Drew’s side, placing my hand on his arm as a show of support. “Well, that’s good, right?”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t give me much time to prep and get men in place for the takedown.”

“Will you be able to do it?”

Drew gave me a look as if to say *of course I can*. He stood and started to help me pack. The sooner we got out of there, the sooner we could clear up this whole mess and get back to the mission.

Although Drew lived less than an hour from the headquarters, the maneuvers we had to take to make sure we weren’t being followed made it take longer. Drew wasn’t very talkative on the way there. I suppose being accused of being a mole in the agency he’d devoted his life to put a damper on small talk.

Making it through security was no easy task in the large office building of a private security firm that was the cover for the secret agency. We were escorted upstairs by a large man in a black suit that looked more bouncer than business man.

He led us into the elevator which required a security code and keycard just to get moving. From there we were taken to a large conference room where Jason and Rebecca were already seated.

“Hey guys,” Jason said as we were brought in.

“Hey.” I looked from him to Rebecca. She looked worried while Jason maintained a more professional coolness.

“So, where’s the rest of the committee gathered as the jury?” Drew said flatly.

“I thought we could skip all that and just keep it small. I will have to record the session of course.” He nodded toward a video camera in the far corner.

“Of course.” Drew pulled out a chair for me and I sat beside him across from Rebecca and Jason. Drew took the seat beside me and leaned in, resting his elbows on the glass table. “Whatever you think I did, I didn’t do it.”

“I never said you did anything.”

“You said there was a mole and that I was a suspect.”

“The mole is someone who worked in your close network of guys in South America. We are speaking with them all, you included.”

“There were only three of us close enough to the mission to be of any help to the cartel not including Martinez and seeing how he’s dead, I’m guessing it’s not him.”

“Well then, that narrows down the suspect pool quite a bit doesn’t it?”

“Have you spoken to the other two agents yet?”

“Yes. They came in before you since you were the farthest out.”

“And neither of them spontaneously confessed.” Drew spoke in a sardonic tone.

“No, but both of their stories aligned with each other.”

“Which was what?”

Jason gave Drew a pitted smile. “You know that’s not how this works.”

“I’ve never been accused of being a mole before so you’ll have to forgive me if I don’t know how this works.”

“Fair enough. I’m going to need all the information you have on the situation and how it pertained to Martinez.”

“It’s pretty high clearance stuff.” Drew glanced at me and to Jason.

“Yes, I asked Rebecca to come with me so she could keep Hailey company while we chatted. If you girls would excuse us. There are refreshments down the hall. Rebecca knows the way.”

Rebecca stood. I was still pretty speechless which wasn't like me at all. I followed her out of the room with one last glance at Drew before the door closed behind us.

"How are you holding up?" Rebecca linked arms with me and guided me to a small break room with a kitchenette.

"This is all so weird. Everything from Drew coming back, to being undercover with him, to this." I waved my hands in the air.

"I know. I'm worried about you."

"I'm okay." I let out a sigh and sat at one of the round wooden tables while Rebecca poured us each a cup of coffee. She brought them over and sat down with me. "He didn't do whatever it was they think he's done."

"Has Drew said anything to you about what happened in South America?"

"No, but I know Drew couldn't have done anything against the agency. He's devoted his whole life to this place."

Rebecca's eyes widened and she raised a brow, "You know he couldn't have? Hailey, just a couple weeks ago you were slapping him at my house."

"I'm not saying he's man of the year and I wouldn't trust him not to cheat in a relationship. His track record with that is proof enough. But, could he have betrayed the agency and the men who worked with him? No way. He's always talking about how if his cover is blown it would put the other guys in danger too."

"That doesn't prove anything really. I mean, I know you think you know him but do you really? It's been years and you even said yourself that you never thought he'd cheat."

"He doesn't seem like that guy anymore." I said and took a sip of my coffee.

"You slept with him." Rebecca gawked at me.

"I — what? How do you know that?"

"Because you are my best friend. I know you, Hailey. Are you two back —?"

"No. Definitely not. He says he loves me but I can't go back there. Not after what he did to me before."

"I understand. Just be careful. He seems like a nice guy but not long ago you didn't even know he was in the agency. There are a lot of things we don't know about him."

“You’re right.”

“I’ve missed you.” Rebecca gave me a sad smile.

“I’ve missed you too. Girl’s weekend once this is all over with?”

“Yeah, that sounds good. Hopefully before I start showing so we can really do it up right.”

“Yeah — showing? Oh my god, you’re pregnant again? It’s only been eight months since you had Cole.”

“I know. It’s crazy.” Rebecca grinned and placed her hand on her flat stomach. “I wanted to wait to tell you until all this calmed down but I just couldn’t.”

“I’m glad you couldn’t.” I jumped up and rounded the table to hug her tight. “How far are you?”

“Only four weeks. I found out a lot earlier this time around which means it’s going to feel so much longer.”

“Who knows?”

“Just Jason right now. We plan to tell our parents together this weekend.”

“You guys are trying to make a football team, aren’t you?”

Rebecca laughed. “Oh God, no. This will be the last one for a while. I’m going on the pill after this. I need a break from mood swings, heartburn, and swollen ankles.”

“I’m just so happy for you.” I hugged her again until I heard Jason’s voice.

“Just couldn’t wait to tell her, huh?” He smirked at Rebecca and she went to him.

“You knew I couldn’t.”

He laughed and kissed her head as he held her close and looked at me. “Drew’s going to have to stay here for a while until we get this whole thing sorted out so we are going to send you to another safe house until then. I don’t want you to be anywhere the Russians might think to look while you aren’t with Drew.”

“How long is that going to be? Drew has to be back for the mission within a week or he’ll miss his chance.”

“I know. Trust me, I want to get this sorted out just as bad as anyone but I have to go by the book on this. One of my men is dead.”

“I understand. I just don’t want these bastards to get away.”

“Daniel is one of my agents. He’s going to take you to your temporary safe house.”

Jason motioned down the hall, summoning Daniel, an extremely large man who looked like a bodybuilder squeezed into a suit.

“Hello Ms. Wood.”

“Hi. And, it’s Hailey, please?”

“Of course, Hailey. Are you ready to go? I’ve already had your bags moved from Agent Caraway’s car to my own.”

“Can I see him before I go?” I looked at Jason but his sympathetic frown told me the answer before he could.

“I’m afraid not. We’ll get this mess sorted out as soon as possible though, I promise.”

I nodded and hugged Rebecca before Daniel escorted me out to the waiting SUV.

Chapter 20

Daniel escorted me into the small safe house that would be my home until things with Drew were sorted out. It was a cute place. A small two-bedroom ranch with a white picket fence. It was not my style at all. I'm not sure exactly what I expected of a safe house but this was not it. That place looked more like where you might find the Cleavers living.

Daniel placed my bag on the queen size bed that nearly filled the small master bedroom. There wasn't room for much in the way of furniture, just a chest of drawers and a chair in the corner. He showed me around to the spare bedroom made into a small office with a worn desk.

"There's a hidden gun in the second draw down. There's also one in the nightstand drawer and one under the sink in the bathroom."

"Guns?" I blinked.

"Just in case. Better to be safe than sorry."

"Right," I sighed.

"You going to be okay here?"

"I don't have much of a choice, do I?"

"It won't be for long." He looked at me with pity.

"I'm just ready to get back to my normal life."

"Understandably so. But until then, here are the codes to the security system, Wi-Fi, and a new phone. Jason had me program your new phone with his number, Rebecca's, mine, and the line to our security team. We'll also have surveillance drive by at least every two hours. If you need anything — or if anything looks off — call us."

"Another new phone?" I sighed.

"Just in case the Russian's tampered with the old one, which I need to take."

I handed over my old phone, pocketing the list of codes and new cell before walking Daniel to the door.

"We'll get everything cleared up and get Drew out of there soon."

"He didn't do whatever it is they think he did."

"Then he has nothing to worry about. Trust the system." And with that Daniel left me to my solitude.

I took my laptop out of my bag and to the office where I set it up on the desk. I'd barely been keeping up with work in the short bits of downtime I'd had. I logged into the secure network and started checking emails but I couldn't focus.

I shut my laptop and went to the small farmhouse themed kitchen. Jason must have known he was going to put me here because he had stocked some of my favorite foods and snacks. I pulled out the pint of cookie dough ice cream and after searching through several drawers, finally found the spoons. At least I wouldn't go hungry. I plopped down on the couch and switched on the small T.V.

It'd been five days that I'd been stuck in the tiny house. Time moves slowly with nothing to do and nowhere to go. I was used to a fast-paced life so sitting around indefinitely started to wear on me from the first day.

I'd binge watched my favorite shows until I was completely caught up on every episode. I'd finally caught up on all my work emails, and started using the treadmill I found tucked in the corner of the living room.

I was losing my mind in the house. I had to do something. It was already dark outside but I wasn't hungry enough to bother with dinner yet. I turned on the radio and started to dance around the house. It was probably the most fun I'd had since being there.

After dancing, I didn't really feel like cooking so I fixed myself a turkey sandwich and hopped in the shower. The water was a little testy so I had to adjust it multiple times to get it just right. I dried off and changed for bed. I was super tired. I checked the clock and about dropped my glass of wine when I saw it was only 9:30 at night.

Staying three was making me old. I vowed to make up for it once I was back to my old life. Then I turned off the lights and crawled into bed — to sleep — at 9:30.

The loud squeak of a floorboard in the hall woke me from my dreamless sleep. *Someone was in the house.* I shook my head to knock off the haze of sleep and listened again. There was definitely the sound of a heavy boot on the hardwood floor.

I held my breath and reached into the nightstand where my hand landed on the cool metal of a small pistol. I'd only shot a gun in the range with Rebecca, Jason, and Liam. I knew how to use a gun — in theory.

I checked that it was loaded and climbed out of bed. I sidestepped a creaky board and listened by the door. The footsteps stopped just outside the door. I could hear the rattle of the doorknob as my finger twitched on the trigger.

I readied the gun as the knob turned and the door slowly opened to expose a large shadowy figure.

“Don’t move or I’ll shoot.” I yelled and the figure startled.

“Hailey, jeez. Don’t shoot, it’s me.” I recognized Liam’s voice in the dark.

“Liam? What the hell are you doing here?” I lowered the gun to my side.

“I volunteered for surveillance. Only wanted the best looking out for you.”

“Looking out for me includes breaking in and scaring me half to death while almost getting yourself shot?” I moved over to the bed and flipped on the small side lamp for some light.

“I was driving by and saw all the lights were off. It was too quiet. I got worried something might be wrong so I wanted to check it out. Then when I saw your security system wasn’t on, I got really worried.”

“Shit, I must have forgot to turn it on before bed.”

“Bed? It’s only ten.”

“What can I say? Being here all alone for days with nothing to do is making me old before my time.” I sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. “Are they any closer to sorting this mess out? Time’s running out for Drew to make it back for the big bust.”

“I don’t know. They are keeping things really hush-hush for now and since it doesn’t directly involve me, Jason hasn’t really mentioned much. He’s been working himself to death over this case.”

“I feel bad for him, but I also feel bad for Drew.”

“Yeah, this sort of thing can’t be easy.”

“I’m about to lose my mind here, Liam.”

“Do you want me to stay here tonight?”


“Really? Could you? It wouldn’t get you in any trouble or anything?”

“Nah. I’ll sleep on the couch. I’m just going to let Jason know what’s going on, so he’s in the loop.” He pulled out his phone and started texting.

“Okay,” I yawned. “Want to watch some TV in here with me for a little while? I know it’s a little early for you to be going to sleep.”

“Sure.” Liam slipped off his jacket and shoes and crawled into bed still in his jeans and black tee.

He leaned against the headboard and I curled up in the crook of his arm. There was nothing romantic about it. Liam was like a big brother to me. And, after all the craziness of the past couple weeks, I needed the familiar safety he provided.



The clearing of a throat woke me from a dream I couldn’t remember. I rubbed my eyes, feeling a hard chest under my cheek which made me freeze. I had to think for a minute who would be in my bed. Then, the flood of memories came back to me. I almost shot Liam. Me pulling a gun on him somehow seemed humorous now and I couldn’t help but grin.

I heard a throat clear again. It wasn’t coming from Liam; it was from across the room. I finally fought the haze of sleep, opened my eyes and looked across the room to see Drew standing in the doorway. He had a broad stance, arms crossed, and an angry scowl but what sent a chill shooting down my spine was the rage burning in his stare.

I shot up in bed when the possibilities started racing through my mind. “Drew, what are you doing here? What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong?” He let out an angry laugh. “You’re asking me what’s wrong while you’re lying in bed with another man?”

I was an idiot. Of course, this wouldn’t look good to anyone who didn’t know mine and Liam’s friendship. “It’s not—.”

“What’s going on?” Liam’s groggy voice rumbled.

Drew ignored Liam’s demand for an explanation. His gaze never leaving me. “I guess this explains why you can’t love me back — why you fought the attraction between us.” He turned to leave.

“Drew, wait.” I jumped out of bed and ran to him just as he was reaching for the front door. I grabbed his taut arm and tried to pull him around to look at me but he fought against my advances. “There’s nothing going on between Liam and me.”

“Save it, Hailey. A picture is worth a thousand words, and that picture is there...” He whirled around and jabbed his finger in the direction of the bedroom. “That one was worth a hell of a lot.”

Liam came swaggering lazily from the bedroom still in his jeans and wrinkled tee from the night before. “Man, listen to her. There’s nothing —.”

“You stay the hell out of this.” Drew pointed at Liam and took a step toward him.

“You came in here yelling and waking me up from my beauty sleep like you own the place so as far as I see it, I’m already in this.”

Drew charged forward, knocking me to the side. I spun around just in time to see his fist make contact with Liam’s jaw. I yelled out for him to stop but he didn’t respond.

Liam staggered back having not expected the blow. He lunged at Drew, throwing punch after punch until the two of them were nothing more than fists, shoulders, elbows, flying around, stumbling, knocking into the furniture of the small house.

“You guys, stop it. Stop. Liam. Drew.” I yelled but no one was listening to me.

A lamp shattered to the floor but they wouldn’t stop. Liam got in a really good punch, knocking Drew on his back on the wooden coffee table and its legs gave out, crashing onto the floor.

I thought that was it, but Drew leaped right back to his feet, ready to attack when there was a knock at the front door that made us all freeze.

No one knew we were here except for Jason and Rebecca and the few surveillance guys. If it were any of them, they would have charged in at the sound of all the fighting inside. No — this was someone else.

Liam nodded for me to answer the door while he stood to the side, out of sight, ready to pounce. Drew stood near me and wiped the blood from his busted lip.

I slowly opened the door and peeked out. There was an older lady dressed in a long brown wool jacket and thick scarf around her neck and head.

“Hello, may I help you?” I opened the door a little wider so that my body just blocked the entrance.

“Oh, hello dear. I’m Edith from next door.” She pointed with a shaky hand toward the house I assumed was hers. “I’m sorry to disturb you, but I was out getting the mail when I heard the most awful ruckus. I just wanted to make sure everything was alright.”

“Oh — yes ma’am. Everything is fine. Just a little mishap. I’m sorry to have disturbed you.”

“No problem, dear. I’m glad everything is okay. You take care now. I have to get out of this cold. It’s hard on these old bones.”

I smiled and waved as she left. Shutting the door, I scowled at the two of them as if they were children. “No more of that. I don’t know why men think everything needs to be settled with a fist fight.”

“It didn’t settle much but it sure felt good,” Drew said, perched on the arm of the couch.

“Then let me settle this for you.” I snapped at him, stalking toward him until I was right in his face. “There is nothing going on between me and Liam. He was on security detail last night and ended up staying to keep me company because I’ve been going crazy in this house for five days. Liam is like a brother to me. Nothing happened.”

Drew looked from me to Liam who gave a confirming nod but he snapped his head back to me. “Then why were you two in bed together?”

“We fell asleep watching T.V.” I rolled my eyes at him.

“You think I usually sleep in jeans and a tee-shirt?” Liam pointed out his wrinkled clothes.

“I guess — damn.” Drew looked down and rubbed the back of his neck. “Guess I screwed up.”

“You think?” I motioned toward the shattered lamp and broken coffee table.

“Hey, the table was on him.” Drew chuckled and crooked his thumb at Liam.

It amazed me how quickly these two could go from fighting to buddies in the blink of an eye. Once the fighting had calmed, something important dawned on me — Drew was there.

“So, how are you here? I thought you weren’t allowed to see anyone until this was sorted out? Did they finally clear you?”

“Yeah, Jason made the announcement this morning. I’d planned to come surprise you.” Drew gave me a sheepish grin. “Surprise?”

I couldn’t hold back the laugh “Yeah, it was a bit of a surprise. That’s for sure.”

“Not as big of a surprise as I got last night when I showed up unannounced. Be glad you came this morning after she was already unarmed.”

“Unarmed?” Drew looked from Liam to me with a quirked brow.

“Uh— yeah, I kind of almost shot Liam.”

Drew laughed and slapped Liam on the back. “Man, and I was jealous of you. I should have been pitying you.”

“No kidding, this one’s already got a fiery temper. The last thing we need is for her to be armed too. And she’s a good shot too.”

“You’ve seen her shoot?”

“Yeah, we usually go once or twice a month out to the range.”

Drew’s smile dropped, though he tried to hide the shift in his mood. “Nice. I’m glad she’s learning. Too much bad shit in the world not to know how to defend yourself.” I knew him better than that. His jealousy was back.

“I’ve never been much of the damsel in distress types.” I smiled, trying to shift the conversation. I continued, “So, what did Jason find out about the case? Who was the mole?”

“Martinez.” Drew frowned and his shoulders slumped.

“You mean, the dead soldier from your team?”

“Yeah. Turns out he was leaking some intel to the cartel. Once things went badly, they blamed him and took him out.”

“That’s awful. But I am glad you’ve been cleared.”

“Yeah.” Drew sighed again. He looked like someone just kicked his puppy.

“What is it?” I walked over and placed my hand on his arm.

“I just never saw this coming. I never would have suspected him. He’s a good soldier — was a good soldier.”

“Do they have any idea why he changed sides?”

“They found correspondents with the cartel. They threatened his family. He’s got a wife and a new baby. Now the kid is going to grow up without a dad. They don’t even get his pension after all this.”

“That sucks. Is there anything that can be done to help?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe we can figure out a way to help. A fundraiser?”

“We’ll see. We should probably get going. The sooner we can get back, the sooner I can quell some of Mikhail’s suspicions about me.”

“Okay, give me fifteen to pack and throw on some regular clothes?”

“Anything I can do to help?” Liam asked.

“You can grab the ice cream from the fridge. I’m not leaving that behind.”

Their rumbling chuckles faded as I disappeared into the back bedroom.

Chapter 21

Walking back into Drew's apartment felt so strange. The place was so much bigger than the safe house. Switching lives then switching again was starting to make life seem surreal. I was afraid, when I got home and attempted to go back to normal, I may not know what normal was.

Having lost five and a half days due to the investigation, Drew and I couldn't waste any time. We'd discussed the details of our cover story about his mom being ill while on the drive back to the city. Drew had also called Mikhail and let him know we were heading back and they arranged to meet at the club.

I went to the kitchen and poured a drink. Drew came up behind me. His hand slipped around my waist, pulling me back against him. He swept my hair to the side, exposing my neck and trailed his warm lips down the tender flesh from my ear to the crook of my neck.

"Drew, what are you doing?" I tried but failed at trying to sound scolding.

"We're stuck in this situation for a while longer. We might as well have a little fun. You know the sex was always incredible between us."

He was right. Sex with Drew was unlike anything I'd ever experienced with anyone else but I wasn't going to let him know that. "I'm not some inexperienced little girl anymore. I have higher standards now."

"Is that a challenge? Because I accept." He ground his hips against me and pulled my back tighter against him.

"Why are you so intent on torturing me?"

"Because baby, you just make it too damn easy. I love the way you tremble when I kiss you like this. The way your breath shudders when I run my hand over your body." His hand moved up my stomach underneath my shirt until he reached my breast.

He took my nipple between his finger and thumb and lightly tweaked it, sending a jolt of pleasure between my thighs.

"It's not fair," I moaned.

"What's not fair, honey?" His sensual tone caressed my ear as he teased the now hardened nipple in his fingers.

“The way you know my body,” I whimpered and pressed back against him.

“I never said it would be fair — this little arrangement of ours — it's always going to be unbalanced. The thing you've failed to realize is that it's you that holds all the cards.” He pressed his hips against me, emphasizing his obviously growing arousal.

I'd let down my guard enough to sleep with him before but if I slept with him again, I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep my heart out of the equation this time.

“Drew, we can't.” I slipped out of his grasp and started down the hall. “We have to get ready for tonight.”

I rounded the doorway into the bedroom to try to keep busy preparing for the meeting tonight.

“Tell me you didn't miss me,” Drew growled as he pinned me to the wall just inside the bedroom.

“I did miss you,” I admitted.

“Tell me you don't want me.”

“I do,” I let the words slip out on a breath.

“I missed you too, you know? And I want you so damn much.” He whispered as he ran the tip of his nose along the shell of my ear and I knew I'd lost.

I rolled my hips against his pelvis and felt a growing hardness that told me just how much he wanted me.

He thrust his hips pressing the hard bulge in his pants against my softness. My head tilted back on its own accord, a moan pouring from my parted lips. Drew's lips found that sensitive place just behind my ear and a thrill shot through my body.

I squeezed my hands between us, lightly pressing on his chest. “Shouldn't we be focusing on tonight? On Mikhail?”

“I don't know about you...” He kissed down my neck and across my collarbone as he spoke against my skin. “But Mikhail isn't exactly my go-to fantasy for moments like this.”

“Then who is?” I dropped my hands to my sides. I was helpless with his mouth on me. I couldn't think clearly.

Drew pushed down my shirt and bra, releasing my breast and teasing my nipple between his teeth, making it harden into a tight little nub.

My back arched and I let out a loud, needy moan. His lips were still on my skin as he whispered, “you.”

At that declaration, I let myself go. Drew and I became a frenzied blur of hands tearing at each other’s clothes until there was nothing between us. My body was scorching. Drew lifted my ass and I wrapped my legs around him. He pushed my back hard against the cool wall and with a quick adjustment, sunk into my wet folds with one smooth thrust.

“Oh Hailey, you’re always so ready for me.” Drew’s chest rumbled with each word.

He began to thrust, wild, desperate, pounding thrusts that took my breath as he hit something deep inside. My nails dragged down his arms, clinging to him as he pushed me up the wall.

My body wound tighter and tighter, like a rubber band ready to snap. Drew’s hand lightly grasped my throat. Not enough to restrict my breathing, just enough that I could feel his hand. His power was there, restrained, never hurting me, but always there. It made me feel vulnerable in the most wonderful way. All through my life, I’d hated to feel vulnerable. Vulnerability meant you could get hurt. But Drew was letting me know, though he had the power to hurt me, he wouldn’t.

My insides quivered around him. Contracting and releasing in pulses. I didn’t realize he could get any bigger until he did. His shaft swelled inside me. His thrusts came faster, harder, wilder.

“Come for me,” he growled against my ear lightly biting at that tender place on my neck that shot jolts through me. And, I did.

That rubber band didn’t just snap, it set off a billion tiny bundles of dynamite connected to every nerve in my body. White lights exploded and swirled behind my eyes. A cry of pleasure I didn’t recognize, ripped from my throat, catching until I couldn’t even scream.

Drew followed after me. Thrusting until he was seated as deep as my body would allow. He shuddered against me, burying his face in the crook of my neck as a deep muffled cry filled the air.

We rode out the aftershocks until both of our bodies had nothing left to give. Drew held me as we slowly collapsed onto the floor in each other’s arms.

He held me, cradled in his lap, for several moments as our panting began to quiet. My ears rang — or — beeped? That wasn’t right. I looked

up at Drew, who had apparently also heard the noise because his face was alert now. He held up a finger to his lips and gently slid me off his lap.

Drew stood up and picked up the jeans he'd been wearing. He pulled out his cellphone, the beeping gradually getting louder.

"Sorry. Just a message from my dad." Drew's voice was normal, but his expression was anything but.

"What's —?"

He held up a finger to his lips again. "Let's go take a shower. I want to make you a little dirtier before we get cleaned up for tonight." That didn't sound like him.

He took my hand and helped me off the floor. I found it odd that he took his phone with us until he closed the bathroom door and the phone finally quit beeping.

"What the hell is going on?" I demanded when he started punching in seemingly random numbers on his phone.

Drew placed his phone on the counter and started the shower. "The bedroom's bugged."

"What?" I gaped at him.

"Shh. The bedroom's been bugged. My phone has a bug detector on it. Shit. I can't believe I let myself get so distracted I didn't think to check. I just never thought they'd actually get through here."

"So, you mean they saw —."

"Maybe not. We could have been out of view, or they could just have audio — damn it, did we say anything to blow our cover?"

"I don't think so. We weren't doing a lot of talking after we got inside." I smirked at him and even under the stress of the situation, I could see the corners of his sexy mouth being tugged upward.

"Let's get cleaned up and get ready for tonight. It's safe here but anytime we're in the other parts of the apartment, be careful. Speak as though they can hear everything."

"What are we going to do about the bugs?"

"While we're with Mikhail tonight, a maintenance team will come in and sweep for bugs."

"How did they get in?"

"That's the bigger question."



"Mikhail." Drew gave a cheerful greeting.

“Hello my friend. I trust your mother is doing better?”

“Yes. Gave us quite a scare, though. It was pneumonia. Once the doctors got her on the right I.V. antibiotics, she started responding fast.”

“I’m glad to hear that she is well. And how are you, beautiful girl?” Mikhail patted the place beside him on the couch.

I hesitated for only a moment. I couldn’t risk anything when Drew and his team were so close. I put on my best smile and sat beside him with Drew on my other side. “I’m well, Mikhail. Thank you.”

“I must say, I know things started off as simply a means to an end for you to get your debts repaid, but this lifestyle seems to suit you much better than a life scraping by in that horrible apartment you were staying in before.”

I leaned in close as if telling him a secret while knowing full well Drew could still hear me. “To be honest, I prefer this lifestyle to my old one.”

“People say money can’t buy happiness and maybe that’s true. But I say it can make it much easier.” He laughed and I forced my own laugh.

“I’m anxious to hear about this upcoming business opportunity you were telling me about.” Drew interrupted.

“Ah yes.” Mikhail gave my thigh a sensual squeeze that made my deep green dress shift higher. “Why don’t you go enjoy the club while us men talk business.”

“I don’t know about having her wandering freely around the club. I like to keep her close. She says she’s happier in this lifestyle but, what assurance do I really have she won’t slip away the moment I turn my back?”

“Lacy is working in my VIP rooms entertaining our guests with dances. I can have her pulled out to keep Hailey company if you’d like. Lacy knows better than to attempt to defy me.”

“That would be great. Thank you.” Drew cast me a warning glance for Mikhail’s benefit. “Behave yourself.”

“Of course.” I smiled and rose from my seat to find Lacy. I was happy to get to see her again. I’d be even happier to see her once she was free from Mikhail’s control.

One of Mikhail’s goons led me to the VIP rooms and had me wait outside while he went to find Lacy. I’d quit even attempting to remember all the guys that worked for Mikhail. The only ones I knew by name were

Mikhail, Dmitri, and one other named Boris which I remembered because when I first heard it, I had to bite my cheek not to laugh as I fought the urge to ask him about Natasha.

I watched the people out on the dance floor and wondered if any of them had a clue what was really going on in the club.

“Hailey.” My attention was brought back by Lacy’s happily surprised voice. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here with Drew but he and Mikhail had some business to discuss so they sent me off to find you. Said you’d keep me out of trouble.” I smiled and linked arms with her. “So, what kind of non-trouble can we get into?”

“I don’t know. I don’t usually have free time when I’m at the club. Mikhail keeps me pretty busy... entertaining.” She frowned and my heart ached for her. I wanted to tell her that it would all be over soon, that Drew was going to put these horrible men away for a long time, and she and her brother would be safe.

I wanted to. But, I didn’t. Because I knew it could put her in danger. Even if she didn’t slip up and tell Mikhail, just a spark of hope in her eyes could give us away.

Usually, when someone tells me to not get in trouble, that’s exactly what I want to do and if it had just been me at risk of *punishment* I wouldn’t have minded it from Drew, but I knew Lacy would have it much worse if Mikhail was displeased by our antics. So, I decided that dancing would be some good harmless fun.

“Come on.” I grabbed Lacy’s arm and dragged her out onto the dance floor. I’d remembered how free she looked when she was dancing instead of having to be around Mikhail or the other men.

“Where are we going?” Her laugh was warm and almost musical. It was the first real one I’d heard from her.

“We’re going to dance.” I pushed our way through the crowd.

There was a large riser in the middle of the dance floor. While the smaller ones around the perimeter were available to guests, this one was too high for anyone to get onto easily on their own. I spotted one of Mikhail’s men and waved him over.

“Hey, big guy. You mind giving us a lift?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be working in the VIP rooms tonight?” He eyed Lacy suspiciously and she cowered down under his thousand-pound

gaze.

“Mikhail said she’s supposed to hang out with me instead to keep me out of trouble,” I smirked at him and his expression lightened slightly as he turned his attention toward me.

“And who do you belong to, pretty one?” He snaked his arm around my waist and pulled me against him but I kept calm.

“Drew,” I kept my voice matter-of-fact and hoped the guys had a big mouth about how Drew did not like *his girl* touched.

Apparently, that worked because the guy’s hand shot off of me as if I’d just burned him. I couldn’t hold back a chuckle.

“So, you think you can give us girls a little boost? It’s less crowded up there than on the dance floor.”

He looked unsure but finally caved. “Sure, why not? But if anyone asks, you little monkeys found a way up yourselves.”

“Sure thing.” I smiled. There was something a little different about him. Even when he’d pulled me close, he’d missed that dangerous vibe the other’s put off. I couldn’t put my finger on it but something was definitely different about him.

He gave us a boost and within minutes, Lacy and I were both safely atop the center stage of the club. The lights pulsed with the music around us and I could feel the beat starting to take over my body. Lacy looked around timidly toward the balcony where I knew Mikhail and Drew were having their meeting.

“He’s busy with Drew. It’s fine. Plus, he said for us to have fun.”

“He said that?” She looked skeptically.

“Well, he said you’d keep me entertained. So, come on. Let’s have some fun. Loosen up.”

I grabbed a hold of her hand and spun around. We started to dance and before long, Lacy was indeed loosening up. She was smiling, a true, real smile that made her even more beautiful than she already was.

It wasn’t long before we had begun to attract the attention of the other people on the dance floor.

“People are starting to watch,” Lacy whispered to me.

“So they are,” I smirked. “Let’s give them a good show then.”

I took Lacy’s hand and spun her out before pulling her back so that she was wrapped in my arms. We both faced the crowd and I could see it

was more people watching than we'd realized. Mikhail and Drew were standing at the rail of the balcony watching us.

Drew's eyes met mine with a heated glint. I smirked at him. It was time to have a little fun. I ran my hands down Lacy's sides and pulled out the sexiest moves I could, just for him.

Mikhail said something to Drew and his expression switched, hard and cold. He shook his head but his gaze never left me. Once the dance was done, I thought it was best to head back up to Drew and make sure everything was okay.

I didn't make it up the stairs before Drew was coming down to meet me.

"Hey, is the meeting over?"

"Yeah. It's time to go," he said coolly and took my hand, leading me out.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes." we passed security and out into the street.

"Then why are you in such a hurry?"

"Because," Drew said as he pulled me into a dark alley beside the club, "I didn't want anyone to see me do this."

He pushed me against the rough brick wall and within moments, his mouth was on mine. His fingers tangled hard into my hair, directing my movements as his tongue invaded my mouth.

Drew hooked his hand under my leg and hitched it up around his waist. I barely had time for my mind to catch up before his hand was between us was moving my drenched panties to the side and guiding the tip of his shaft to my entrance.

He thrust into me, hard and smooth until he completely filled me. I cried out into his mouth. His hips thrust harder, viciously taking me. Pleasure took over my whole body and I barely noticed the brick scratching at my back.

"This isn't going to take long," he ground out through clenched teeth, "not with the way you were driving me wild in there."

His hand reached between us again, his fingers finding that sensitive bundle of nerves between my legs, making my back arch and a cry of pleasure escape my lips.

He swelled inside me, filling me even more than he had, hitting every spot that threatened to send me over the edge. My insides clenched

and Drew let out a loud growl that rumbled from his chest as he exploded inside me. He rutted his hips harder, pushing me over the precipice.

I buried my face in his shoulder as I cried out and clawed at his shirt. My body exploded into a million tiny pieces that swirled and burned like floating embers caught in the wind.

I barely had time to recover before he pulled out of me and lowered my leg back to the ground.

“Wow.” I breathed out, leaning against the wall for support on my shaky legs.

“You okay?”

“Better than okay,” I smirked at him.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

I bit my lip and shook my head.

“Good.” He leaned in and kissed my lips gently before pulling me from the wall to his arms. “Let’s get home.”

“Okay.” Drew guided me into the car and climbed in beside me. He pulled me to his side and I curled up in the crook of his arm. After taking a few minutes to recover, I peeked up at Drew who was gazing down at me. “Did the meeting go well?”

“It did.” Drew smiled.

“Well, are you going to tell me about it?”

“It was mostly just locations and which of his guys will be involved in the shipment. He won’t tell me when it will be until the night it’s happening.”

“Doesn’t give you a good advantage to plan ahead.”

“No, but at least he’s letting me in. That’s huge. It won’t be as secure this way but we can still do it. They won’t be keeping the girls. The auction will be the same night they arrive. It keeps the risk of discovery lower because there’s not as much time that Mikhail will have them.”

“He’s a smart man.” I mused and Drew raised a brow at me.

“Psychotic and evil, but smart,” I clarified and Drew chuckled. “So, what did Mikhail say when Lacy and I were dancing? You looked upset.”

“He said I should put you to work at the club. That with moves like that you’d be a popular girl in the VIP rooms.”

Drew’s mood shifted and I wished I hadn’t brought it up. I wanted to do something to fix it. I leaned my head over on his shoulder and intertwined my fingers with his. “Maybe if you’re the only one in there.”

He let out a soft chuckle and pulled me tighter to him.

Chapter 22

We had no way of knowing when the shipment of girls would arrive, which meant the guys had to be ready at any time. That meant quick preparations. Drew had spent most of the night on the phone with Jason planning and preparing for what was to come. I'd fallen asleep on the couch waiting up for him.

"Hailey? Hailey, wake up." Drew said softly.

I squinted in the bright morning light. "Hey, morning."

"Morning, you need to get up and get ready. I tried to let you sleep for as long as I could."

"Sorry I fell asleep on you last night."

"Don't be. You need your sleep."

"Did you sleep at all?" I looked over at his side of the bed which barely looked slept in at all.

"I caught a couple hours. Come on. Get up. We have to be at Jason's to meet with the team in an hour and a half."

"Okay. I'm just going to throw my hair up in a ponytail and get dressed. I can do my makeup on the way."

"I don't know why you bother with that stuff. You don't need it." Drew gently pressed his lips to mine but only for a moment before pulling back.

I smiled and hurried to the bathroom to get ready. Ten minutes later I met Drew in the kitchen and was welcomed by the smell of coffee.

"I had Philip grab us some bagels and I put our coffee in travel mugs so we can have breakfast on the way."

"Thanks." I smiled and took my coffee from him.

"I also packed you an emergency bag. I want you to keep this with you all the time until this mission is over." He leaned down and picked up a bag that looked like something between a large purse and a messenger bag.

"What's in it?"

"It has all your fake papers in it. The agency has records of everything so they can get you your real ones when this is all over." He led me out the door as he continued. "It also has a bank card connected to my cover back account and two credit cards. You have access to them all for

emergencies. There's a satellite phone that will get reception anywhere. I already programmed several numbers in it that you might need."

"Why would I need access to all this?" I paused at the elevator door and studied his expression but I couldn't read him.

"I just want you taken care of in case anything happens."

"You mean if anything happens to you?"

"Just if anything happens...in general."

"Drew..."

"There's also a hidden compartment with a gun and two clips in it, if you notice its heavier than it looks." He led me into the elevator and punched the L for the lobby.

"Nothing's going to happen." I intertwined my fingers with his.

"I know. But, just in case."

I nodded. There wasn't anything else I could say.

Jason opened the door before we had a chance to knock. "Hey guys. Come on in. We are just waiting on a couple of guys to get here and we'll be ready to start."

"Hey Jason," Drew shook his hand and we walked in.

"Rebecca's putting together a few snacks in the kitchen before everyone gets here. You'd be amazed at how often these guys eat." Jason chuckled, trying to keep things light but I could tell tension was high. Everyone was on edge with this new development. If I learned one thing by being friends with Jason for so long, it's that these types of guys like order, structure, and planning. Not knowing when the shipment and auction was taking place had them all a little nervous.

"I'll go see if she needs any help." I gave Drew's hand a little squeeze before heading to the kitchen.

"Hey, you're here." Rebecca smiled up at me from the island where she was arranging sandwiches on a tray.

"Hey. Sandwiches? It's not even noon." I laughed.

"It's almost eleven and these guys eat all the time." I could tell she was overwhelmed. I'm sure it was tough on her, being married to someone in the middle of all this stuff all the time. But Rebecca and Jason seemed to make it work and he made her happier than I'd ever seen her before.

"Need some help?"

“Yeah. You feel like putting together some pimento cheese sandwiches while I finish these turkey ones?”

“Sure.”

We went to work fixing sandwiches and a tray of veggies. Staying busy was good for the nerves which seemed to be a trick Rebecca already knew well.

“So, how are things going with you and Drew?”

“Going good.”

“You two still sleeping together?” She raised her brow.

“Yeah...” I let out a long breath and Rebecca stopped what she was doing to look at me. “What is it?”

“I think I’m getting...comfortable.”

“You mean you’re wanting this to be more than a fling?”

“I didn’t say that. I told Drew this was only lasting until the mission was over.”

“And now that the mission is close to ending?”

“I’m going to miss him,” I confessed.

“Then why does it have to end?”

“Becs, you know how this goes.”

“Yeah, you get scared and push a good guy away in exchange for a few meaningless hook-ups just like you did with Conrad.” *Ouch.* “I’m sorry, Hailey, but you’ve always told me like it is and I think you need to hear the same.”

I ran my hand over my face in frustration. “Drew isn’t some good guy like Conrad. Drew is the reason I’m the way I am. He’s the one that broke my heart beyond repair.

“I think it’s more repaired than you think, and I think Drew had something to do with that too.”

“I can’t be with Drew. We have too much history. Once this mission is over, so are we.”

“So that’s how it is.” Drew’s voice shook with anger from the doorway.

“Drew.” I jumped guiltily but why was I feeling guilty? I’d told him from the beginning. I never said promised him anything different.

“If I could let it go after everything, it seems like you could too.”

And just like that, guilt melted away into fury. I felt like one of those cartoon characters with smoke coming out of my ears. *If he can let it*

go? *Like he was the one wronged in all this?* I wanted to jump at him. I wanted to punch him in that chiseled jaw. I wanted to claw those tropical blue eyes out. Those sexy full lips that used to make me melt now threw me into a murderous rage. “After everything? After everything?” My voice rose but I couldn’t help it as I stormed toward him. “You broke my heart and have the nerve to act like *you* were wronged? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I broke your heart? Have you forgotten the message you left on my phone? I know five years is a long time but hell, not long enough to forget throwing away everything I thought we had.”

His words knocked the breath out of me. *How could he remember things so much differently?* “I threw away? Are you kidding me right now?”

“Do you have any clue what the hell is going on?” Cody, one of Jason’s men, asked Liam from the door. They’d come in with Drew and were now trying to put the puzzle pieces together.

“Hailey and Drew dated in high school. They were together for two years but then he cheated on her,” Liam whispered to Cody was just a little too loud and Drew turned toward them.

“Cheated on her? I never —,” Drew gasped.

“Bullshit, you lying son of a —” I started toward him but Liam stepped forward and pulled me back by the arm. I took a deep breath. I was glad he was there.

“Lying? I’m lying?” Drew pulled out his phone and roughly punched in numbers before putting it on speaker and holding it out for us all to hear.

It was my slurred voice coming through the line. I was drunk. “Hey, Drew. It’s been a fun ride but I just wanted to let you know that I’ve been seeing someone else for a while. Yeah — he’s great and I’ve decided staying with you just doesn’t make sense anymore so uh — it’s been fun.” *Click.*

“That’s fake.” How stupid did he think I was? I’d remember making a call like that. Except, there was something vaguely familiar about those words.

“Fake? You honestly don’t remember making that call?”

“No, I remember getting really drunk. Like, *really* really drunk. Maybe I made the call to get back at you.”

“What the hell did I do to you?”

“What the —?” I was going to claw his eyes from their sockets. I lunged at him but Liam and Rebecca stopped me, each holding me by my arms. “You cheated on me, you lying bastard. That night you had to *work late*.” Drew’s eyes bulged. “Yeah. I decided to go out to the bar with a girlfriend for a couple of drinks. I saw you in the booth with that skank crawling all over you...” A sob ripped from my throat and I covered my face with my hands. I hadn’t realized I was crying until I felt my tear-soaked cheeks.

Liam’s arms wrapped around me to hold me up as all my expertly erected walls came crumbling down around me.

After a few minutes of awkward silence with only my sobs to fill the air, Drew finally spoke up.

“Can Hailey and I have a minute?” I heard Drew’s pained voice. I couldn’t believe I’d lost it like I had. I couldn’t believe I’d let everyone see me so weak.

Liam started, “I don’t think that’s a good—”

“I’ll be okay.” My voice was raw and shaky. Liam studied me for a moment and I nodded. I watched as they all filed out of the room.

Once it was just the two of us, Drew took a timid step toward me before thinking better of it and maintaining his distance. “You were there that night?” His raspy voice sounded ashamed and his eyes held a deep pain in them. All I could do was nod. “God, Hailey, I’m so sorry. I never meant for you to see that.”

“Clearly. So, you just planned to hide her as your little side piece?” A tiny spark of my anger returned and I held onto that. Anger was better than hurt. Anger I could use to build strength.

“No, Hailey. Damn it. Okay, you have to let me explain. Please? Will you sit with me?” He motioned toward the small breakfast table by the window and I followed him to sit. My arms crossed protectively over my chest as if it might protect my heart from him. “Hailey, I was going to tell you.”

“You were going to tell me about the girl?”

“No — yes — I mean...” He ran his hands through his hair with frustration. “Let me start at the beginning, okay?”

I nodded.

“Okay, so you knew I went to the police academy and was just starting off. What you didn’t know, was that during some of my testing, I

scored exceptionally well. I was approached by another agency — the one I work for now. They had me start out small, local stuff. The pay was great compared to a rookie cop. It would have meant a real future for us. I knew it would be the kind of money I'd need to give you the life you deserved."

He glanced down at his hands and back up at me as if it pained him to look at me for too long. "Work sent me undercover on a small job. I won't bore you with the details, but it had to do with a small drug run. Once I was through with my probation period, I was going to tell you. I just wanted to make sure it was going to work out first then I'd have to get you security clearance so I could tell you at least the basics. Anyways, a small drug run turned into something more. I found myself being accepted into a crime ring simply because the leader's younger sister had a thing for me."

"I hated every minute with her. It made me sick to have her touch me — kiss me. God, it made me sick. But I was doing it for the agency. It was just supposed to be for another week while they were in town, but then that night you called me... When I heard that message on my machine, it gutted me. I felt like I had nothing to lose. So, when the cartel invited me to go back with them to Colombia to work with them, I cleared it with the agency and agreed."

"I was able to get some invaluable information and slowly integrate some of my own men into the cartel. When Jason's team took over the operation, he kept me on since I was so well established there. Hailey, you have to believe me. I wasn't cheating on you. Not really. I know it must've looked really bad, but I was only doing what I had to, to try to take out some really bad guys. And, I never slept with her. I wouldn't cross that line. I had no idea you'd seen anything. If I'd known that was why you said that, I would have said screw the agency and told you anyways."

I sat there in shock while my whole world was turned upside down. *How could I have been so wrong all these years?* "You weren't cheating on me?"

"No, God, Hailey, you were the love of my life. You still are. After I knew my future was set, I'd planned to ask you to marry me. I just wanted to be the man you deserved first."

"All this time..." Tears burned my eyes and I couldn't hold them back even as numbness set in again.

"Damn it, if I'd only known. Hailey, you have to forgive me, please?"

“There’s not really anything to forgive. You were just doing your job. But you should have told me from the beginning.”

“I know. I just had to be careful who I told. The agency said no one but spouses but I was going to tell you when I asked you to marry me. I’m sorry, Hailey. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sorry I lied to you and told you I was cheating on you. I guess I just wanted to hurt you as much as you hurt me.”

“I get it.”

“Hey man.” Liam peeked into the room. “Don’t mean to interrupt but a lot of the guys are looking for you. We were supposed to start ten minutes ago.”

“I’ll be right there.” Drew looked from Liam to me, “I’m sorry. I really have to go. Can we talk later?”

I nodded and watched as Drew hesitantly left me alone in the kitchen while he went to talk to the men about the mission.

I wasn’t alone long. Rebecca was quick to slip back in to check on me.

“Hey, you okay?” I glanced over at her, concern painted her face as she walked over to me and sat down.

“Yeah. I just have a lot to process.” I sat staring out the window without really seeing anything.

“What do you mean? What happened?”

“He never cheated on me. Not really. He was on a mission.”

“Way back then?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh my god. Well, that explains a lot.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he just didn’t seem like a cheater to me. Jason said he always seemed like a stand-up guy when he worked with him. And, the way he looks at you...”

“I just need some time. This is a lot to wrap my head around.”

“I know. Take time to process.” Rebecca smiled at me and squeezed my hand. “I want to hear what’s going on with the mission. So, I know what to expect. Do you want to come or do you need time to yourself?”

“I don’t think I’m ready to be around people just yet.”

“Okay, do you want me to stay?”

I forced a smile. “I’ll be fine. You go. I’m just going to sit here and let my mind catch up.”

Chapter 23

I must have gone through every emotion possible while I sat there in the kitchen staring out the big bay window into the backyard. I had no idea how much time passed and I didn't care. I needed time to think. Nothing was what I thought. All my decisions, all my theories on love and relationships. The foundation for those things was rocked to the core with just a few words from Drew.

When he walked back in, he looked as though he were approaching a rabid animal, unsure of what to expect. I still wasn't ready to talk to him about any of this.

"Meeting's done. You ready to head out?"

"Sure." I stood but my moves felt mechanical.

"You never ate anything," Rebecca said from behind Drew.

"I'm not very hungry."

"Well, let me pack a few of these sandwiches for your trip back, just in case." Rebecca wanted to feel useful. She didn't know what to do to make things better, so she was doing what she could. I knew my best friend well. I could see right through her and I was sure she could see through me as well.

I wondered what she could see. I didn't even know what was there now myself. Rebecca packed the sandwiches and Drew led me to the door.

Liam stood with his arms crossed, leaning against the door jam. He studied me as I came near. "Hey girl, you okay?" He wrapped me in his arms and held me tight. It felt good but I could feel the tears pricking my eyes. I knew if I stayed like this, I would lose the battle to hold them in.

"I'll be okay." I forced a smile and he gave me a knowing look.

"Call me if you need anything. I mean it."

"I will."

We said our goodbyes and Drew helped me into the car.

I was relieved that for the first ten minutes, the ride was silent. But then Drew couldn't hold back any longer.

"Say something. Please?"

I couldn't look at him. I just kept my eyes focused on the buildings moving past. "I just need time to process."

“Okay, but can you give me a little hint of what you’re thinking? Please? This is driving me crazy.”

“I was mad at you for so long. I told myself relationships weren’t for me. That love wasn’t for me. All because seeing you with that girl broke my heart so bad, I made the decision that being lonely was safer than being hurt like that again.”

“But I never really cheated on you.”

“I know. And, I need to figure out what that means for me and all my theories.”

“Shouldn’t they be void since they were based on false information?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. It’s true, you didn’t cheat on me. But, loving you is still what led to me being vulnerable to get hurt that bad, to begin with.”

“So, what does that mean for us?” Drew was holding back but I could hear the desperation in his voice.

“I don’t know. I need time to figure all this out.”

“Okay, how much time?” I glanced at him and he backtracked. “When you’re ready.”

I looked back out my window and watched the world pass by on the way back to Drew’s apartment. I knew we’d have to talk again sometime. If nothing else, I needed to know what was going on with the mission in case I needed to help or stay away or anything. But I didn’t want to talk anymore. After a few minutes of quiet, I laid my head on the side of the seat and pretended to be asleep so I wouldn’t have to talk anymore.

“Whenever this all goes down, I want you as far away from all the action as possible. Things could get very messy very fast and I’m not willing to risk you.”

“Okay.” I sat at Drew’s dining table, moving the steak and steamed vegetables around on my plate.

“That’s all you’ve said for the past half hour I’ve been talking.”

“I’m just not feeling very talkative.” I put down my fork and took a sip of my wine.

“Maybe you should have Rebecca over for a girl’s night.”

“A girl’s night?” I looked up at Drew like he’d grown two heads.

“Yeah. We can sneak her in the back like we did her and Jason when they came by before. You two can hang out here, do whatever you girls do. I’ll just be in my office working and I can sleep on the couch in there.”

“You’d do that?”

“Yeah. I think you need some time with her right now. You’ve been through a lot.”

“I think you’re right. It would be nice.”

“Then it’s settled. Why don’t you call Rebecca and I’ll call Jason? We’ll get things arranged.”

“Okay,” I smiled my first real smile all evening and Drew grinned back at me.

We both pulled out our phones and went our separate ways to make the calls.

“Hailey? Is everything okay?”

“Hey Becs, Yeah, everything’s okay...well, considering everything. I was wondering, would you be up for an impromptu girl’s night in?”

“A girl’s night in?”

“Yeah. It was actually Drew’s idea. He thinks I could use some time with my best friend and I have to agree with him. I need some time to hang with you like we used to. I need something normal.”

“You agreed with him? Is this some kind of SOS code? A cry for help kind of thing?” I could hear the laughter in her voice.

“This is an SOS I need my best friend sort of thing.”

“Let me run it by Jason — oh, apparently Drew’s on the phone with him now. He gave me a thumbs up. I can be there in a couple of hours.”

“Okay. See you then.”

I hung up, excitement bubbling inside me. I needed this more than I’d realized. My life had been turned upside down and twisted until it was no longer recognizable. Rebecca was my tether, pulling me back and reminding me of who I really was.

Two hours later, Rebecca was at my door.

“I brought supplies.” She grinned and held up the grocery bags hanging on her arms.

I moved out of the way and Rebecca headed straight for the kitchen where she went to work unloading cartons of ice cream, cookie dough, chips, popcorn, and other assorted goodies. When she pulled out a bottle of my favorite red wine, I raised my brow at her.

“What?” She looked genuinely puzzled.

“You can’t drink wine. You’re pregnant, remember?”

“I know that, silly. That’s for you. This is for me.” She pulled out a bottle of ginger ale from her purse.

“Have I told you, you’re the best friend ever.”

“Yes. But I never tire of hearing it.”

“Well, in that case, you are the best friend in the whole world.” I hugged her then went to the cabinet to get out spoons for the ice cream and glasses for our drinks.

“Just coming through to grab a sandwich and a beer before I disappear into my cave for the night.” Drew made a beeline for the fridge.

“No problem,” I said uncomfortably as he brushed by me to grab a plate from the cabinet.

“I’ll be out of you girls’ hair in just a couple minutes.”

“Drew, I feel bad that we are displacing you tonight.”

“Don’t. It was my idea. Hailey needs this. She’s been through a lot helping me out here.” His smile toward me was so sweet, so loving, it pained me that a part of me still reacted to him. My mind knew I’d been wrong all those years ago when I thought he’d cheated. My heart, however, hadn’t caught up on the latest news and was still in hiding from the man who’d broken it all those years ago.

“I don’t see how you girls can eat like that and still look so good.” Drew teased before grabbing his sandwich and a couple beers and closing himself in his office. Rebecca led me to the couch and we both plopped down on either end so we could rest our feet in the middle.

“Okay,” she said with a sigh. “What’s going on?”

“Wow, jumping right into it? Not even a little warm-up chat first?” I chuckled nervously. I wasn’t sure I was ready to talk about this stuff, not even with my best friend.

“Just like ripping off a band aid. Now, tell me what’s going on in that head of yours.”

“I don’t know.” I grabbed a spoon and a carton of ice cream and dug in.

“Sure, you do. You just don’t feel like you can say it. So, out with it.”

“Drew was the love of my life.” I blurted out.

“Was?”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Yeah, but I’ve seen you with him recently too. You seem really happy when you aren’t overthinking it.”

“He broke my heart.”

Rebecca didn’t have to say a word. She just lifted one eyebrow, challenging what I was saying.

“Okay, so maybe he didn’t actually break my heart. But try telling it that. I know I was wrong all those years ago. God, it was my fault.” I put down my ice cream and held my head in my hands.

“It wasn’t your fault. From what you described, the scene you walked in on looked bad. No one can blame you for what you thought.”

“I should have known him better than that. Drew and I had been together for two years. I thought we were going to get married one day. How could I have doubted him like that?”

We all have doubts sometimes. It’s part of being human. The question is, do you love Drew? Not the Drew you knew back then, but the one you’ve gotten to know over these past few weeks.”

“Yes,” I whispered.

I looked down but could feel Rebecca’s eyes on me. “I’ve always loved him. Even when I thought he cheated on me, I still loved him. That’s what made it hurt so much.”

“Then that’s all that matters. People make mistakes. People change. You know he loves you. He told you so already and you love him. That’s all anyone can hope for in the world.”

“How do I get my mind and my heart to realize that? Part of me knows what you’re saying is true, but the other part of me still feels like I need to guard my heart from being hurt again.”

“Time. It took you time to build up those walls. It’s going to take time to break them down.” She placed her hand on my shoulder and I looked up at her with tears in my eyes.

“What if he’s not willing to give me time?”

“I am.” Drew’s voice cracked from the entrance to the hallway. “Sorry. I was just sneaking in to grab another beer.” He walked over to me with long, quick steps and knelt in front of me beside the couch. “I’ve always loved you. No one has ever come close to what I feel for you. No matter how bad it hurt me to hear that message on my phone, I couldn’t let

go of you. I've waited this long for you. I'll wait as long as it takes as long as the end result is having you."

A tear escaped my eye and rolled down my face. Drew cradled my cheek in his hand, his thumb swiping away the tear before crashing his lips against mine. He held me to him like I was his salvation — his life raft in a stormy sea of emotions but what he didn't know was that I wasn't saving him. It was him saving me.

We parted lips and I was suddenly very aware of Rebecca sitting on the other end of the couch when I heard a snuffle and looked over at her. She was wiping tears from her eyes and sobbing like a baby.

"Rebecca, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," she sniffled. "I'm just so happy for you two. It's these damn hormones."

Drew and I laughed and I pulled Rebecca into a hug. "What would I do without you?"

"You'll never have to find out," she hugged me back. "I should go home and let you two have some time to yourselves."

"Nonsense. You two still have some girls' night left. Besides, the boss man would kill me if I let his wife go home alone at this hour." Drew chuckled.

"If you're sure."

"Of course, I'm sure." Drew stood up from the floor. "You ladies have fun." He leaned down and softly kissed my lips before grabbing his beer and going back down the hall.

The rest of the night was just what I needed. Rebecca and I stayed up way too late watching crime shows and eating junk food just like the old days.

Chapter 24

“Hailey, wake up.” Drew shook me softly from my deep, peaceful sleep.

My eyes fluttered open, battling to adjust to the early morning light that filled the room. “What time is it?” I whispered, seeing Rebecca still asleep on the other side of the bed.

“Six-forty five.”

“Geeze, couldn’t let me sleep in a little bit?”

“We need to talk.”

“Can’t it wait until I’ve had a little more sleep and some coffee?” I whined.

“Hailey, something’s happened. We need to talk.” His tone finally broke through my grogginess and sent chills down my spine.

I pushed up on my elbows, finally noticing the grave look on Drew’s face. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“Hey, what’s going on?” Rebecca’s groggy voice interrupted.

“It’s your dad. He’s in the hospital.”

“The hospital? What happened?” I shot up in bed, throwing my legs over the side. I was already snatching up my crumpled clothes off the floor from the night before Drew could explain.

Rebecca hopped out of bed and joined me in rushing around the room to get ready, though she was a bit more modest about changing clothes and took her things to the bathroom

. “They think it was a heart attack.”

“Oh my god.” I stopped with just one shoe on and looked at Drew. “Did they say if he’s okay? I have to go to him.”

I nearly fell over trying to put my tennis shoes on while standing.

“They didn’t say.” Drew rushed over to help hold me up. “You need to sit down or you’re going to hurt yourself. I’ve already got Philip arranging a car for us.”

“I need to get to him. Why didn’t my mom call me?”

“You don’t have your normal phone, remember?”

“Shit, that’s right. How’d you find out?”

“Jason called me. He got the call and called me right away.”

Rebecca came out of the bathroom and I grabbed my purse. The three of us left out the back exit of the apartment so no one would see Rebecca with us. Philip had arranged for us to take a little white sedan. It was very different from the usual car we took.

“We’re taking that?”

“Yeah. Can’t risk Mikhail following us. Philip’s still going to drive. Rebecca, you can sit up front with him. We’ll take the back.”

We all climbed in and Philip was off in a heartbeat. He was a quick driver when needed. It was clear he’d done this before by the smoothness of each turn he took. The hospital was two hours from Drew’s place. It felt like a lifetime had passed before Philip finally pulled up in the emergency lane where he dropped the three of us off so he could park.

“Hailey, slow down,” Drew called as I took off into the hospital.

“I need to find my dad.” I got to the front desk but the lady wasn’t paying attention to me. She was talking with another lady in similar scrubs about her night. “Excuse me. Excuse me, ma’am?”

“Fill this out and take a seat.” She tried to hand me a clipboard but I didn’t take it.

“I’m looking for my Dad. Steven Woods.”

She took the clipboard back and started slowly typing away on the dinosaur of a computer in front of her. At least a decade must have passed while I waited for her to say something.

“He’s not here. Looks like he’s been moved to a room.” Her voice sounded so annoyed. I wanted to shake her and tell her that this was my dad we were talking about.

“What room is he in?” I said with a hint of panic that was starting to bubble over.

“Room 4015. Cardiac unit.”

I didn’t bother saying anything more. I ran to the elevator bank and rapidly pressed the button to summon down the car.

“Pressing it more than once is not going to make it get here any faster. Take a breath, Hailey.” Drew said, but I just glared at him.

“I’ll breathe once I see my dad is okay.”

The ding of the arriving elevator interrupted us and I hurried on before the doors had time to fully open. Drew and Rebecca followed. Another torturously slow elevator ride had me convinced everyone and

everything in the hospital was designed to slow people down and boost their anxiety. If that were true, it was working.

We finally made it to the fourth floor and I ran to the reception desk. “I’m looking for Steven Woods in room 4015.”

“I’m sorry miss. He’s not taking visitors at this time.” A rude lady with thick-rimmed purple glasses and pin-straight blonde hair looked up at me from behind the desk.

“I’m his daughter and I’m going to see him. Where is he?”

“Room 4015 is that way.” She pointed to her left down a long white hall. I ran past the medical personnel who looked at me with disapproving expressions until I reached the room marked 4015. It was open just a crack with no light coming from the room. I knocked softly but there was no answer.

I slowly pushed the door open and peeked inside. A pale, still shadow of the man I knew as my dad laid asleep on the bed. There were tubes around his nose, coming from the bandage on his arm, and from the cuff around his other arm. It all seemed so unnatural to see him like this. His normal bright face and warm smile weren’t there and it made me want to cry.

I took a tentative step toward him. Not wanting to disturb him, but needing to know he was okay. “Dad?”

“Hello?” A soft male voice startled me from the doorway.

I whirled around to find a young man in a white doctor’s coat standing with a clipboard.

“Hi. Are you his doctor?”

“Yes, ma’am. And you are?”

“I’m Hailey Woods. I’m his daughter. How is he? Is he going to be okay?”

“Your father suffered a minor acute myocardial infarction.”

“Oh my god, that sounds bad. Is that bad? Is he going to die?” I felt the floor shift under me but Drew was there to steady me.

“In English, if you don’t mind, Doc,” he said with slight irritation.

The doctor was clearly proud of himself for using all those big words and it made me wonder just how long this young guy had actually been a doctor who talked with real patients. His expression showed he was intimidated by Drew but he straightened himself to look taller though he was lucky if he came to Drew’s chin. “Mr. Woods had a mild heart attack.

His surgeon performed an angioplasty to unblock the arteries that supply blood to the heart.”

“An angioplasty? I looked at the doctor for clarification.

“During an angioplasty, the surgeon inserts a catheter through the artery to reach the blockage. They inflate a small balloon to reopen the artery, allowing blood flow to resume. From looking at his chart it looks like they inserted a stent as well to prevent the artery from closing again.”

“Is he going to be okay?”

“I’m going to be fine. Don’t let those doctors scare you with all their mumbo jumbo. You know nothing’ can stop your old man.” My dad’s rough voice came from behind me and I whirled around to see him still lying in bed, eyes now opened.

“Dad.” I cried and rushed to his side.

“Hey, baby doll. So, this is what I have to do to get you to visit?” He smiled at me so softly it made my heart ache.

“I’m sorry dad. Things have been crazy lately.”

“I know. You’re busy living your life like you should be. I just like to give you a hard time. It’s in the job description you know.”

“Where’s mom?”

“I sent her down to the cafeteria. I needed a nap and that woman can talk. Especially when she’s busy fawning over me the way she does when she’s nervous.” He chuckled weakly.

“It just shows she loves you.” I smiled at him, finally relaxing a bit as he led me to sit on the edge of his bed.

“You have to love someone to be with them as long as we have. Who have you brought with you?” My dad looked past me and squinted to see Drew and Rebecca. “Rebecca, it’s good to see you again. And who’s your guy friend there?”

“You remember Drew,” I said a bit lower.

“Drew? Your high school boyfriend, Drew?” My dad squinted his eyes to focus better without his glasses on.

“Yes, Sir. It’s good to see you again.” Drew came over and offered his hand to my dad who just looked at it.

“Don’t you break her heart again. I may be weak right now in this hospital bed but it doesn’t take much strength to pull a trigger.

“Dad.” I scolded him but his protectiveness made me smile.

Drew smiled. “I promise, Sir. I plan to keep her heart fully in one piece.”

“Good. I always liked you until you went and screwed everything up.”

“It was a misunderstanding, dad.”

“A misunderstanding?” My dad looked at Drew suspiciously. “So, he wasn’t fooling around?”

“No, he wasn’t.”

“But what about —.”

“It’s a long story.” Drew interrupted. “One I fully intend to explain once you have your strength back. Maybe we can talk about it over a beer sometime?”

“That sounds like a good idea, son. Right now, I’m extremely tired. I think it’s these damn meds they have me on. I told them I didn’t need anything”

“We should let you get some sleep,” Drew said as he rubbed my shoulder.

“We’ll be back in a little while. Try not to give the doctors and nurses too hard of a time.” I leaned over and carefully gave my dad a hug.

“I’ll try.” My dad smiled and I leaned in to kiss his cheek before we left.

We stood at the elevator, waiting for the car to arrive.

“I saw a hotel on our way in. It’s just down the road. I think we should check in there so you can get some rest and be close to your dad.”

“Drew, you don’t have to —.”

“I want to.”

The elevator dinged to let us know it had arrived. Feeling more patient this time, I stood back to make room for people who might be getting off. The door opened to reveal my mom standing there, arms crossed, pulling her sweater tighter around her. She looked paler than when I’d seen her last — older — with dark circles and bags under her eyes.

“Mom,” I said with more surprise in my voice than I’d intended. It made her jump out of whatever thoughts she’d been lost in.

“Hailey, you’re here.”

“Of course, I’m here.”

“I called this morning but Jason answered. He said you left your phone at his place.” She stepped off the elevator and I let it close without

taking it.

“Yeah, I went over there and must have left it. I’m sorry I didn’t get your call.”

“It’s okay. I’m just glad you’re here. Were you able to see your dad?”

“Yeah. He said he needed some rest. I guess the meds are making him groggy. Are you taking care of yourself, mom? You look tired.”

“That’s just a nice way to say I look terrible.” She gave me a weak smile.

“No, of course not, you just look tired. Are you getting any rest?”

“Of course not. I’ll rest once I know your dad is okay.”

“The doctor sounded like he was doing well.”

“We were going to check-in at the hotel down the street to be close. Would you like me to arrange a place for you as well?” Drew spoke up and I realized how rude I’d been by not acknowledging him before.

“Oh mom, you remember Drew?”

“Drew. Yes of course.” Her voice sounded surprised with a hint of disapproval. “And no, thank you but I’ll rest better knowing I’m in the same room as Steve.”

“Of course, just know the offer still stands if you need it.” If Drew noticed my mom’s coldness toward him, he didn’t let on.

“Thank you. And Rebecca, it’s good to see you again, dear.”

“You too, Mrs. Woods.”

“Well, I should get back to Steve. Hailey can I have a moment before you go?”

“Yeah sure.” I looked back at Drew and Rebecca. “Why don’t you get the car and I’ll be right down?”

“Sure.” Drew smiled though he looked hesitant to leave me alone as he escorted Rebecca onto the elevator.

The minute the elevator door closed, my mom gently took my arm and turned me to her. Concern etched deep grooves in her pale face. “Hailey, what are you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Drew? Again?”

“Mom...”

“I know you thought you did so good at hiding how hurt you were with him before but a mother knows these things. You cried for weeks after

he broke your heart.”

“It’s a long story mom, but it wasn’t what I thought.”

“You said he cheated.”

“He didn’t. I thought he did.” I was already growing tired of explaining this. I couldn’t tell them about Drew’s work. “He’s a good guy, mom. Just give him a chance, please? For me?”

She let out a heavy sigh and flashed me a weak smile. “I’ll try. I need to go check on your dad. Don’t go back home without saying goodbye okay?”

“We won’t.”

“It’s so good to see you.” My mom crushed me into a tight hug. “I love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you too, mom. We’ll be back in a little while. I didn’t sleep much last night and I wouldn’t let Drew stop for food until I saw dad first so we need a nap and some food, then I’ll be back.”

“Okay. Maybe we can have dinner together in the cafeteria tonight?”

“Sure, mom.”

Chapter 25

“Everything okay?” Drew asked as I slid into the backseat of the car just outside the hospital.

“Yeah, my mom just wanted to warn me about you.”

“Warn you?”

“She wanted to remind me of how much you hurt me before,” I said bluntly.

“Oh.” Drew looked out the window appearing in deep thought.

“Hey.” I turned his face to look at me. “I explained to her that it wasn’t what she thought. I told her I was wrong back then. That I made a mistake and that you never cheated on me.”

“You told her...you didn’t tell her about my job, did you?”

“Of course not. I told her it was a long story but that you were a good man and you never cheated.”

“You told her I was a good man?” He flashed me a cocky smirk.

I playfully elbowed him in the ribs and he had the courtesy to pretend it hurt.

“So, you feel better now that you got to see your dad?”

“Yeah. I told my mom we’d have dinner with her in the cafeteria tonight. I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course, it is. We’ll check in, maybe order some room service and take a nap, and clean up before meeting her. That sound good to you girls?”

“That sounds perfect. I’m starving.”

“Actually, Jason is going to be picking me up in a couple hours so I might have to settle for the room service and the nap.”

“I’m so sorry to have dragged you out here.”

“No, I’m glad I was there. It’s just that Cole is needing me home.”

“I understand. I’m glad you were here too. I want to stay the night just to make sure my dad keeps getting better.”

“We should get back tomorrow though, as long as your dad’s okay. Mikhail will be expecting us tomorrow evening at the club.”

“Okay. As long as my dad’s doing good. Thank you for bringing me here.”

“Hailey, family comes before everything else. I’m glad you let me be here for you.” Drew wrapped his arm around me and pulled me close.

“It’s amazing how much some food, a nap, and a shower will do for a person. After a few hours at the hotel, I felt like a new woman,” I told my mom as we sat at the cafeteria table with our trays of food.

“I’m glad you’re taking care of yourself,” she smiled at me.

“Actually, I probably wouldn’t have left the hospital if Drew hadn’t talked me into it. He takes pretty good care of me.”

My mom turned from me to Drew, her smile slipping from her face as she became more serious. “Drew, I’m afraid I owe you an apology.”

Drew swallowed his drink, looking surprised by my mom’s spontaneous apology. “For what?”

“I was rude to you earlier and I apologize.”

“Mrs. Woods, please it’s fine, really.”

“No, it’s not. That is not the way I was raised and not the way I raised Hailey either. I’m sorry for not being more grateful before for you bringing Hailey all the way here so she could be with family during this time.”

“I was happy to do it. As I told Hailey, family is number one priority.”

“And I can tell you are sincere about that. Hailey told me that you two breaking up before was a misunderstanding...” Drew went to speak but my mom held up her hand to stop him and went on. “I don’t need to know the details, but I will say I’m glad. You always made Hailey so happy. To be honest, Steve and I always thought you’d end up our son-in-law one day. You seem to have a good head on your shoulders.”

“Mom—.” I started but she wouldn’t have it.

“I just want you to know — not that it matters either way but — Steve and I approve, and you two have our blessing.”

“Geeze,” I put my face in my hands to hide the embarrassment on my face though internally I was thrilled to have my parents’ approval. “What century is this again? I didn’t know we needed parental approval and blessings. Should I step away while you discuss dowry prices too?”

“Hailey, don’t be so over dramatic. I’m just saying, your dad and I are happy you’ve found someone to make you happy.”

I looked up and smiled. “Thanks, mom.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Drew added. “Because I love your daughter and I don’t plan to let her go again.”

I smiled at Drew. My cheeks hurt. I hadn’t smiled that much in years, and I loved it.

“Now,” Drew said very seriously, leaning in with his elbows on the table toward my mom, “About that dowry...”

“Drew.” I admonished.

“What?” He said with a smirk before looking back at my mom. “As you know, your daughter can be a very stubborn, difficult woman.”

“Drew.” I swatted him but he batted my hands away and laughed as he continued.

“I think that should reflect in the dowry amount...”

He couldn’t keep his cool any longer and all three of us burst out laughing which drew the attention of more than a few of the people quietly eating. Their angry stares only made us laugh harder.

After dinner, we walked my mom back to my dad’s room and I sat with him for an hour before he got too tired and needed to rest. The four of us said goodnight and Drew took me back to the hotel.

“Thank you for tonight.” I said as I started to change into Drew’s white t-shirt, he offered for me to sleep in since I’d left without packing an overnight bag.

“It was fun. I’m glad we were able to spend some time with your family. And I’m glad your dad’s going okay.” He climbed into bed in just his boxers, resting his back against the headboard.

“They think he’s going to be released the day after tomorrow.” I slipped off my shirt and replaced it with his.

“Good,” Drew sounded distracted making me turn to look at him.

His eyes were blazing on my body. “They say that stint should help him from having another heart attack.” I studied his distant gaze.

“Uh-huh,” he said absentmindedly.

I slipped out of my jeans and tossed them on the side chair. “It’ll also give him the ability to leap tall buildings in a single bound.”

His gaze scanned up my exposed legs and over every curve. “That’s good — wait, what?”

I laughed and climbed onto the bed, sitting on my knees. “Something distracting you?”

“A little bit.” He smiled sheepishly. “You’re just unbearably sexy.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.” I smiled and began climbing up the bed toward him like a lioness on the prowl. I finally reached him, and pressed my lips against his.

Drew didn’t let me lead the kiss for long. His hand grasped the back of my head and pushed my mouth harder against his as his mouth took mine. His tongue invading my mouth and he pulled me into his lap.

“I love you,” he whispered against my lips.

“I love you too.”

His phone beeped from the nightstand, breaking the moment. “Shit, I’m sorry. I need to check that.”

“It’s okay. I know things are pretty crucial right now with Mikhail.”

He leaned over and grabbed his phone while his other hand held me in his lap. I watched him read the text and the way his brow furrowed.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, just Mikhail said he missed seeing us at the club tonight and hoped we’d be there tomorrow so we can discuss more of the details of delivery day.”

“Oh, okay. Why the frown?”

“When all this goes down it’s going to be dangerous.”

“I know, but we’re going to be okay. We’ll get through this and find some sense of normal again — but together this time.” I smiled lovingly at him. Drew was making me nervous with all his negative talk. He was usually so positive about the mission.

“Hang on a sec.” He moved me off his lap and got out of bed.

He dug through the bag he always took with him. It was similar to the one he’d given me though his looked more like a messenger bag, and much more manly in the worn leather.

Drew came back over to the bed and pulled me to the edge.

“Hailey...” He took my hand and lowered himself to one knee.

“Drew, what the hell are you doing?” Panic clawed at my chest and I couldn’t breathe.

“Just listen,” he assured me and I tried to focus on what he had to say. “Hailey, I love you more than anything. I always have and always will. Even during our time apart, I never stopped. My heart knew you were mine even when my mind fought it. Joking with you and your mom today about marriage and all that — well it got me thinking.”

“Drew...I —.”

“Just listen. This is not a proposal — well, not exactly anyway. I love you. I want to marry you. I’d marry you tonight if you’d say yes, but I know you better than that. I know you can be impulsive enough to jump into things like this but I also know that commitment scares the hell out of you. So, I’m not proposing. I’m asking you to think about it. Consider marrying me without pressure, without a time restraint.”

Drew opened his hand, revealing a ring box. He let go of my hand to open it and inside was a small, simple diamond engagement ring. I gasped, slapping my hand over my mouth.

“It’s not much, but it’s the one I bought for you years ago when I was just starting out. I’d planned to find the perfect moment to ask you but then everything went to hell. Things could go bad during this mission, or any other. We aren’t promised tomorrow and I know this is way too soon since we’re just starting to find our way back to each other but I wanted you to know that marriage was on my mind then too. It wasn’t just you. We both knew it was meant to be. I want you to take this ring. Keep it in the box, don’t wear it until you’re ready to, but I want to know that someday, when you finally realize we are meant to be together, you’ll have this ring and can put it on.”

“I couldn’t bare if something happened to me and I never got the chance to tell you how I feel or to know that you never got the ring I’d always kept for you.”

“Drew...I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I don’t expect any answers right now. Just take the box, put it somewhere safe until the day you decide you want to be my wife.”

I nodded with tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat. Drew took my hand, placing the small ring box in my palm. He gently closed the lid as he closed my hand around it. I slipped the box into the hidden compartment of my emergency bag and placed it back on the chair by the door before turning back to him.

“I do love you, you know,” I confessed as I joined him standing at the foot of the bed.

“I know. That’s why I know one day you’ll get there. But, there’s no rush.”

“Thank you.” I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my lips to his.

“You’re welcome.” He kissed me again and pulled me to him, holding my body tight against his. “Now, where were we?”

I grinned and glanced back at the bed. Drew stepped toward me, guiding me back until my legs brushed against the edge of the bed. He gently laid me down and crawled up my body.

He held himself hovering just above me with one muscular arm while the other hand drug slowly up the outside of my thigh, bringing the hem of his white shirt with it until it was over my hips.

He sat up on his knees and dragged my panties down my legs, kissing each leg as he released them back to the bed. He pulled off his boxers and joined me back on the bed.

Drew’s lips pressed to mine with a new sense of desperation. He was tender but the restrained strength hovered above us as he kissed me until we were both breathless.

“I love you,” he whispered on a breath.

“I love you too.”

Drew rolled us over so that I was on top of him. He sat up on the edge of the bed, and I straddled him as we continued our passionate kiss. He nipped my ear and sent heat down my body, pooling in my core. I adjusted over him. My body was already so ready for this man who knew me so well. He knew how to play my body like a fine-tuned instrument and he used that knowledge for both of our benefits.

I sunk down onto him, letting my insides slowly stretch around his length until he completely filled me. His warm hands caressed my back, all the way up to my neck and tangled into my hair. He tugged softly, guiding my head up to gain access to my neck.

His soft lips and nipping teeth were the most delicious contrast grazing down my throat. I moaned and ground my hips on him, needing more friction.

Drew lifted his hips, thrusting up into me giving me just what I needed. I cried out and grasped hard on his biceps. “Oh Drew.”

He took my mouth with his again, swallowing my cries. He flipped us over so he was again on top as he viciously thrust into me. My insides quivered and contracted around him.

“That’s it, baby,” he rasped against my ear as he nipped at the sensitive lobe. He held me tight against him. The mixture of tenderness and feral need was more than my system could handle.

Drew tilted his body as he began to piston his hips, thrusting even deeper and reaching something inside that shot pleasure through me like a rocket. I cried out, my back arching and lifting from the mattress as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over us. My body quaked and Drew only sped up, chasing his own release and drawing mine out.

Three more thrusts and Drew let out a loud roar that sounded more animal than man before collapsing beside me. He slid the rest of the way out of me and pulled me over to him. I wrapped my leg around him and rested my head on his chest as he pulled the blanket up over us.

“Everything is going to be okay whenever the mission goes down, right?” I looked up at him without lifting my head from his chest.

“Yeah. Don’t worry about that now. Just sleep.” He kissed my tousled hair and whispered. “Sleep now, baby, I’ve got you.”

Chapter 26

The loud shrill of Drew's phone woke up both from a dead sleep. One glance at the clock told me I'd only been asleep for a couple hours. It was just now three in the morning.

"Hello?" Drew's voice croaked into the phone. "Mikhail, is something wrong?"

I leaned in so I could hear what was being said.

"Not at all my friend. It is an exciting day," Mikhail's energetic voice came through the line. "The shipment will be arriving in three or four hours. I'm texting you the address. Be there an hour early so we can prepare."

"An hour? Okay, I'll be there."

"Oh, and Andrew, bring the girl."

The phone clicked, signaling the ended call and Drew looked over at me with worry etched on his now very awake eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"He wants me to bring you."

"Are you really that surprised? He's always seemed infatuated."

"Women are usually kept away from the business side of things. Something doesn't seem right."

"We'll be careful."

"I don't want to bring you. I don't want you anywhere near all this."

"If you don't, he'll get suspicious. We can't risk that this close to the bust."

"I don't care. It's not worth putting you at risk."

"I won't be at risk. I'll be there with you. You need to call Jason and assemble the team." The sound of a text coming through on Drew's phone silenced us both.

He looked down at the phone and swiped open the text. "Looks like we're going to the shipyard."

"You need to call Jason."

"Okay. Go get dressed. I'll contact the team."

Fifteen minutes later, we were walking out the door.

“Do you have your emergency bag?” Drew said as he carried his own bag toward the elevators.

“Yep. A girl can’t go anywhere without her makeup bag.”

“Not tha— you know what I mean.” His voice was tense.

“I know. Relax. Things are going to be okay. You said so yourself.”

“That was before he told me to bring you along. Something’s up with that and I don’t like it.”

“You need to calm down. Nerves make mistakes.” I reminded him as we rode the elevator down.

“Now you sound like Jason.” He chuckled.

“Well, he and Rebecca have been my best friends for a while.”

We made our way to the car and Philip got out. “Hello Sir, Ma’am. I hope you have a pleasant drive this morning.”

“Thanks.” Drew took the keys from him and motioned me around to the passenger seat.

“He’s not driving us today?”

“No. Mikhail specifically said for me to come alone — before he added you to the mix. Hurry or we’ll be late.”

I climbed into the car and buckled as he rounded to the other side. “How long will it take to get to the shipyard from here?”

“This time of morning? I can get there in an hour and a half.” It was early. The street lights were still on and even the sun wasn’t out of bed yet.

The drive to the shipyard was tense. We had to stop by the apartment to switch cars and barely spoke the whole time. I watched as the dark shadows of the street zipped by until Drew broke the silence.

“Try to stay away from the action as much as possible. Stay close to me when you can, though.”

“How am I supposed to do both?”

“I don’t know. Damn it, this was not the plan.” He hit the wheel with both hands.

I placed my hand on his thigh and tried to comfort him. “It will be okay. I’m a smart girl and I’ve got my emergency bag with me in case we get separated.”

“Promise me you’ll be careful.” Drew glanced my way. “Promise me if anything bad goes down, you’ll get the hell out of there and never look back.”

“If anything bad happens, *we* will get out of there and never look back.”

“But if something happens —.”

“Nothing is going to happen to you.” I squeezed his hand as we pulled up to the dark shipyard.

We parked in the large gravel lot but something felt off. For a big shipment coming in, the place seemed eerily calm and deserted. “Where is everyone?” I said as I unbuckled.

“I don’t know. This doesn’t feel right. Stay in the car while I look around.”

“Oh hell no. You’re not leaving me here.” I jumped out of the car as he got out.

“Hailey,” he scolded.

“Drew,” I mocked his tone with my hands on my hips.

“Fine.” Drew looked around. His hand twitched, ready to reach for the gun at his back.

The shipyard was dark and the few flickering outdoor lights cast deep shadows. Clouds covered the moon and stars and there was just the tiniest hint of sunlight beginning to peek up over the water. I started to shake and grabbed hold of Drew’s hand for strength.

“You okay?” He whispered.

“I guess. Where is everyone?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.”

“Don’t move,” a loud booming voice made my breath catch in my throat as we whirled around to see Dmitri standing with a huge gun pointed at us.

“Dmitri, what the hell?” Drew said as he slumped his shoulder, but I could feel the tension rolling off of him.

“Drew, sorry man. Didn’t know it was you.” He lowered the gun and we both relaxed a little for real this time.

“Where is everyone?”

“They’re out back. You’re late. The shipment just arrived.”

Drew checked his watch. “It arrived early.”

Dmitri shrugged and motioned for us to follow him.

Several men worked to unload large shipping containers from a boat that had definitely seen better days. Mikhail stood with a few of his men on the dock, watching.

“Andrew. You made it just in time.” Mikhail motioned us over excitedly. “Three shipping containers. This is the last one. The others are already inside. Soon the real fun starts.”

“The real fun?” Drew looked at him suspiciously and his hand tightened on mine.

“Inspecting the product.” Mikhail's devilish smirk sent chills down my spine.

“Oh of course.” Drew forced a smile and I could tell he was trying his best to hide his disgust.

“I'm glad you brought your girl. I have some work for her.”

“You do?” Drew's grip on my hand turned almost painful.

“Yeah. The auction will be this evening. We will inspect the girls. Then they will go through a whole process of being cleaned before having hair and makeup done. Hailey will help Lacy make sure the girls' look good.”

“And what about me?”

“You'll help with setup and security at the event.”

“Of course.”

“Now let's get inside.” Mikhail said excitedly with a clap of his hands. He reminded me of a kid ready and eager to open his presents on Christmas morning. If the kid was an evil sadistic, psychopath, of course.

When we walked into the now lit warehouse, it was like walking into a whole other world. There was a stage being set up off to one side and men were busy putting out folding chairs. Like they were setting up for a play or something.

I was quickly reminded of what kind of show was really about to go on when one of the men led a long line of filthy, almost naked girls toward us. Several of them were crying and I wanted to cry with them. My heart pained at the thought of what they must have endured, what they were still enduring, and what would become of them if things didn't go as planned.

Lacy joined Mikhail as we came inside and he led our small group along the line of girls. I gave her a timid look and she returned it to me. Although she looked nervous and uncomfortable, she seemed to know what she was doing and I assumed that she'd probably had to endure this before.

One thin girl, practically skin and bones grabbed at Mikhail's man as he passed by her. I couldn't understand her as she spoke quick Russian, but I still knew what she was saying. She was pleading with him — for

mercy, for freedom, for help — it didn't matter because his hand swiftly rose and he brought it down hard across her face.

A loud gasp escaped me as she crumbled to the floor sobbing and the man yelled at her in her native tongue.

Drew tensed but didn't move. He squeezed my hand and kept walking. We walked along the line of the girls. I couldn't look at them. I couldn't handle the pain in their pleas, their tear stained faces. It was slowly breaking me. I held harder to Drew's hand but he kept walking by each one. He feigned interest in Mikhail's examination and appraisal of each as they were made to turn around one at a time.

I found myself simply keeping my eyes on the ground after around the fifth girl. I had to separate myself from them, at least for now. I couldn't let myself think of them as people, as girls, some of them just barely of age. If I allowed myself to truly soak in the full situation, I would have lost it.

We finally came to the end of the line and Mikhail looked to his men. "Take the girls and lock them four to each domicile. Remember, do not sample the merchandise. This is your one and only warning.

He dismissed the men and the girls who sobbed as they were led away.

"Aleksey" he called over one of his men from the group. The man stepped forward and I recognized him as the man from the club. He was the one who had helped Lacy and I climbed up onto the riser when we were wanting to dance.

"Yes, Sir." Aleksey said, eyeing me and Lacy before turning his full attention to Mikhail.

"Take Hailey and Lacy to get their supplies. Then take them to each room. They may have an hour per room to have all four girls presentable before the auction."

"Yes, Sir."

I held Drew's hand tighter. I didn't want to leave his side and an hour for each room with four girls per room. I wasn't quick at math but I knew time would be tight to have all the girls ready. That meant I probably wouldn't see Drew again until the auction began.

Drew squeezed my hand and gave me a small reassuring nod before letting go and urging me toward Aleksey. I gave him one last glance as Lacy and I were led away.

The plan was, once the auction was underway and the men were distracted by the bidding and half naked girls, Drew's men would sneak in and slowly pick off the men along the perimeter first. Men would be posted at every exit so no one could get out and Jason would lead a group of men to close in on them in the auction room to take down the majority in the act. I just prayed it all went according to plan.

"Here is a bag of makeup and hair supplies." He shoved the bag into my arms and I had no choice but to take it. "And lingerie." He shoved another bag into Lacy's arms.

"Each girl has already been ordered to shower while they wait for you to arrive. I will be just outside the door if any of the girls give you trouble. You'll have one hour per room. No longer. Any questions?"

"Uh— not that I can think of." I stammered as I fell into step behind him trying to keep up.

"Good. Here is your first room."

There were guards between each room. Aleksey nodded to the first guard who unlocked the door and they practically shoved us inside before the door clicked locked behind us.

The room looked like what you might expect from a shipyard domicile. Minimalistic wasn't even enough to describe it. Everything was metal and concrete. The girls sat two by two on plain white bunk beds on opposite walls with lumpy bare mattresses.

One of the girls was now clean, with stringy wet hair clinging to her terrified faces. Two others sat huddled on one bed and I assumed the fourth was in the shower. I wanted to reassure them, to tell them everything would be alright soon, but I knew I couldn't give anything away.

"I'm Hailey. Do any of you speak English?"

"Just a little." One girl spoke up. "The men required us to learn basic commands."

"But you seem to know more than that."

"Yes. I went to a university before —." Her voice cracked and she fought back a sob that ripped a hole in my already breaking heart.

"I understand. No need to continue." I forced a smile to try to make them feel better, though I'm not sure anything I could do would help.

"You are not like the others."

"What do you mean?"

"This all makes you upset."

I couldn't do this. My insides twisted and panic rose in me. Lacy must have sensed I was panicking because she spoke up then. "We only have an hour to make you presentable. You don't want to be found displeasing to the men or it will be much worse for you so let's get started."

"You want to do hair and I'll do make up?" I asked as I started digging through the bag of supplies.

"Sounds good."

Keeping busy helped. Before I knew it, all the girls looked beautiful — a little thin — but beautiful. We let them pick out the lingerie they liked best, though they were all timid about it considering why they would be wearing it. I think giving them small choices like which lipstick they liked best or which lacy scrap they'd be wearing gave them a small feeling of control.

We moved from room to room. Time went by faster than expected, though, there were times when a girl would start crying and pleading with us that made the reality of things that much harder.

I wanted the day to be over. I was exhausted both physically and emotionally. Once Aleksey led us out of the last room, he took us to another room down the hall.

"I thought that was the last one." I looked at him curiously.

"This is your room."

"Our room? For what?"

"The boss wants you two cleaned up and presentable as well — eye candy for the crowd, though you'll both be in cocktail dresses, not lingerie since you're not for sale."

"Oh." I timidly stepped into the room. The door slammed shut with a loud click like all the rest. He'd locked us in.

Chapter 27

As fast as time had flown by when we were helping get the girls ready, it went in slow motion as I sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for someone to let us out and for the auction to begin. I somehow doubted Drew knew I'd be locked in a room and forced to wear skimpy cocktail dress I was sure Mikhail had picked out.

Finally, Aleksey unlocked the door and escorted us out. I stood nervously and slung the emergency bag that looked like an oversized purse over my shoulder.

"Leave that here."

"I need my purse."

"Boss won't like it. You can get it after the auction."

I was reluctant but I placed it beside the door and followed Aleksey from the room.

"The auction will begin in one hour. It is time for the customary cocktail hour before it begins. The boss requests both of you girls to accompany him."

"What about Drew?" Panic seized me and I fought back the panic rising in my throat.

"He is busy handling security for the evening."

So, I wouldn't see Drew. This was torture. Nothing was going as I'd hoped. I needed to see him, to know he was okay, to know this was all still going as planned. I resisted the urge to run, reminding myself of those poor girls I'd be leaving behind.

We entered the dimly lit auction room. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought we were at any other cocktail party. The room was filled with mostly men in nice suits. There were a few girls in the mix, mostly dressed in tiny cocktail dresses.

"There they are." Mikhail called us over and snaked one arm around each of our waists. "Gentlemen, I'd like you to meet Lacy and Hailey."

"They are lovely. Will they not be joining the others on the block tonight?" One larger man roughly gripped my chin and lifted it as he studied me like a prize mare. I clenched my jaw and fought the urge to jerk away.

“Oh no, these lovelies are not for sale.” Mikhail looked like a snake as he smirked, letting his gaze roam over my body and linger at the low neckline of the deep green dress he’d had me wear.

“A shame. I do hope you have some other beauties for us tonight.”

“Don’t I always?”

“That you do.” One man interrupted, a timid young girl on his arm who barely looked legal. “I bought this one from your auction last year.”

“I remember her. Such an exquisite little thing.” Mikhail eyed her intently. “What brings you back tonight?”

“Too much money to burn.” The man laughed. “I’m looking for a second girl to add to my collection.”

“Well, you will find her here tonight.” Mikhail assured him.

The whole conversation made me want to throw up or punch someone — maybe both.

The lights flickered and I jumped. “What was that?”

“Ah, that is the signal the auction is ready to begin.” Mikhail said with his sly grin. “Let us take our seats. You girls will be sitting right up front with me.”

He led us both to the front of the auction seating and placed one of us on either side of him. His touch made me physically ill.

An announcer took the stage. He was tall and thinner than most of the men who worked for Mikhail. He grinned that same sly grin Mikhail had and the resemblance was uncanny.

“My younger brother.” Mikhail whispered to me as if he’d known my thoughts.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen.” His accent wasn’t nearly as thick as Mikhail’s and I wondered if he had been in the U.S. for longer. “It’s almost time for the auction to begin, if you will please take your seats.”

There was a loud rumble of voices from the crowd as everyone started moving to the rows of seats. I looked around trying to spot Drew. I didn’t see anyone I knew but some of Mikhail’s men.

“He’s outside making sure things are secure there. I thought it would give us a little time to enjoy ourselves.” Mikhail placed his hand high on my thigh and I tensed.

My heart began to pound. I wanted out of here. I wanted away from all these horrible men. I took a deep breath and reminded myself why I was doing this. *Drew’s just outside. He’s not gone. Breathe. Focus.*

“Shall we start with our first item of the night?” The announcer said excitedly.

Mikhail held up a hand, standing and catching his brother’s attention. “Before we begin with the planned line up, I’d like to start off with a special treat for you this evening.”

What the hell was he up to?

“Multiple inquiries have come in about my girl, Lacy and it has come to my attention that I might have been being selfish keeping her all to myself. I would like to put her up for bid and I will use the money from her sale to make a new purchase here tonight.”

It felt as though the earth had dropped out from under me. I turned to Lacy who was just as shocked as I was. She looked terrified.

“No, Mikhail, please.” She grabbed hold of his sleeve from her seat and he shook her off.

“Lacy is a talented dancer and already well trained on most occasions. You can see she is a loyal girl. Not wanting to leave me but it is time for something new. Men, help her up on stage for the bidding to begin.”

My eyes blurred with tears. “Lacy, no.” I reached out for her but the men grabbed her by both arms and pulled her up on stage as she kicked and screamed. I stepped forward to follow her and Mikhail pulled me back.

“Sit,” he ordered coldly. “I have decided you will be my new girl. Maybe a large sum of money will convince Andrew to give you to me.”

“Doubt it.” I ground out through clenched teeth.

“I can be very persuasive.” Mikhail brushed his jacket open to reveal a pistol at his hip. “I plan to talk with him about it after the auction.”

I couldn't stand to look at him a moment longer and turned back to the stage.

Lacy was forced to strip down to just her panties. As she sobbed, I cried along with her, keeping my eyes locked on hers until I couldn't bear it any longer. I couldn't let this happen. My ears roared until I couldn't even hear the bidding began. I was losing it. I couldn't keep calm. This was Lacy. How could Mikhail do this?

I couldn't breathe. I had to find Drew. I had to make him stop this. I glanced around from side to side, looking from one guarded door to the next. Mikhail's men would never let me get out the door even if it was to find Drew. I was trapped but I had to do something.

I balled my fists in my lap and readied myself to jump up. I couldn't think of what was at stake except for poor Lacy crying on the stage before all these deplorable men lusting after her. I took a deep breath to ready myself but was interrupted as a voice cut through the crowd.

"Seventy-five thousand dollars for the girl."

"Sold." The announcer looked ecstatic.

I turned to see who had made the unexpectedly high winning bid. The man wore an expensive suit. His hair was slicked back neatly and his clean-shaven face was different than what I'd known him to look like, but I'd recognize him anywhere. *Liam*.

My mind couldn't comprehend what I was seeing as my two worlds collided into one in the weirdest of ways. *Liam had bought Lacy?* It wasn't until his gaze met mine, only for a moment, that realization hit. Liam was saving her and me. He must have been undercover to offer help once things went down. He must have seen my panic and knew I was about to blow the whole thing.

Lacy, however, didn't know what I did. She sobbed, and screamed when the men drug her off the stage to her new *owner*. She looked at me for help. The pleading in her eyes gutted me. I wanted to tell her it was okay, that she was safe now, but I couldn't. Not yet.

Once the fourth or fifth girl is sold, we will move in. Be ready to take cover and if you can, get out of there. I remembered Drew's instructions.

I watched Liam lead Lacy to sit beside him, keeping a tight grip on her hand to keep her at his side. He leaned in and whispered something into her ear that seemed to calm her if only slightly. I had to pull myself together. Mikhail kept his hand on my thigh, his thumb running small circles over my skin as we watched the next terrified girl come out onto the stage.

Two. I counted in my mind as the second girl was sold.

After the third, I knew we were getting close. Anxiety clawed at me until I wanted to scream. I placed my hand over Mikhail's and did my best to give him a flirty smile.

I leaned over between biddings to whisper in his ear. "I need to go to the restroom."

"You'll miss the auction. Surely you can wait."

"I really need to go. I'll hurry back."

They brought out the next girl and Mikhail looked between me and the stage. “Fine. But hurry. You don't want to miss all the excitement.”

“Of course. I'll be quick.”

I hurried toward the side exit that led down the hall of domiciles where the girls had been kept. My first stop was back to the room where I'd left my bag. I was relieved when I found the door still unlocked and my bag sitting just as I'd left it. I threw the strap over my head so it cut across my chest and ran out of the room.

There was an exit on the other side of the hall but I knew it would be guarded. I just needed to keep away from the major action like Drew said.

“Hey, what are you doing back here?” Dmitri barked at me from down the hall.

“I was just looking for a bathroom.” I glanced around nervously. I didn't trust Dmitri at all.

“Didn't think I'd get a chance alone with you again.” He sneered at me and closed in.

“I need to hurry back. Mikhail will be waiting.”

“He's preoccupied with the auction. I'm sure we have a little time.” his lascivious smile sent a chill through me.

I backed up until the wall was at my back. He cornered me in with his arms against the wall on either side.

“Boss sent me to keep an eye on the girl.” Aleksey interrupted just as Dmitri leaned in to kiss me.

“I'm keeping an eye on her.”

“Looks like that's not all.” Aleksey pulled him away from me and gave him a look like you'd give a child you were scolding. “Boss won't want your grubby hands on what he has his eye on.”

Dmitri didn't look happy, but he shrugged it off and stomped away sulking.

“Thanks.” I offered Aleksey a smile.

“Where are you supposed to be?”

“The bathroom. I told Mikhail I'd hurry. He doesn't want me to miss the auction.”

“No, where are you *supposed* to be?”

“I don't —.” I was interrupted by a loud commotion from down the hall where I knew the exit to be. Moments later, the hall was stormed with

special forces dressed in full tactical gear and huge rifles.

Aleksey pulled out his gun. I wasn't sure what he might do, so I turned to run from him just as three of Mikhail's men came down the hall aiming guns leaving me right in the middle. Aleksey lunged at me, throwing me to the ground with himself on top.

I screamed and fought to get him off, not realizing what was going on as the bullets rang out around us. Moments later, Aleksey climbed off of me, grabbing my arm and pulling me up as well.

Mikhail's three men lay dead on the floor. A large growing pool of red creeping from underneath them. I recognized one. *Dmitri*.

"Let's get you out of here." Aleksey gently grabbed hold of my arm and pulled me toward Drew's team.

"What are you doing?"

"Drew wants to make sure you're safe."

I pulled back on his grip and gawked up at him. "You're one of Drew's men?"

"I'm one of Jason's men." He nodded and smiled at me. "Now let's get you out of here."

He pulled me past Drew's men, heading away from the impending fight.

"But what about Drew and Liam. Lacy's still in there too."

"We'll get them out but I had strict orders to get you out of here safely."

He pulled my arm, almost dragging me down the hall toward the exit when two of Mikhail's men stopped us.

"Where are you going with the girl?"

"Mikhail ordered me to take her somewhere out of the way to wait for him."

"I'll take her somewhere out of the way." One man ran the back of his hand down my exposed shoulder.

"Bosses orders. I need to deliver her." Aleksey pushed me on ahead before turning back to the men. He grabbed one by the shoulder and whirled him to face him just as his gun pressed into the guys chest and fired a soft wet sound the other man turned quickly and fired but Aleksey used the first man as a shield, pushing his body at the shooter. While he was distracted, Aleksey shot the second guy square between the eyes.

He ran over to me and grabbed my hand, pulling me further down the hall, leaving the crumpled bodies bleeding out on the floor.

“Where are we going?”

“I need to find someplace safe for you.”

“Drew and the team need all the help they can get. You don’t need to worry about me.”

There was a loud explosion that shook the walls. Debris fell from the ceiling and we both covered our heads. Heavy running footsteps echoed down the hall and Aleksey readied his gun.

Liam came running around the corner and we nearly collided.

“Jeez. Alek. You trying to give me a heart attack? Hailey, there you are.”

“Liam,” I lunged at him and wrapped my arms around his neck, hugging him tight. “God, I’m so glad to see you.”

“Me too.”

“Where’s Lacy?”

“She’s hiding in a supply closet just down the hall. Mikhail’s men still hold the perimeter on too many sides to get you out safely. We should get you to her while me and Aleksey take care of things.”

“Have the men secured the main warehouse?” Aleksey asked Liam, all business.

“Mostly. We still need to get the stragglers still.”

“What about Mikhail?”

Liam’s jaw clenched, “In the wind.”

“We’ll find him.”

“Come on. Let’s secure Hailey then we’ll get back to it.”

We ran down the hall back to a small supply closet. Liam opened it after a series of knocks. Seeing Lacy standing there trembling, surrounded by buckets, mops, and brooms, I was so happy. I hurried in and hugged her.

“What’s going on?” Lacy’s voice trembled.

“We gotta get going. You girl’s stay here.” Liam said and closed the door behind us.

“We have to get out of here.” Lacy grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the door once the men were gone.

“No, we need to stay here and wait for them to come back for us.”

Lacy looked completely confused.

I took her gently by the shoulders “They’re the good guys.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. We’re here to save all those girls, and you.”

“You’re one of them?”

“I’m one of them. So is Drew.”

“I knew it. He just seemed too good to be in with the likes of Mikhail.”

“We need to take cover in case someone comes in.”

“What will we do if they come in?”

I grabbed my bag and tossed it up on top of a supply box of cleaner. I dug through the secret pocket and pulled out the pistol Drew had given me. “If they come in, I shoot them.”

“You know how to use that thing?”

“Yeah. Liam used to take me to the range every week.”

“So, you and Liam are close?”

“Like brother and sister.” I nodded. “Once we’re out of this, I promise I’ll fill you in on everything.”

“Thanks.” She smiled.

“For what?”

“For being a friend.” We crouched behind stacks of boxes, hoping no one would see us, but if nothing else, the boxes would offer some cover.

Chapter 28

“How long have we been in here?” Lacy looked weary.

“I don’t know. Time moves slow in here, doesn’t it?”

There was a crash from outside and we both jumped. “Shit. I just can’t take the waiting much longer.” Every crash, every footstep set us on edge. It was nerve wracking.

“Someone’s coming,” Lacy whispered and ducked down lower.

“Shh, they could just be passing by.” I tried to calm her but crouched a little lower myself. My hand gripped the gun until my knuckles turned white.

Heavy boots hit the concrete at a quick pace. Someone was running then I heard nothing. We both leaned in to listen closer just before a loud explosion shook the walls and rang through our ears. Lacy and I both gasped and cowered lower behind the boxes. Dust from debris pushed through the cracks in the door from the force of the blast.

I covered my head with my arms and ducked low as small pieces of the ceiling crumbled on top of us. I looked around. My ears rang. Lacy was saying something I couldn’t make out. Everything was so muffled. The metal door stayed closed but that explosion was too close for comfort.

“I can’t hear you.” I yelled above the ringing. It didn’t take long for the sound to fade and Lacy’s voice began to come through.

“I thought this would be over by now,” She yelled.

There was a crackling sound from behind the door. “Do you hear that?” I stepped out from behind my boxes and closer to the door to hear better.

“What is it?” Lacy stepped out of her hiding spot to join me. The light from under the door seemed to be dancing and smoke began to seep from the cracks. Her eyes widened as the realization struck. “Fire.”

“Shit. We gotta get out of here.”

Lacy reached for the handle but jerked her hand back. “Damn it, that’s hot.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. It’s just really hot. Is there something I can grab the handle with?”

“We can’t. Didn’t they cover fire safety when you were in school? If the knob is that hot, the fire’s too close. If we open that door, it will fill this room before we can get out.”

“We can’t stay here. We’ll suffocate from the smoke,” Lacy said in a panic.

“We need to find another way out or a way to protect ourselves.” I grabbed some dusty old cleaning rags and used my foot to shove them under the door to block the smoke from coming in as fast.

“These cleaning supplies could be explosive too. We have to get out of here, now.” Lacy looked around in a panic.

“Agreed, but how?”

“There,” She shouted.

“What?”

Lacy pointed up at the ceiling to the air vent. “We can use the boxes to stack up and go through there.”

Lacy grabbed a box and slid it under the vent with some struggle. I rushed over and grabbed one end of a large box.

“Grab that end.”

We stacked boxes as fast as we could, making a stair step pattern to climb.

“Let me test it,” I said, placing my foot on the box.

Lacy offered me her hand and I stepped up onto the first box. The cardboard collapsed under my weight and I fell. Letting go of Lacy’s hand, I barely caught myself on a metal storage shelf.

“Damn it. The boxes are too old. Probably from before the shipyard shut down. They’ve already started to deteriorate.

“Get on my shoulders,” I told Lacy. “I’ll lift you up so you can open it. Then you can pull me up.”

“Why do I have to be the one who’s lifted? Why can’t I lift you up?”

“Because you are smaller than me. It will be easier for me to lift you.”

“Okay.” She climbed onto my shoulders using a short supply shelf and I straightened up so she could reach the vent.

Lacy tried to move the grate but it didn’t budge. She banged on it with her open hand with no luck.

“It’s stuck,” She coughed. “And, the smoke is thicker up here.”

“We need to hurry. Can you force it open?”

“I can try.” Lacy hit the grate over and over as hard as she could. When it finally gave way, Lacy jolted forward, making me lose my footing. I stepped forward to catch myself but lost my balance, tripping over the boxes on the floor. I fell back into a box with a loud crash.

Lacy screamed and I looked up to see her hanging from the ceiling holding onto the opening. “Hailey, are you okay?” She called down to me.

“Yeah, I’m just —.”

There was a loud noise and white smog forced itself under the door. The door slung open to reveal Liam and Aleksey along with a couple more men in full tactical gear.

“What the hell are you doing? I swear, Hailey. I leave you alone for a few minutes and you go making a mess,” Liam teased as he rushed in.

“Damn. Lacy, let me get you down from there.” He wrapped his arms around Lacy’s waist. Her whole body tensed at his touch. It was going to take her some time to recover from everything she’d been through.

Liam put her down near the door and offered a hand to help me out of the pile of boxes I’d fallen into.

“What’s with all the explosions?”

“Mikhail’s insurance policy if I had to take a guess.”

“Did he get away?”

“Drew was able to take down Mikhail. Shot him in the leg when he tried to make a run for it. We got most of his men, too. But we need to go.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ll explain on the way. But, for now. We gotta get out of here. I was able to contain this part of the fire but the whole place could go up anytime.” He pushed us out of the door and into the hallway before nearly dragging me down the hall with the others following.

“What about the other girls?”

“They’re safe.”

“And Drew?”

Liam’s step faltered and I glanced up at him. His face fell and I knew something was wrong. My feet planted firmly on the floor. I couldn’t go another step without knowing more. My heart sank into my stomach and I thought I might get sick.

“Where’s Drew?” I demanded.

“We need to go.” He tugged at my arm.

I yanked my arm out of his grasp. "Liam, damn it, tell me, where is he?"

"I don't know."

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

"Things got a little crazy in the main room. There was a lot of shooting, but that was the last time I saw Drew. I'm sure he's fine but we have to get out of here. Everyone is clearing out."

"No, he wouldn't leave without knowing I was out."

"If he knew you were protected by me or Aleksey he might. Hailey, we have to go. Now."

An explosion nearby shook the walls and debris crumbled from the ceiling again. Liam drug me by the arm down the hall while Aleksey and Lacy followed.

We turned the corner and stopped so suddenly that Lacy ran into the back of me. Drywall and beams covered the end of the hall, blocking our path while a small fire was beginning to spread along the side of an exposed stud in the wall.

"Shit, we'll have to go back through the main warehouse and out the front door." Liam turned us around and began running back where we came from. "It's more dangerous. We'll be exposed to any of Mikhail's men still around so stay close." He yelled over the loud crashing noises all around us as the building began to give way piece by piece.

Smoke burned my lungs and made me cough. It was hard to see more than ten feet ahead of us. I coughed as Liam continued to drag us through the hall.

My coughing got too bad and Liam stopped to let me catch my breath. "You okay?"

"It's getting too bad. The fire has to be close. We need to find another way."

"There's not another way." His voice was laced with worry.

We heard a loud creaking noise from just behind us. Aleksey shoved the three of us on ahead, lunging forward with us as the ceiling collapsed right where we had all been standing.

"Shit," Liam yelled as we all turned to look at the rubble we would have been under. "Thanks, man."

Lacy and I were the first ones off the floor and the men followed. "Well I guess turning back isn't an option now anyways." I coughed,

looking at the piles of sheetrock, wood, and metal.

“We really have to get out of here. Try to stay low, it will help with the smoke and cover your faces like this.” He held the front of his shirt over his mouth and nose and crouched low as he led us through the gray smoke.

We ran down the hall toward where the auction had taken place. “We’ll have to make a run for it.” Aleksey said as we reached the door to the main room.

The room was dim but with the front door open, the air was clear. We stayed close and ran as fast as we could toward the front door. I was almost out the door when a grunting noise caught my attention.

The others were already out the door. “Hailey, what are you doing? We have to get out of here.” Liam grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the door.

“Wait. Don’t you hear that?” There was the same sound again - *grunting*.

I ran behind the stage where the curtains and a couple of rafters had fallen during one of the explosions. The noise was louder there so I began digging through the black fabric and debris.

I moved more debris, finally uncovering Drew’s handsome face, smudged with dirt and ash.

“Drew,” I cried out. He was barely moving. There was a large red spot growing on the right shoulder of his white shirt. “You’re bleeding,” I gasped, falling to my knees beside him on the floor.

I managed to rip a piece of the sheer curtain from the jumbled pile and press it against his shoulder to try to stop the bleeding like I’d seen in the movies.

I looked him over for more injuries and stopped when my gaze reached his leg trapped under a beam from the stage. I scrambled on my knees to get to the beam and slipped my hands on either side of his leg. I tried to lift the large piece of metal but it was too heavy for me.

“Hailey, get out of here,” Drew mumbled, barely managing to get the word out as he struggled to keep his eyes open.

“Shit,” Liam said as he came up behind me.

I desperately tugged on the beam but it didn’t budge. “It’s too heavy,”

“Aleksey, come help,” Liam yelled out behind him.

Aleksey ran from around the front of the stage back to where we were hidden. “Damn, Drew,” He exclaimed and immediately took action, grabbing the beam.

They hurled it off Drew who was barely coherent.

“Show-off,” he said weakly as Liam and Aleksey each draped an arm over their shoulders and carried him toward the door. “Get her out of here.” Drew looked at me before his head fell to the side, finally losing consciousness.

“We gotta get him help.” Aleksey hurried us along out the front door.

Emergency lights flashed in the dark from several parked police and SWAT vehicles accompanied by ambulances and firetrucks a little farther back.

“There,” I yelled and motioned toward one of the available ambulances.

We rushed Drew over to them. Two paramedics ran to meet us and helped carry him to the stretcher.

“Get him on there.” One man ordered as they placed him on the hard stretcher.

Nearly half of Drew’s white shirt was red. My stomach twisted. How much blood could someone lose and still be okay?

They immediately loaded him into the ambulance and started working on his limp body. He was so pale — so lifeless.

Chapter 29

I stood frozen as they loaded Drew into the back of the ambulance. I'd never seen him look so helpless. My heart ached in my chest. I couldn't breathe. Time seemed to stand still as I stood there staring with tears stinging my eyes. There was an almost magnetic pull drawing me closer to him.

"We gotta get him out of here." One paramedic grabbed hold of the large back door, waiting for me to move out of the way.

"I'm riding with him," I demanded.

The younger of the two paramedics nodded and I climbed into the back of the ambulance. The door slammed shut, making me jump. The older paramedic pointed me toward the front near Drew's head. Everything moved so fast. I hurried to sit beside Drew and took his hand. I was crunched up on the side of the ambulance opposite where one worked on his shoulder to stop the bleeding while the other hooked him up to monitors.

"Drew?" I choked back a sob.

"I'm still here." I could barely hear his gravelly voice over the commotion of beeping sounds and men barking instructions.

"I can't believe you got shot." I squeezed his hand and tears stung my eyes. I was still in shock. *This can't be real.*

"I'm sorry I wasn't there to get you through the auction. I told you I'd be there."

"I got out of the main room before the raid started like you said. Now I wish I hadn't. I left and you got shot. If I'd have stayed, I might have found you sooner — stopped the bleeding faster..." I swiped a hand across my wet face to fight back more tears.

"I need to start an I.V. on that arm." The younger paramedic said, making me scoot down but I still held onto Drew's hand like a life-line.

"You were doing what I told you to," Drew's voice was strained. "You made sure you got out and got somewhere safe. I'm proud of you and..." Drew's voice faded. His eyes fluttered closed.

"Drew? Drew," I shouted and squeezed his hand tighter.

“He’s losing too much blood.” One of the paramedics said with urgency and applied more pressure to his bloody shoulder. The other guy knocked on the cab of the ambulance and suddenly the sirens grew louder. I could feel us accelerate, flying over bumps in the road as we sped toward the hospital.

“Drew, wake up,” I demanded almost falling out of my seat when we took a turn.

His eyes opened to tiny slits which I could tell took too much of his strength. “I love you, Hai...” His eyes closed again. The strength faded from his grip on my hand as his head dropped to the side.

“Drew? Drew, no. Wake up. I love you too. I love you so much. Drew please? Please wake up,” I shouted and shook his hand as the ambulance came to a stop. “Why are we stopping? He’s dying. Do something,” I yelled in desperation to the two men.

“We’re here.” The back doors swung open loudly. “Ma’am move out of the way so we can get him into the hospital.”

I moved out of their way, hesitant to let go of his hand but having no choice as they rolled him out of the ambulance. I jumped out and hurried to follow them into the emergency room.

“Drew? I’m still here,” I yelled after them, trying to keep up.

They wheeled him through the double doors and into a stark white hallway. A nurse pulled me back as doctors rushed him down a long corridor. “Miss, I’m sorry but you can’t go back there. Let the doctors do their job. Please have a seat and we’ll let you know as soon as we hear anything.”

As fast as everything happened in the ambulance, it was now in slow motion. I turned around and ran to the bathroom barely making it to the toilet before throwing up. I splashed cold water on my face and swished some in my mouth before looking up into the large mirror and just staring at the mess of a woman reflected back at me.

My auburn curls were a mess, mascara smudged around my eyes and black streaks covered my cheeks. I looked paler than I’d ever been and the white of my eyes were pink from crying.

I wet a paper towel and attempted to clean up my face. With the black streaks and racoon eyes faded, I just looked ghostly. I walked back into the waiting area feeling numb. Something was missing. I grasped at my hip where my emergency bag had been hanging. It was gone.

I want you to keep this with you all the time until this mission is over... I just want you taken care of in case anything happens.

Nothing's going to happen.

I know. But, just in case.

Drew told me to keep it on me at all times. It had everything in it I would need in case something happened. In case of an emergency. An emergency...like this? *Had he known he might get hurt — or die?*

My body was suddenly too heavy for my legs. I crumbled, barely making it to a chair. I held my face in my hands and cried. My shoulders quaked with the force of each painful sob as they ripped from my throat. He couldn't die. He just couldn't. Not after everything. All those wasted years I spent being mad and hating him for breaking my heart when he'd never done anything wrong at all. I sobbed harder as I thought of all the time we'd lost and all the time we might never have.

"Ma'am?" A soft male voice timidly drew me out of my sorrow enough to hold back the sobs.

"Yes?" I looked up to see the younger paramedic standing over me.

"I believe this is yours?" He held out my bag. I took it eagerly, hugging it to my chest.

"Thank you," another sob escaped me.

"Do you need anything? Is there someone I can call for you?"

I shook my head. "I'm sure they're already on their way."

"Okay, well, good luck with everything." He looked at me with such pained sympathy that it only made my heart hurt worse.

"Thanks." I forced a smile and looked down at my bag.

He left and my breath trembled with more tears streaming down my face. I couldn't lose him. Not after we just made it back to each other. Not after everything we'd been through. I couldn't lose him. I refused.

I opened my bag and desperately dug through until my hand finally grasped the small velvety ring box. I held the small black box in my hands, just staring at it before I finally opened it to get a better look at the diamond engagement ring inside.

The diamond was small. Drew had bought it when he was just out of the police academy. There was no telling how many of those tiny paychecks it took to pay for the ring. That in itself made it worth more to me than the biggest diamond on the planet.

How could I have ever been afraid of getting hurt by being with Drew? It was being apart from him that was killing me. I needed him. I couldn't breathe without him. That's when it hit me. Like a train colliding full force. No pain from letting myself love him could ever compare to the pain I'd feel without him. Loving him wasn't an option. I would love him whether I was with him or not. I was only hurting myself more by keeping myself away.

I took the ring from its box — its home for the past five years — and slipped it on my finger. It fit perfectly. I had no idea how Drew had known my size but he had. I sat there staring at my hand. I tilted it from side to side, watching the tiny diamond sparkle under the fluorescent light. It was almost hypnotic and I found a small sense of calm when I looked into the endless facets.

I swallowed hard around the lump in my throat and fought to stop the tears. *He's going to be okay. He has to be.*

"I'm looking for the family of Drew Caraway." An all-business sounding voice drew my attention back to the double doors Drew had disappeared through.

I jumped up from my seat. "What is it? Is he okay?"

"Are you a relative, Miss?"

"Yes." I said without giving it a second thought. My index finger brushed over the ring on my ring finger. "I'm his fiancé." I stated boldly, spinning the ring on my finger as I said the words.

"Mr. Caraway is out of surgery now. It was touch and go there for a bit and he lost a lot of blood, but he's stable now. He's strong and I expect he will make a full recovery."

"Oh, thank god." My shoulders slumped and I let go of the breath I hadn't known I was holding.

"Hailey," Rebecca called my name from across the waiting room. I looked just in time to see her and Jason running toward me.

"How is he, doctor?" Jason said while Rebecca wrapped me in a tight hug.

The doctor cleared his throat, "As I was telling his fiancé, here..."

"Fiancé?" Rebecca whispered to me in bewilderment.

"I'll explain later." I whispered back to Rebecca while Jason talked with the doctor. Once he was done, I turned my attention back to Drew's doctor. "I need to see him."

“Not just yet. He’s very groggy from surgery and weak from the blood loss.”

“Please? I just need to see that he’s okay.”

“I don’t —” He must have seen the desperation in my face because he suddenly changed his mind. “Alright, I’ll give you five minutes. But just you and you need to keep him calm. This way.”

“Thank you.” The doctor turned away without another word and led me down the hall. I hurried to keep up with his large stride until we stopped in front of a small room with the door open but the curtain pulled closed.

The doctor held open the curtain for me. “Five minutes.”

I nodded and timidly slipped inside.

Drew laid in the hospital bed, sleeping. He looked so peaceful. I hated to wake him, but I had to make sure he was really okay.

I whispered softly as I stepped closer to him. “Drew?”

He stirred slightly but didn’t wake so I tried again as I made it to his side and took his hand, “Drew.”

“Hey gorgeous,” no sound had ever sounded as wonderful as his gravelly voice did at that moment.

“Oh, Drew,” I threw my arms around him and held my head against his chest. The sound of his heart beating gave me so much comfort. Tears streamed down my eyes again and the sudden realization that I might be hurting him finally hit. “Oh no, did I hurt you?” I shot up from my position over him.

“I’d take a hundred bullets if it meant getting to feel you clinging to me like that again.”

“You don’t have to take one. I’m going to hold onto you and never let go again,” I squeezed his hand.

“Good because I made a decision when I was laying there fighting to keep conscious after I got shot.”

“What decision?” I looked up at him but kept my ear to his chest, relishing in the steady beat of his heart.

“I decided that I don’t care what you say. I’m not letting you go again. I’m not going to let you run away no matter how scared you are. You’re mine. You always have been, even when you didn’t know it.”

The doctor reappeared in the doorway and tapped at his watch to signal my time was up.

“Give us a few more minutes, doc.” Drew said. His voice lacked his normal charisma and strength. The doctor reluctantly nodded and disappeared again.

Drew turned back to me, looking me in the eyes as another series of tears began to flow. “Hey, what are those tears for?” He lifted his hand to wipe them away but I could tell it was a struggle.

“You scared me back there. I thought I’d lost you.”

“Aww, you didn’t think you’d get rid of me that easily did you?”

“I —” My voice cracked.

“Shh. It’s okay. Come here.” Drew patted the open space at his side and I climbed up beside him and settled on my side, laying my head against his left shoulder.

“I love you,” I whispered against his chest.

“I love you too.” Drew took my hand in his and froze as his thumb brushed over the ring, “What’s this?”

I froze, suddenly feeling embarrassed that I had put it on without saying anything to him first. *But he told you to put it on when you were ready.* My mind reminded me. “It’s my ring,” I looked up into his eyes as my cheeks warmed.

“Yes, it is,” he smiled down at me with so much love in his eyes that it made my heart swell until I thought it might burst. “Does that mean...?”

“Yes. The answer is yes.” New tears started to flow. Happy tears.

Drew’s hand cupped my cheek and pulled my lips to his. He pressed his mouth tenderly against mine and poured all his love into that one kiss. In that moment, every last one of the walls around my heart came crashing down.

Chapter 30

“So, how’s the wedding planning going?” Jason asked Drew before taking a sip of his wine.

“We were actually talking about eloping.”

“Eloping? Why?” Rebecca said, almost spitting out her sparkling cider.

“I want to hurry up and get her locked in on this before she can change her mind.” Drew smirked. “Especially now that I’ve been cleared for active duty again. I should be all set for the honeymoon.” He wagged his eyebrows.

I slapped Drew’s arm but couldn’t help laughing. After being afraid of hurting him for the past few months, I would be glad to get back to normal now that he was completely cleared.

“The only problem with eloping is, there are some people who really want to be there with us. So, we’re going to have a small ceremony. But it’s going to be kept very simple and small.”

“And soon.” Drew added.

I gave Jason and Rebecca a pleading look.

“We wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Rebecca beamed.

“We’re also going to have our parents there,” Drew added.

“And a surprise guest officiant.” I smirked.

“Who?” Rebecca leaned in conspiratorially.

I leaned in as if to tell her, lowering my voice almost to a whisper. “If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise.” I winked at her and grinned, which made her huff.

“So, when is all this going down?” Jason said around a bite of his steak.

“Next weekend. We were all going to drive out to the coast if you can get a sitter on such short notice.”

“I’m sure we can work something out. The grandparents are always looking for an excuse to have the kids over.”

“Sometimes I have to remind my dad they still belong to me,” Rebecca chuckled. “So, looks like we have some planning to do.” She put down her napkin and grinned at me.

“Simple. Remember?” Drew reminded us and I gave him a devilish grin.

“Of course.”

“The weather is perfect for a beach wedding,” Rebecca said as she waddled through the sand in her calf-length peach dress that flowed on the breeze from the ocean.

“I always wanted to get married in the spring,” I smiled, looking out where the dimming blue sky met the matching blue ocean.

“Okay, shh. There it is, through there.” I pointed out to the ocean from behind our hiding place of reeds and palm trees near a rustic little surf shop that had closed until summer.

Rebecca and I looked through to the small gathering on the sand. Two pillars, wrapped in sheer white fabric framed the view of the ocean. A few white chairs where our parents sat lined a sand aisle.

I could just barely make out the faces of Drew, Jason, and Liam — our surprise officiant who went online to make it official.

“Oh Hailey, it’s beautiful.”

“Ready?” My dad’s unexpected voice coming from behind me made me jump.

“Geeze, you scared me half to death.”

“Your future husband is getting impatient.” My dad smiled fondly at me. He took in my white flowy wedding gown and his eyes glossed over.

“You look beautiful.”

“Thanks dad.”

Since we were on the beach, I kept it simple, flowy with no train to get messed up in the sand. I kept my auburn curls loose like Drew liked. Just pinning the sides a bit to frame my face. My favorite part was the bouquet made of seashells instead of flowers so it would last forever. Rebecca had found a place that made them nearby and I was ecstatic when she showed me their online catalog.

“I think he’s been pretty patient considering you kept him waiting for years.” Rebecca smirked and bumped my shoulder.

“Yeah, let’s go put him out of his misery,” I grinned and motioned for Rebecca to lead the way.

I waited until Rebecca was almost at the makeshift aisle. Liam pressed the button to play the pre-recorded music and excitement bubbled

inside as I linked arms with my dad and he led me toward the beach. We had timed it perfectly, picked the perfect location on the small island just off the coast. The backdrop for our wedding would be the setting sun over the water.


As I focused on not tripping on the sand, I looked up, my eyes meeting Drew's. The music shifted for me to walk down the aisle. Tears pricked my eyes and I batted them back as Peter Cetera's voice floated through the air, singing *After All*.

Of all the moments in my life, everything I'd seen, I knew the one I'd never forget would be the look in Drew's eyes as he smiled at me while I walked down the beach to him. I could barely breathe by the time my dad kissed my cheek and passed Drew my hand.

We waited through the song, just staring at each other, soaking in the moment and thinking about all we'd been through and how far we'd come.

"I love you, Hailey." Drew stood on my parents' front porch after taking me out to the movies. He timidly looked down into my eyes and I could see how nervous he was to say those words for the first time.

"I love you too," I smiled so big, I thought my face might crack as I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him down to press my lips onto his.




Drew and I lay on his bed, both naked, as he pulled the sheet up over me and kissed my temple, "That was amazing."

"Mm-hmm." I murmured sleepily.

"Are you okay? I didn't hurt you, did I? I know that was your first, and —."


"I'm good, I promise. It was fantastic." I lifted my head from his chest and gently kissed his lips. His hand reached to cup my face as he controlled the kiss.



"How could he do this? How could he cheat on me?" I cried to my best friend; my head buried in my pillows.

"It will be okay. You'll get through this. I know it doesn't feel like it right now, but you will."

"No. That was it. He was it for me. He was the love of my life but he didn't want me." I sobbed so violently I thought I might die.



*“You were there that night?” His pained voice echoed in my mind.
“...you have to let me explain...”*

“You weren’t cheating on me?”

“No. Hailey, you were the love of my life. You still are... I’d planned to ask you to marry me. I just wanted to be the man you deserved first.”

“All this time...”

The lyrics were perfect. Rebecca had brought the song to me a few days ago claiming it had to be *the song*. And she was right. The moment I heard it; I knew — it was ours.

As the music faded and the rumbling of people taking their seats died down, Drew mouthed the words, “After all.”

I smiled and a tear escaped, rolling down my cheek but Drew was there to catch it. His hand cupped my cheek and his thumb swiped the tear away as Liam began the ceremony.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to celebrate the love of Drew and Hailey.” Liam began. “Love is not an easy journey and marriage is not something to be entered into lightly. But, these two have never been known to shy away from a challenge, especially when the reward is so great. And, love is the greatest reward. It is love that makes all the challenges and all the struggles worth it. Love for each other, for family, for friends.

“I can speak with absolute certainty when I say, there is no stopping these two when they set their mind to something. I have no doubt that will hold true of marriage as well. Lao Tzu said, ‘To love someone deeply gives you strength. Being loved by someone deeply gives you courage.’ And, I can attest that these two have both in excess.

“It is now time for those words Hailey and Drew wish to hear the most. The vows that will take them from engagement to marriage.” Liam nodded to me, signally it was my turn to speak.

“I, Hailey take you, Drew to be my husband. I will share my life with you, build our dreams together, support you through times of trouble, and rejoice with you in times of happiness. I promise to give you respect, love and loyalty through all the trials and triumphs of our lives together. This commitment is made in love, kept in faith, lived in hope, and made new every day of our lives. With this ring, I marry you. Wear it forever as a

sign of my love.” I slipped the simple gold band onto Drew’s finger and he looked up with so much love in his eyes I thought I might melt.

“I, Drew, take you, Hailey, to be my wife. I will share my life with you, build our dreams together, support you through times of trouble, and rejoice with you in times of happiness. I promise to give you respect, love and loyalty through all the trials and triumphs of our lives together. This commitment is made in love, kept in faith, lived in hope, and made new every day of our lives. I give you this ring. Wear it with love and joy. As this ring has no end, my love is also forever.” He slipped my ring onto my finger to nestle beside the engagement ring he’d bought for me five years before.

“With the exchanging of vows and giving of rings, I am happy to pronounce you husband and wife.” Liam smiled and raised his eyebrows at Drew. “Kiss her, man.”

Drew didn’t waste any time. His hand grabbed into my hair and pulled me to him, kissing me so deeply that my toes curled. I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on tight.

We were finally where we belonged. It was a long journey to get there, but the journey was worth every step.

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