

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
RILEY EDWARDS



GOLD TEAM  **BOOK THREE**

KYLE

KYLE (SPECIAL FORCES: OPERATION ALPHA)

GOLD TEAM 3

RILEY EDWARDS

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Special Forces: Operation Alpha Fan-Fiction world!

If you are new to this amazing world, in a nutshell the author wrote a story using one or more of my characters in it. Sometimes that character has a major role in the story, and other times they are only mentioned briefly. This is perfectly legal and allowable because they are going through Aces Press to publish the story.

This book is entirely the work of the author who wrote it. While I might have assisted with brainstorming and other ideas about which of my characters to use, I didn't have any part in the process or writing or editing the story.

I'm proud and excited that so many authors loved my characters enough that they wanted to write them into their own story. Thank you for supporting them, and me!

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

ABOUT THE BOOK

Anaya Baker knows pain—she got her first taste when she was orphaned and put into foster care. Then it was forever embedded into her soul when she was sold to a sex trafficking ring. Nearly two decades later the stench still clings to her. It coats her skin and burns her gut. Since being rescued, Anaya has dedicated her life to helping others, yet no amount of good she's done has lessened her anguish. While on an assignment with the Peace Corps she learns of brothel posing as an orphanage and she cannot turn her back. Not even the civil unrest or the death of her friend will stop her. Anaya has one mission: save the young girls for the horrors she herself had suffered.

Kyle Smith couldn't say no. Not when the beautiful woman with haunted eyes asked him and his teammate to escort her to a remote island to save a bunch of children. Her plan was crazy. The island was overrun with rebels and the unrest was at an all-time high. There was no stopping the woman, she was resolute and Kyle was just as determined to keep her safe. His personal life was in turmoil, his team at war from within a high-power criminal syndicate. He had no business falling in love—but was helpless against her bravery and strength. He tumbled head first and now he had to let her go. But when the threat closes in and one of their lives hangs in the balance, Kyle has to make a choice. And the wrong one could mean death.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Thank you for purchasing Kyle. I'm beyond thrilled to once again write in Susan Stoker's Special Forces: Operation Alpha universe. I've been a fan of Susan's for many years and have read every book she's published (multiple times.) While I've tried my hardest to stay true to her original characters (because, *hello*, they are already awesome) I am not Susan, I wrote them as I, the reader, experienced them.

I want fans of Susan to feel like they're visiting old friends when they see her beloved characters. I hope I've done them justice. But please remember, I've taken some liberties.

In Kyle, I use Susan's characters from her new Legacy SEAL series: Rocco, Ace, Gumby, Phantom, Bubba, and Rex. I've also borrowed plot elements from Securing Piper. You can certainly read Kyle as a standalone but I recommend reading Securing Piper first.

And of course, The King of All Things Cyber, John "Tex" Keegan makes an appearance.

I hope you enjoy the world I've created for you as much as I loved writing it.

For Susan.

Thank you for giving us, your adoring readers, such wonderful characters.

CHAPTER 1

"DO YOU HAVE TO GO?"

Guilt started to claw away at my insides. If my best friend only knew the real reason I had to go back. The burning need and where that need stemmed from, then maybe she'd understand. But she didn't and she never would because I'd never tell her. Telling her would mean I'd have to open up about my past and that was never going to happen.

"Yes," I groaned, answering for the third time.

"Anaya," Evette snapped then continued to berate me. "It's dangerous. Kalee..."

My best friend trailed off, Kalee's death still too painful to talk about. Too fresh. It hadn't been that long ago that Kalee Solberg was murdered in Timor-Leste. And if the reports were to be believed, she was tossed in a pit with all the others who had been senselessly killed and left. My beautiful, sweet, caring friend left to rot. The thought so revolting I had to push it from my mind or I'd go crazy.

"Evie. I have to. Part of why *is* Kalee. She died over there doing what she thought was right. She was making a difference."

I'd met Evette London and Kalee years ago at a literacy event for under-privileged children. The two of them had been friends since junior high and had quickly pulled me into their friendship. We became fast friends. It was because of Kalee I'd joined the Peace Corps. When we were both sent to the small island of Timor-Leste, we were so excited to go together.

Now she was gone.

"I've read—"

I'm sure she had read the reports. She worked for a newspaper and would have access to information before the general public.

"I'll be fine. I'm not going back to Timor-Leste with the Peace Corps volunteers, I'll have a bodyguard."

"A bodyguard?" she gasped. "Anaya!"

Shit. Why had I told her that? Evette was a worrier, always had been. Out of the three of us, she was the most cautious. Kalee and I couldn't even get Evie on a plane to fly to Timor-Leste to visit us. Evie was so insane about it she could recite NTSB crash reports verbatim.

"I have to go. My flight leaves in a few hours."

"But you've only been home a few days. I didn't get to see you."

Guilt slithered its way down to my stomach. I'd purposely avoided her. But I knew if she saw me, I wouldn't be able to hide my feelings from her. She'd dig them out of me and it would worry her more. I had to go back to Timor-Leste and no amount of begging from my friend would stop me.

"I know. I'm sorry. I won't be gone long. When I get back, I'm all yours."

"Please be careful." I could hear the hitch in her voice and my stomach tightened. "I can't lose you, too. We didn't even get Kalee back to..." Evette trailed off. "To you know, bury her. Poor Mr. Solberg. I haven't been over to see him yet."

I had tried, but when I went to his house, he hadn't opened the door. I could see him pacing the front room through the open curtains, but it was like he was so lost in his grief he hadn't heard the door. I'd left without speaking to him.

"I think he needs time to come to terms with her death. Give him time." I hated to change topics on her, but I had to go. "Listen, Evie, I have to finish getting my stuff ready and go meet with the two men who are taking me to Dili. My flight leaves tonight but I'll email you from the plane and check in."

"Anaya—"

"I promise I'll be safe."

"Okay. But check in every day or I'll fly over there and find you."

"Right." I smiled. There was nothing that would make Evie get on a plane.

"Bye, love you."

"Love you. Bye."

I glanced around my apartment, a place where I spent very little time, and spied my phone charger and paperback I'd need for the twenty-five-hour plane ride. I shoved the items in my backpack and grabbed my small duffle.

If all went well, I'd be home in a week.

* * *

I WALKED into the lobby of the Hotel Coronado and immediately spotted Beckett "Ace" Morgan and his wife, Piper. The man was hard to miss—between his almost-mohawk, close-cropped beard, and imposing demeanor, one didn't simply walk past Ace without staring.

I'd met Piper Johnson, now Piper Morgan, when she was visiting her best friend Kalee in Timor-Leste. That was right before the rebels had decimated the village Kalee and I had been staying in and slaughtered the children and workers in a nearby orphanage.

Once again my blood heated thinking about what those savages had done. Their evil knew no bounds. And what was worse than that were the so-called 'private orphanages' in the city. They were nothing more than brothels. Young girls groomed for a life of prostitution, sold into the sex trade, or into servitude to old men who wanted to marry a young girl.

It was horrifying.

"Hi, Anaya," Piper greeted.

Being back in the States had done wonders for her appearance; she looked healthy. However, her eyes told the real story. The tale of hiding in a crawl space for days with three orphans while the rebels had killed everyone right above their heads.

I wondered if she'd heard the same cries I had while I'd been hiding, praying the band of insurgents wouldn't find me as they tortured and killed others mere feet away from me.

"Hi, Piper. How are the girls?" I asked.

She and Ace had adopted the girls she'd protected. *Thank God for Piper and Ace.*

"Adjusting. Ace is introducing them to the wonders of all things candy. So, I'm steady behind him reminding the girls to brush their teeth."

I knew she was making light of the girls' acclimation to life in the United States but the smile on her face was genuine.

"Declan and Kyle are waiting for us," Ace announced.

"Thanks again for setting this up for me."

I'd already met with Declan Crenshaw and Kyle Smith, the men who were going with me to Timor-Leste. The meeting had gone well, Declan had asked most of the questions, which was good because every time Kyle spoke I'd been captivated by his deep voice and penetrating stare. Kyle was the kind of man who held your eyes when he talked to you and demanded you did the same. Not verbally of course, it was in the way he pinned you with his gaze. He held you hostage and the ease in which he did it was disconcerting.

He made me nervous and when I was sitting across from him I'd had to fight not to squirm in my seat or blurt out all my secrets I was sure he was reading. I figured no one hid much from Kyle, and that didn't make me nervous—that scared the shit out of me. I'd made an art of out hiding. I was good at it. But I was no match for Kyle. Which meant I had to keep my distance. And that was going to be hard considering we'd be sharing the same space.

Then there was the small problem that Kyle Smith was incredibly good-looking. And not in the cute, boy-next-door way. No, in the, I'm-a-badass-man kind of way. His posture and demeanor screamed danger. An air about him that left no doubt you did not want to get on his bad side. But when he smiled, everything changed. A gentleness crept in and that was even scarier. And unfortunately Kyle had smiled at me a lot during our meeting. He'd done it to try and quell my nervousness, not knowing that each time he'd done it, his smile had the opposite effect.

"If I can't talk you out of going back, then at least I'll feel better knowing Kyle and Declan will be with you." Ace's expression couldn't be misinterpreted. He wasn't happy.

"I have to—"

"I know you do. But that doesn't mean it's any less dangerous. And Amisha will not be happy you're sniffing around her business. She makes a lot of money off the girls."

Amisha, the woman who ran a private orphanage, was the reason I was going back to Timor-Leste.

"I know she does," I ground out. "It's not right. I can't just pretend I didn't see what I did. I can't sleep at night knowing—"

Piper's hand on my wrist stopped my outburst. "I think what you're doing is brave and kind. But Ace is right, it's dangerous. Please be careful."

The sadness I'd seen in Piper back in Sydney after she, Ace, and his team were able to leave Timor-Leste with the girls, shone in her eyes. She was thinking about Kalee.

"I promise I will."

"Thank you," Piper whispered and looked to Ace.

His features were still hard, but they conveyed understanding. He'd seen, it too. He'd been to the very orphanage in question. The woman didn't even try to hide her misdeeds. She flat out had told Ace and Piper their oldest girl, Kemala, was almost ready to find a husband. But Ace and his team had seen what went on next door. Where the real horror happened. Where the teenage girls weren't sold into marriage they were rented out by the hour. That was why I had to go back. I knew what was happening and I'd never live with myself having that knowledge without trying to stop it.

I silently followed Ace and Piper into a small room the hotel rented for business meetings, and found Declan and Kyle already seated side-by-side behind a round table.

The two men were identical in intensity. The best way to describe them was, they had their game faces on. And that was scary, too. The danger that normally surrounded Kyle had been ratcheted up and it was sexy in a frightening kind of way.

Neither stood but Declan motioned for us to sit. I took the seat farthest from Kyle thinking it was best to keep my distance. There was something about the man that made my body sizzle with awareness. And frankly it was alarming. He was not my type, yet he woke up all of my girly parts I'd forgotten I had. His dark blond hair, tanned skin, and set-in-stone eyes were the opposite of what I'd once dated.

Once upon a time, I'd liked my men on the happy-go-lucky side. There was nothing cheerful about Kyle.

"Thanks again for doing this," I broke the silence.

Declan's gaze swung to me and I immediately regretted speaking. "From this point on, you are to listen to everything we tell you. Once we land in Timor-Leste, you do not question our decisions. If we feel it's too dangerous, we pull back."

I felt my eyes twitch in irritation. "Yeah, see, that doesn't work for me."

"Doesn't have to," Declan continued. "Our only purpose is to keep you safe, and if we feel you're in danger, we're pulling the plug."

Pulling the plug. *What? I don't think so.* There was no way I was going all the way back to Timor-Leste to have these two stop me from doing what I needed to do. I'd figure something else out. I had to.

"Then you might as well not even go. I know I'll be in danger, because Dili is overrun with criminals and rebels. You forget, I've spent more time in Timor-Leste than you have—that is, *if you've ever been there at all.* I know my way around. I know who I need to see. And I know what I need to do. What I don't need is you keeping me safe. I need muscle so I can move the girls. If you can't do that, then thank you for your time, but I'll go alone."

"That'd be the stupidest thing you could do," Declan went on. My eyes zeroed in on an angry red scar on his neck and I briefly wondered how long ago someone had tried to slit his throat. It had to be fairly recent, the welt hadn't completely healed.

"Wouldn't be the first time someone told me that." I shrugged.

I was tired of people telling me I was stupid. It was worse than the patronizing comments about me trying to save the world said by people who gave a few bucks to the Red Cross and thought they were doing something.

I knew I couldn't save the world and I wasn't trying to. Right now, if I could save one girl from the horrors of being mistreated for the rest of her life, I'd be happy. If I could rescue all the girls in that terrible *orphanage* then I'd be able to sleep at night knowing I didn't abandon them.

"You should start listening. I've spent time over the last twenty-four hours reading reports coming out of the region. The civil unrest has reached a boiling point. The defense force is outnumbered. The travel warning—"

"You have no idea what those girls go through." I slid my chair back and prepared to stand. "I grew up in the foster system—in orphanages here in the States I know what I saw, things I will never forget, but my experience is a walk in the park compared to how they live. I don't care about the travel warning. I don't care my ef-

forts may be for nothing. I'm still going to try. With or without your help."

Declan's icy fury directed my way stopped me from moving. "I know all about how the system fails the kids left in their care," he growled. I'd obviously touched a nerve, one that was exposed and painful.

"If you know, then why are we having this conversation?"

"Because we're not going over there on a suicide mission."

"Obviously," I huffed. "You may think I'm stupid but I'm not. I'll listen to your concerns and follow directions. But I won't be treated like I'm some idiot who doesn't know how to take care of herself."

"All Declan is trying to say is if we find ourselves in a situation, we need you to work with us, not against us. If we have to take time arguing with you about a decision then we could all get killed," Kyle clarified.

"Then why didn't he just say that?"

"Because he's Declan," Kyle said, as if that was an explanation I should understand.

"Maybe this isn't going to work. I can—"

"It's gonna work out fine, Anaya."

My body tingled hearing him say my name, it was a bizarre and ill-timed reaction, but it was there. If I'd believed in love at first sight, or some such bullshit, I'd say there was a buzz of recognition. But I didn't think there was such a thing as romantic love. My libido had simply picked the wrong time to wake up.

"I have aerial images of the area," I offered. "Once we're in Dili, we'll meet with my contacts. They're ready to move the girls as soon as we can get them out."

"Your contacts?" Declan asked.

It sounded more like an accusation, and I didn't remember him being this confrontational the first time I'd met with him and Kyle two days ago when they'd agreed to help me.

"I used to work for the National Center of Missing and Exploited Children. I worked with Donny and Camilla Rivera. They've left the NCMEC and started working globally. When I told them about the orphanage, they offered their help and flew to Sydney. They're there waiting for us now."

"Have you met the Riveras?" Declan asked Ace.

"No."

Declan picked his cell up off the table and after a few swipes on the screen he lifted it to his ear.

"Can you get me a full workup on Donny and Camilla Rivera?" he asked. "They worked at NCMEC. Anaya Baker said they now work privately." Declan paused then continued. "Right. Thanks."

"Did you just run a background check on my friends?"

"Yep," Declan answered unashamed.

"What the hell?"

"Is there something you don't want us to know?" Declan's eyes narrowed.

"No. But it's uncool. You could've asked me about them."

"Anaya, I don't think you understand how this works," Declan told me. "First, I'm not risking my life or my team's working with people I don't have a full workup on. And I'm certainly not handing young girls to people who haven't been vetted. I don't care how well you think you know them, or that they're your friends."

"Did you investigate me?" I asked and held my breath praying they hadn't.

"Yep."

My eyes widened and anger surged. They'd know everything about me. Not that I'd ever done anything wrong, but the invasion of my privacy was unwelcomed. I didn't offer details about my childhood to anyone. Not even my closest friends know what had happened to me growing up.

I couldn't hide the fact I didn't have a family, but I didn't talk about it.

"So, you know," I seethed. "Yet you still think my reasons for going back to Timor-Leste make me stupid."

"I didn't say that."

"Yes, you did."

"Enough," Ace cut in. "You all have a plane to catch and a mission to plan. Bickering isn't going to help."

"It's bad, Declan," Piper spoke. "So bad, that when Ace and I saw it we knew we couldn't leave our girls there. Amisha was upfront—she sells the girls. She even told us how much money it would cost for us to buy one. Twelve-year-old girls are being trained how to please a man."

Declan's jaw locked and his eyes clouded. Maybe he was finally understanding.

"We'll leave you to it. We have to pick up the girls from Rocco and Caite," Ace announced and stood. After he was on his feet, he helped Piper up and they said their goodbyes.

Now what?

Were Declan and Kyle really going to help me or had I made everything a hundred times harder on myself asking them for help? When Ace had told me he knew a group of former SEALs who had worked human trafficking and could assist me, I was excited.

Now, not so much. Declan scared me and he was kind of a dick. Then there was Kyle. I could handle Declan being an asshole, but Kyle? I wasn't so sure about that. I didn't know what it was about him, or why after years of not feeling anything, suddenly there was something to feel.

Everything about this partnership smelled like a disaster waiting to happen.

CHAPTER 2

I SCRUBBED my hands over my face as I took my seat on the plane. This morning's meeting hadn't gone well. Declan's normal gruff demeanor had taken on a hard edge. This case was too close to home for him. I'd tried to get him to go back to Maryland with the team and send Max to Timor-Leste with me, but he'd refused. And being the team leader, it was Dec's call.

It was doubtful, but I hoped the twenty-plus hour flight would calm his short temper.

Anaya finished stowing her bag and sat in the seat next to me. "Would you like the window?" I offered.

"No, thank you. I'll read for a bit then I'm sure I'll fall asleep."

Once again, I found myself studying the woman, wondering what it was about her that garnered such a strong reaction. From the moment I saw her walking across the lobby of the Hotel Del Coronado, I couldn't stop thinking about her.

It was more than her obvious beauty. She carried herself with strength and determination. Two things I admired. I'd thought the sadness I'd seen in her eyes was from the horror she'd lived through in Timor-Leste, the loss of her friend, but now I knew it was more than that. I'd read her file. I knew she'd bounced around from foster family to foster family and finally as a teenager ended up in several group homes. The last was specifically for troubled teens.

But after she'd aged out of the system, she'd turned her life around. Complete about-face. I admired that, too. She'd pulled herself out of the gutter, all by herself. Went to community college, then to UCLA on scholarship. She was also older than I'd thought. At first

glance she looked to be in her early twenties, but she was thirty-two, same age as I was.

"Thanks again for coming with me," Anaya said, pulling me from my thoughts.

"How long were you in Timor-Leste?"

"Almost six months. We were making good progress until the uprising."

"Economic development, right?" I asked about her volunteer position.

"Yeah. It's a pretty large umbrella. Some days I was teaching basic money management, but other days I was drawing up detailed business plans for entrepreneurs."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes. The Timorese are eager to learn, both men and women. The outlying villages were harder to convince they could trust our intentions. There's a fine line between teaching them to improve on what they're doing and teach them, and forcing Western culture and society norms on them. The Timorese don't want to be Americans and they don't want their beliefs and way of life trampled on. Sometimes it's hard to find the balance. Improving someone's life doesn't mean changing who they are fundamentally."

I liked how passionate Anaya was about her work. She came alive when she spoke about the Timorese people.

"I agree with that. Sometimes I think as a society we think our way is the best way and any country who doesn't believe like us should be persuaded to do so."

"It's not my place to persuade anyone into thinking like I do. I'm a teacher, that's it. And if I do my job well and the men and women can use the skills they learned to better their lives, hopefully they will go on to make the changes they feel their communities need to make."

Her intelligence impressed me. But her thoughtfulness on the subject intrigued me. And surprisingly it fell in line with my own beliefs. Which made what I had to do next suck even more.

"Except when it becomes personal."

Anaya's body jerked and her pretty eyes squinted.

"This isn't personal," she snapped.

"Then what is this? Why are you going back?"

I was fairly certain I understood her reasons, but I needed to make sure. Personal vendettas had a way of ending poorly. When emotions clouded judgment, people died.

"Because what's happening to those girls isn't right."

"According to you?" I pressed.

Anaya's face went a deep shade of red and she was getting angrier by the millisecond. "According to human decency. We're talking about girls being sold, and not marriage customs. Not only are the girls being sold to men who intend on taking these girls against their will and making them child-brides, they're being sold to sex traffickers. They're being used as prostitutes. Amisha isn't running a private orphanage out of the goodness of her heart until a married-in relationship can be arranged. She's running a brothel. Ace and Piper didn't see half of what goes on there. Amisha kept them where she wanted them, in the clean living space, with classrooms, dorms for the girls, a kitchen. She may've told them she sells the girls into marriage and presented it in a way that, while cringeworthy, benefits the girls because they'll have their basic needs met by their *husbands*, and the money is used for the care of the younger girls. But it's bullshit. They didn't see what really goes on."

"What really goes on?"

I needed to know how much Anaya had seen. I'd read the report John "Tex" Keegan had put together on Amisha Alves. By all accounts the woman was a piece of shit and so far, everything Anaya had told them had been correct.

"There's a second home, next door. There are almost the same number of children in that house as there are in the orphanage. Only it is not clean and there are no classrooms. Piper had told me she and Ace didn't see any children over fourteen when they'd been given their tour. I didn't have it in me to tell her why. She was right not to leave her girls there, not even for the day—they would've been gone. Three clean, untouched children from the mountains would've fetched a high price next door. And before you ask, yes, even the four-year-old."

My stomach roiled and it had nothing to do with the plane gaining altitude. Fucking despicable.

"Have you been in the house?"

"No. I was in the city teaching a class when I overheard a man in a café talking about Amisha. He was excited because she'd brought

new girls next door. So I discreetly started snooping around. Amisha doesn't hide what she's doing."

"You speak Portuguese?" I asked, somewhat amazed.

"Yes, and some Tetum." Anaya's tone had turned frosty toward me and I wasn't surprised by her next statement. "You don't seem to share my concerns about Amisha."

"I do," I answered but kept the rest of my thoughts on the topic to myself, very aware ninety-nine percent of the population wouldn't agree with my opinion on how to remedy the situation. Which would include bloodshed and a fair amount of torture.

"It doesn't seem that way, with the questions you've asked."

"I need to understand your motive."

"Motive?"

"I can't protect you if, when we get there you go off reservation trying to avenge a personal issue. I know what happened to you." Anaya's swift intake of air was painful to hear. "I'm not bringing it up to force you to talk about it. But I want you to know, I know, and to that end, some of this is *personal* for you. Our mission is to get those girls to safety *and* come home alive. There are things you don't know about. Bribes that are being paid to the Defense Force. Amisha's services are being used by the Minister of Justice. We need to tread carefully."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, I can't go in and happily place a bullet between the woman's eyes no matter how badly I want to. We go in easy, recon the area, see who's coming and going, and figure out the best way to get the girls."

I hadn't taken my eyes off Anaya's face as I waited for her to show some sign of disgust that I'd admitted to wanting to shoot the woman. But the revulsion never came. She simply nodded her head.

"I understand," Anaya said.

"I think you understand that the rebels pose a different kind of threat than Amisha. We'll have to stay on target and focused at all times."

"I understand that, too." Anaya's bravery masked her sadness.

I wouldn't bring up I also knew about how she'd escaped from the village she and Kalee had been staying in. I'd read her statement about hiding in a closet while the rebels had decimated the tiny

mountain community and tortured the people, trying to get information from them. She'd been far luckier than most.

Her courage had outweighed her fear and it was damn impressive. Most people would never go back to the place where they'd endured the nightmare she had. Another thing that endeared me to Anaya, and I was not a man who was easily impressed or taken in by a woman. But there were so many layers to Anaya I couldn't stop myself from wanting to peel them back. Every new bit of information I learned made me want to know more. And I certainly wasn't the type of man who wanted to more. Yet I had an overwhelming need to know how she'd managed to pick herself up and move on. And that need had taken over all rational thought.

"I know you do, and I promise I won't let anything happen to you," I vowed. "But I need you to promise me, that when Dec gives an order you follow it to the letter, even if you don't understand why he's giving it."

"I hate that word, order," she grumbled, and I tried not to laugh at the way her face scrunched into a grimace. She was just as cute as she was beautiful.

"Most people do. But Declan has years of experience, he knows what he's doing. If he didn't, I wouldn't trust him with my life, and certainly not yours."

Anaya's eyes flared at my admission, but she recovered quickly. "I don't think he likes me."

There was no way for me to explain Declan's hostility about the situation without breaking confidence. Declan being separated from his twin sister Violet and then bounced around the foster system was not my story to tell.

"His attitude has nothing to do with you or the mission." Maybe that was a white lie. His bad mood had everything to do with the mission. But not because he disagreed with rescuing the girls. "Declan's...intense. He has to be. He's our team leader. He makes the hard calls and his decisions may or may not end with someone dying. He takes that seriously. Dec's former Force Recon and he spent years in the CIA. When shit hits the fan, you want Declan by your side."

"What about you? Are you a Marine, too?"

My lips twitched and I couldn't hide my smile at how she'd formed her question. She would've had to know a Marine or know

something about the military to know there are no ex or former Marines. There are simply Marines. And I found it interesting she knew what Force Recon was to begin with.

"I lived with a Marine when I was a teenager," she explained. "After...well you know, you read the background check on me. Anyway, I stayed with him and his wife for about three months, but he was changing duty stations and since they were only fostering me, I couldn't go. It was the only place I'd ever felt safe."

Well, that answered my question, but now I had a queasy feeling in my gut. Yes, I understood what she was referring to when she'd said "after" and it pissed me off that she'd only ever felt safe one time in her young life. But again, it brought my fascination full-circle. How could someone hold on to all the beauty she had after they'd been through hell?

"I was in the Navy," I answered her question to avoid the other topic altogether.

"A SEAL?" she guessed.

While she was not wrong, it was interesting she'd gone there first.

"Now why would you ask that?"

"You look like one."

So she was observant by nature or she'd been paying attention. And damn if I didn't like the thought of her watching me closely. Normally it'd annoy the shit out of me if a woman asked if I was a SEAL. I'd run into my fair share of Frog Hogs who hunt around the bars in San Diego and Virginia gagging to get their hooks into a Special Forces Operator. And there was nothing sexy about a woman who was gagging for it, not even when she easily fell on your dick. No—especially when she did. There was not one damn thing intriguing about those women. Nothing special or unique. They were a dime a dozen and so different than all that was Anaya Baker, it wasn't even funny.

I couldn't picture Anaya aggressively pursuing a team guy just so she could brag she'd bagged one. Hell, I couldn't see her aggressively going after any man. And she wouldn't have to, not with her beauty. Men would flock, they'd pursue, they'd chase. All she'd have to do was smile and they'd be in her web. I had no doubt, because there I was trapped in the net she didn't even know she'd cast.

"Look like one?" I smiled. "Have you been around a lot of SEALs to know what they look like?"

A stem of jealousy unexplainably took root.

"Considering I live in San Diego, I've seen my fair share," she shot back. "I actually met with Rear Admiral Creasy a few times when I was with NCMEC. Two victims had been taken by boat from the beach. A witness reported the boat was seen near San Clemente Island. For obvious reasons civilians helping in the search couldn't go onto the island. He'd personally gone out and had a BUD/s class that was there for training stop and help search."

That sounded like Creasy. He'd recently saved us a lot of time and effort, unofficially aiding in the rescue of Thad's wife, Emerson. He was as kind and good as he was tough and demanding.

"Were they found?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, both had died. A diver found one just off the island and the other victim washed ashore. Rear Admiral Creasy had respectfully brought both back to Coronado and assisted the families." Again, that didn't surprise me. Creasy had seen his fair share of grieving spouses, parents, children, and siblings. Actually, he seen more than any one man should have to see.

She felt that loss. And I couldn't say I was happy she did but I liked she had the capacity to feel it. I was even happier she hadn't masked her sadness. In the short amount of time I'd spent with Anaya she'd put in a fair amount of effort to hide her thoughts and feelings. I fucking hated it. It was maddening. I wanted to tear down the walls she'd built and demand she show me the real her.

"You didn't answer my question, sailor," she teased, and I was nearly blinded by her smile and those dimples she had did some weird shit to my insides. I wanted to run my finger over the indentations and at the same time, I wanted to press my lips on them just to see what they felt like.

Goddamn bizarre.

"I didn't? I must've forgotten what you asked."

"Evasion. Nice tactic." Her head tilted to the side and, while she was being funny, her eyes were not. They were steadily gazing into mine and my hands twitched to pull her closer.

"Evasion?" I chuckled. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Right, now we've moved to resistance and denial. What's next on the SERE training protocol? Escape?" Her wide smile was contagious and when her dimples once again dotted her cheeks, blood quickly flowed south and my dick jerked.

Damn, those fucking dimples were going to be the death of me.

I glanced out the window. "Escape for thirty thousand feet without a parachute might be a little difficult."

"Yet you're not worried about the lack of oxygen or decompression sickness. Interesting."

I couldn't help the bark of laughter. "What's interesting is you know what SERE training is and decompression sickness from a HALO jump."

"A what?" Her head crooked to the side and I had a feeling she was screwing with me and knew what I was talking about.

"High altitude low opening jump."

"Right." She laughed and I knew she was fucking with me.

It was too much, the way she was easily teasing me in a way that was flirty yet still witty and definitely cute was muddling my head and doing nothing to help with my hardening cock. Nothing good was to come from it either. I needed my head on straight and my dick to get with the program. Unfortunately it seemed to have its own agenda and getting into Anaya's pants was priority number one.

"Why'd you leave the NCMEC?" I asked, hoping the change in topic would ease some of the stiffness in my pants.

"I needed a change." She shrugged as if it wasn't a big deal.

But hurt flashed in her eyes and I knew there was a story there. One I wished she wanted to tell me. Which was so unusual for me, it was baffling. No one would ever accuse me of being nosy, that was for sure. I wasn't standoffish, and I didn't have severe trust issues like Max did. There was no trauma in my past like Declan that prevented me from forming relationships. I simply respected others' privacy. I had boundaries I didn't cross. But for some reason, with her I couldn't find where those boundaries lay, and even if I could, I didn't want them between us.

At least that's what I told myself, I wasn't nosy and respected others need for privacy. But the truth was I had no intentions of leading a woman on. I'd always been upfront and honest about only wanting a superficial encounter, for however long it lasted.

I had no interest in having a family of my own, therefore there was no reason to form a deep and meaningful relationship.

But if that was the case, then why was I so hellbent on wanting to know everything about Anaya?

CHAPTER 3

KYLE WAS interesting but a little hard to puzzle out.

We'd been in the air almost an hour and the conversation had flowed easy. He still hadn't answered my initial question if he'd been a SEAL but frankly, I liked the banter and his silly denials. He'd accepted any vague answer I'd given him as if he didn't care I wasn't elaborating. Which was confusing because he asked a lot of questions.

"You don't press for answers, do you?" I blurted out. "I'm not complaining or anything. Just an observation."

"You're not an enemy combatant I'm interrogating," he returned.

Okay, that was kinda funny.

"And have you interrogated many?" I asked, enjoying our game.

"More than I can remember."

I could see Kyle being a formidable interrogator. He had intense eyes and the way he stared at me made me feel as if he knew more than he was letting on. Which may've been why he hadn't asked me to expand on my answers when I'd blown off a question. I should've been grateful, I didn't like talking about myself. But sometimes closing myself off was exhausting. I'd even held back with Evette and Kalee.

Damn, I missed Kalee. She was so much fun to be around. A kind soul who always made everyone in her presence smile and laugh. I still couldn't believe she was gone. Even after everything that had happened to me I was still shocked there was so much evil in the world.

"Hey." Kyle's hand on mine sparked me back to the present.

I glanced down to where our hands were connected. He'd threaded his fingers between mine and the feel of his touch was startling. How long had it been since I'd had any sort of physical interaction? I couldn't remember the last time I'd allowed someone to touch me. I wasn't a hugger, that was for sure. I supposed I'd shaken hands with someone in the last few months, but I couldn't remember. Not even the children in the orphanage I'd visited with Kalee touched me. Not like they did her. She'd scoop them up and hug and kiss them. Not me, I simply waved. She was always brushing the girls' hair off their faces and kissing their cheeks while I'd get a washcloth and help them clean themselves.

Man, I was screwed up.

When had I allowed myself to get to this level of disconnected?

"Anaya, are you okay?" Kyle started to pull his hand back, but I held fast. If he pulled away now, I'd lose my courage. "I didn't mean to—"

"I can't remember the last time someone touched me," I admitted.

His hand flexed in mine, and for some stupid reason, I wanted Kyle to understand.

I lifted my gaze from our intertwined hands and locked eyes with him. "It doesn't take a genius to understand why I have issues with attachments. I mean, I know I'm all kinds of screwed up. But I don't know when I started retreating to this point."

"What point are you referring to?" he asked cautiously.

"To a place where a simple friendly gesture is so abnormal, I have to think about it."

Jeez, could I sound any crazier?

Kyle nodded. "I shouldn't've—"

"Don't make this weirder than I already am." I tried to smile and make light of my idiocy. "You didn't do anything wrong. I'm the one who's half nuts."

Kyle squeezed my hand and shook his head. "You're not making anything weird and you're not nuts."

"Right. That's nice of you to say, but we both know a normal person doesn't study joined hands for a full minute trying to remember the last time she actually touched someone."

Yep, I *could* sound crazier.

Time to move things along.

"Anyway," I sighed. "How long have you been out of the Navy?"

"Three years," he allowed, but hadn't stopped staring intently at me.

He knew what I was doing and being nice enough to let me. This was just peachy, he was looking at me like I was going to fall apart. And I especially didn't want him to see me like I was a damaged woman that needed to be handled accordingly. I didn't want him to know how messed up I was but at the same time, I wanted him to know why. It was confusing and I couldn't keep all of my contradicting feelings in check.

"Can we forget I said anything?"

"About?"

"The hand..." His smile cut me off mid-sentence. He was being a good sport.

God, he was a nice guy.

"Thanks."

"Mind if I hold your hand a while longer?"

"No." I drew the O out curious why he'd want to hold my hand.

"Thanks, the turbulence can get a little scary." He shuddered then winked.

Now he was being cute and holy shit I didn't think it was possible for a man who looked as big and tough as Kyle to ever be described as cute, but there he was, mock shuddering and winking. Totally cute.

"Just as long as your palms don't sweat. If they do, you're on your own, pal."

"Noted." His peal of laughter took me by surprise.

Kyle no longer looked cute, he looked downright sexy. And to make matters even weirder I couldn't stop staring at the way the muscles in his neck were contracting, how his perfect, white teeth were on display, how his powerful body shook with hilarity. I also couldn't deny the sound, the feel of him laughing had wreaked havoc on my girly bits. They were tingling and had woken up in a way I couldn't ignore. It went beyond the wetness I'd felt between my legs and straight to need.

Thankfully the conversation flowed back to idle chitchat. Though it had taken awhile for me to get my head back into the conversation. But once I could concentrate again we'd mostly talked about food in different places around the world. We'd both traveled a lot.

Him more than me, but he didn't have time to explore like I had. There were some countries we'd had in common like Albania, Liberia, and Kosovo. But he'd been to more places in the Middle East than I had. And I'd been to more Eastern Europe and Asian countries than he had.

He was thoughtful when he spoke about other cultures and even though he'd been to these countries to fight a war, he didn't paint the local countrymen with a broad brush. He was careful with his words and clear he was there to fight terrorism and radicals, not the innocent people trying to live their daily lives.

Kyle, however, had strong opinions about justice and protecting those who were unable to protect themselves.

I admired him and his resolve to stand up for those who couldn't do it for themselves. His resolution hadn't come from pity nor was it condescending. Kyle didn't think he was better or stronger than those he'd dedicated himself to protecting, he knew he'd simply been born with more opportunity.

And that wasn't sexy, it was *sexy* in an irresistible way that sucked so badly because in a few days I'd never seen him again.

"Tired?" he asked after I yawned for the second time.

"Sorry. I swear it's the motion of the plane, not the company," I told him. "I always sleep in cars and airplanes. Would you like me to switch seats with Declan so he can keep you company while I doze?"

I thought it was odd, though I hadn't commented when we boarded that Declan's assigned seat wasn't near ours. Or that Kyle was sitting next to me and not his friend.

"Sleep, Anaya. You'll need your rest. Once we land, it's doubtful you'll get much."

"Thank you," I whispered.

"For?"

"For the great conversation. These last few hours have been the first time I haven't thought about Timor-Leste or what happened. Part of me feels guilty I forgot but the other part of me is so grateful for the reprieve."

"It'll get easier," he told me. "The mind is a mysterious thing; it will heal if you give it time."

I nodded and asked, "But does your soul ever heal?"

"That I don't know," he answered honestly and I appreciated his candor.

I was learning quickly that Kyle didn't say shit just to say it and he certainly didn't say things just to smooth over an uncomfortable question. It was refreshing in a way I never thought it would be, considering I'd spent most of my life hiding from those I cared about and those who cared about me. I wasn't honest—I glossed over every uncomfortable question that had ever been asked. I had it down to a science and could move any conversation in any direction I wanted with practiced skill.

I lay my head back on the seat and closed my eyes, thinking about Kalee and the rebels. Would it ever get easier? Would my mind settle and stop playing an endless loop of that day and all the things I could've done differently? What if I hadn't hidden? What if I'd gone with Kalee and Piper to the orphanage? Could I have helped them? Together could we have saved more than the three little girls Piper selflessly protected?

I didn't think anything would ever heal my soul, but maybe if I could save some of the girls Amisha was abusing I could finally sleep at night.

Then I started thinking about how I needed to wise up. I couldn't entertain fanciful thoughts about Kyle and his sexy laugh or powerful body. I couldn't think about my body's reaction to him. I couldn't open up to him, I could never be honest the way he was. I couldn't imagine, or want, or dream, about anything. That wasn't my life. And Kyle didn't need me unloading years' worth of crazy on him.

He was a good man.

Too good for the likes of me.

* * *

I WOKE WITH A START. My head was resting on Kyle's shoulder and my hand quickly went to my mouth praying I wasn't drooling.

"I already wiped it off." His voice rumbled with humor.

"Huh?"

"The spit. I already wiped it off before it could drench my tee."

"Please tell me you're kidding," I whispered and closed my eyes.

"Yeah, I'm just joking with you." He chuckled, but this time my body shook with his, and it was so much better feeling it rather than just seeing it.

I was so stupid. I had to stop these thoughts before I embarrassed myself more than I already had.

I opened my eyes and focused on the book he was holding in his left hand. His right was still knitted with mine.

"Are you reading my book?" I asked unnecessarily as I could see part of the back cover.

"After your head landed on my shoulder, I couldn't reach down under the seat to grab mine out of my bag. Yours was already in the seat pocket so I grabbed it."

Oh. My. God.

"Um..."

"I didn't take you for a romance novel kinda gal. But then, I had no idea this kind of romance existed, or I would've picked one of these up a long time ago."

"Um...how much of that have you read?" I asked, dreading his answer.

I had no idea how long I'd been asleep but considering it looked like he was more than fifty percent done with the book it had to have been a while.

"Enough to know, this Susan Stoker woman just may be my favorite new author."

Oh. My. God. He didn't just say that.

"I'll email her, I'm sure she'll love knowing a former SEAL likes her work."

His broad shoulders continued to shake and try as I might, I couldn't stop the tingling.

"Do you know her?" he asked. I glanced up and his brow arched. Wow, that looked good on him, too.

"What? No. I was kidding."

"Have you read this book?"

"Um, yeah. It's one of my favorites."

"That water rescue at the beginning was intense. The hero subscribes to my brand of justice. Straight up, slices the asshole's finger off then starts the interrogation."

I thought about the scene in question and grinned. I could totally picture Kyle as a romance novel hero. Actually, he was a real-life

hero. Jesus, what was wrong with me? I'd gone bat shit crazy—now I was comparing Kyle to my book boyfriends. The only kind of boyfriends I had because I was damaged and learned no man wanted damaged. Not even good ones like Kyle.

"Only I wouldn't have left the woman in San Francisco," he continued.

"Why not? They didn't think she was in danger," I asked.

"Because he obviously had a thing for her."

"What should he have done? Tossed her over his shoulder caveman style and taken her back to the mountains?"

"That's one option." I could hear the teasing in his voice, but I still trembled at the thought of Kyle tossing me over his shoulder carrying me off to his mountain home to love me forever. "The end was creepy as fuck. All those people in the cages. Who thinks up shit like that?"

"Susan." I laughed. "She always has great twists. In this one book the bad guy was hiding in the heroine's house. I was so freaked out after I read it, I was so happy I lived in an apartment or I may've had to nail the attic door shut." I shivered thinking about some crazy person hiding in my house, then something hit me. "You read the whole book?"

I studied the paperback and it was open to the middle.

"Yeah."

"Then why is the book still open?"

"Just skimming over it again." Kyle cleared his throat and he sounded almost embarrassed.

"You wouldn't happen to be rereading the sex scenes, would you?" I teased, and my face heated at my question. I was grateful my head was still on his shoulder and I was looking at the book so he couldn't see my face.

"What? They're hot."

Oh. My. God. He was. I would've laughed if I wasn't so shocked.

"I normally skip those parts when I'm reading in public."

"Really?" He drew the word out. "Is there a specific reason why?"

"Like you said, they're hot."

I was telling the truth and I'd learned never to read a Susan Stoker sex scene in public. Those were saved for the privacy of my own home.

We were both silent for a moment before Kyle said, "Maybe you should close your eyes and try to get some more sleep."

"Why?" I asked even though I was still tired, and his suggestion sounded great.

"Either that or we need to change the subject." His tone was gruff, and I could swear his voice had grown deeper.

"What subject?"

Kyle groaned before he mumbled, "Sex."

He closed the book and laid it on his lap, causing my eyes to follow. Now I was wondering what he was trying to cover up with my paperback. And if he was hiding what I thought he was, how did I feel about my favorite book resting against his crotch while he had a hard-on? I didn't have to think on it too hard because I really, really, liked the idea a lot. And that was a whole new level of psychotic.

Don't go there, Anaya.

"Sleep sounds like a good idea," I muttered.

"Sweet dreams, Anaya." Now his voice wasn't just gruff, it was thick with lust. I may not have a bunch of experience with men, but I knew what turned on sounded like, and Kyle sounded turned on.

I didn't think my dreams would be sweet, they'd undoubtedly be filled with hot sex. Not that I had firsthand knowledge about what hot sex was, but a girl could dream.

I closed my eyes thinking about the book Kyle had read, and could easily picture myself as the heroine. But in my version, Kyle was my mountain hero. He was my lethal mercenary. And the sex wouldn't be hot, it'd be wild and out of control.

My breath caught in my lungs and my muscles seized.

Again, what in the world was wrong with me? Why was I torturing myself? It had been years, and I mean, many, *many* years since I'd had sex. Now I was fantasizing about a man I just met? One whose sole purpose was to protect me. One who had zero interest in me. One who I needed to stop thinking about altogether—but most especially about wishing we could have hot, wild, and out of control sex. Which wasn't even an option for so many reasons it was sad. Even if he offered it to me, I couldn't do it because I was a freak who couldn't stand being touched.

God, why was I so screwed up?

I needed to get my head on straight before things became awkward.

CHAPTER 4

THANK FUCK, we were off that plane.

Sitting next to Anaya for the last twenty-five hours had been brutal.

Brutal for my throbbing dick. Brutal on my nervous system. Pure torture.

She was as sweet and funny as she was beautiful.

But it was the last ten that had been truly painful. I needed a cold shower STAT. I didn't know for sure, but I was almost positive a hard-on lasting more than two hours required medical attention. Ten hours with my dick at half-mast had probably caused permanent damage. Which would be a crying shame because after all the fantasizing I'd done, I had it on good authority Anaya would be insanely hot in bed.

I blamed my current state on that damn book. After I relieved myself of my problem, I was drafting a strongly worded email to that Susan Stoker woman. She needed to include a warning label on the cover. Better yet, a fucking paragraph in the beginning about not reading in public or, most especially while sitting next to a beautiful woman who already has you tied in knots.

Perhaps Susan should market her books to old geezers who couldn't get erections. Fuck the little blue pill. She'd make bank and put big pharmas out of business.

I never should've admitted to rereading the sex scenes, yet I'd been a dumb fuck, and I'd even been stupid enough to utter the word sex out loud. She'd thought because her face was tipped down, I couldn't see the blush creeping over her flesh. She'd been incorrect.

I may not have been able to see it on her cheeks, but I sure as fuck saw it grace her cleavage. Which had been another problem, she had big tits, they were not easy to hide, and the V neck shirt she was wearing showcased her ample breasts, and when the mounds started to pinken my mouth watered. Actual saliva pooled in my mouth as I thought of holding them in my hands and tasting her nipples.

Then Anaya had agreed she, too, thought the sex was hot, and it was all over. My cock had jerked in my cargos and the throbbing hadn't stopped. I could honestly say, I'd never been so turned on sitting next to a woman. Especially next to a woman I hadn't even touched. And a friendly hand hold wasn't considered touching—not in my book.

Though to Anaya the simple touch seemed to be a big deal. To the degree in which she'd admitted to walling herself off concerned me. And her reasons for doing so made me feel like a dirty prick for fantasizing about her.

I needed to cut this shit out. Quick, fast, and in a hurry before I freaked her out. We were in Timor-Leste on a mission and that did not include me getting in her pants no matter how badly I wanted to see if the reality of her lived up to what my imagination had conjured.

"How far away is the hotel?" Anaya asked.

"Zane put us up in a house," Dec answered.

"A house?"

"Yes. It's more secure than a hotel. It's only a five-minute drive from the airport."

"But that puts us almost thirty minutes from Amisha's. She lives on the other side of the city."

Declan turned from the line of taxis to Anaya. Before he could give her shit about questioning him, I stepped in.

"We don't want to stay close to her for lots of reasons. One being we stand out, and she'll likely recognize you."

"I didn't think of that," Anaya mumbled.

"That's why we're here, it's our job to think of the things you wouldn't," I told her, leaving out the unsavory part of the job, which was to take the woman out if necessary.

"Right."

Thankfully the taxi ride to the house was quick and silent. I used that time to calm my nerves and shove all dirty thoughts about

Anaya into the dark recesses of my mind where they belonged.

When we arrived at the two-bedroom bungalow on the beach I was happy to see it was well-kept. Though it was tucked away with trees and foliage on two sides, it certainly wasn't secure and the trees provided a lot of coverage for anyone wanting to hide.

"Goddamn," Dec mumbled, taking in the scenery and likely thinking the same thing I was.

"We've stayed in worse," I reminded him.

"One of us is going to have to stay up and take watch." He said what I was thinking. "You're up first, since you and sleeping beauty snoozed on the plane."

I ignored Dec's dig, hoping I wouldn't have to have a conversation with my friend about laying off Anaya.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Declan. Was I supposed to stay awake for twenty-five hours and patrol the aircraft?"

Declan's eyes narrowed and much to my surprise Anaya didn't wilt. She stood her ground, shoulders back and standing tall. And damn if that wasn't sexy as fuck.

"You know, you seem to have a problem with me. Instead of the passive-aggressive bullshit, you should just come right out and tell me what your issues are. It will make the next week so much easier," she finished.

"Anaya, if I had a problem with you, believe me I'd tell you. I'm not passive-aggressive, I'm simply aggressive. If my attitude offends you, I suggest you toughen up, because if you cannot handle me, there's no way you're up for what's getting ready to happen."

"Toughen up? You're kidding, right?"

"Not even a little bit."

Fuck. This conversation was deteriorating fast.

"Dec—"

"Don't start, Kyle. You know I'm right. You know what we're going to walk in on, and we cannot have her dissolving into tears, or worse, freeze up and panicking. The only reason she's here is because Zane agreed with Emerson and we need a woman to handle the girls."

Declan was correct. We'd tried to form a plan where Anaya stayed safely tucked away back in the States and Declan and I came alone. But Emerson was adamant that we needed a woman, or the girls wouldn't come with us. We didn't need the commotion it

would cause. When Thad had refused to allow Emerson to come with us without him tagging along as well, we had no choice but to bring Anaya.

Thad and the rest of the team were needed in Maryland. The fact that Zane Lewis had allowed Declan and I to come to Timor-Leste for a week when the company was under threat, was a testament to how much he respected Tex and Ace.

Ace had asked us to come as a personal favor and Tex had provided the intel ensuring our trip would be quick. But we were expected back at HQ in seven days. Dismantling the Omni Group was top priority at the moment.

"I'm certainly glad Zane and Emerson had agreed," Anaya threw sass. "Whoever they are. But me staying behind was never an option. I know what we'll be walking into, Declan. I'm well aware how those girls are being treated."

"You are? Have you ever seen a traumatized victim after she's been brutalized? The dull, dead look in her eyes? The fear? The stench of evil that lingers on her skin? Because I don't think you have."

"Why are you kidding me with that shit?" Anaya ground out. "You know damn well what I've seen. I know you did a background check on me. So, you know, it means you're being cruel on purpose."

Declan was way out of line and when my gaze zeroed in on him, I could see he knew he'd taken it too far. He'd allowed his mouth to engage before he remembered who he was speaking to. It was a supremely fucked thing to do.

"Anaya—" Dec had softened his tone but it was too late, he was going to get the hot side of her tongue.

"Don't," she cut him off. "You don't get to backpedal now. I may not have been one of the girls that was *brutalized* in the way you're talking about, but I was taken against my will. I was auctioned off. I was held in a cage right next to them, waiting for my turn. So, don't you ever tell me again I don't know. That stench still lingers on me, it never washes off. So, you can take your bullshit about tears and panicking and shove it up your ass until you choke on it."

Anaya stormed out of the room, and when she slammed a door, Declan flinched. His face was a hard mask of remorse.

"That shit will never fucking happen again," I told him, fighting to hold myself back from saying something I'd regret.

“Don’t—”

“Declan, you know I’ve got nothing but respect for you. I trust you with my life. But what you just did was so fucking jacked, I don’t know what to say except you need to pull your head out of your goddamn ass and admit this mission has you tweaked. As long as you keep denying it, you’re gonna keep twisting yourself in knots and saying stupid shit. It’s not fair to Anaya and *you’re* the one who’s gonna get us killed.

“I’ve never asked for details and I’m not now. But we all know what happened to you and Violet. It’s not a secret the two of you were separated after your parents died. She was adopted early, you were not. It doesn’t take a prodigy to figure out you spent some time in the system. I can’t imagine all the ways that fucks with a kid. But it’s not Anaya’s fault you can’t deal, and *that* will be the last time you take your shit out on her.”

I didn’t wait for him to respond, I turned and headed for the door.

As much as I wanted to go to Anaya—and I *really* wanted to chase after her—it wasn’t my place and I didn’t think she’d appreciate my intrusion after that shitshow. She needed a moment to pull herself together and I needed to calm down before I took a swing at my friend and team leader. And seeing her destroyed wouldn’t help my cause.

The perimeter needed to be checked and the fresh, salty air was what I needed to keep my emotions in check. Anaya was tough. She was strong and resilient and didn’t need me, but damn if I didn’t want her to. That was something else I needed to do, figure out a way to permanently shove these crazy feelings into a box and forget about them.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, I pulled it out, checked the number, then I swiped to accept the call.

“Smith,” I answered.

“Kyle?”

“Yep. Everything okay, Violet?”

“How is he?”

I should’ve expected this call. Violet Cain loved her twin brother, and from what I’d heard, she’d been worried about his state of mind for a long time. After the clusterfuck I’d just witnessed, she had a reason to worry.

"Listen—"

"Please, Kyle. I'm not asking you to betray his trust, but I read the mission brief. I know where you guys are going, and I know it's gotta be fucking with my brother's head. I have to know how he's handling it."

Of course she'd read the mission details. After she'd married Jaxon, Zane had hired her. Partly because Zane was a freak about keeping family close where he could keep a watchful eye on everyone, but also because her experience with the CIA brought value to the Red Team and Z Corps as a whole. She was wicked smart and a damn good intel analyst.

She also had a bullshit meter that was second to only Zane's—she'd sniff out a lie in two-point-five seconds.

"Not well."

"I figured," she sighed.

"He just slammed Anaya and ground her into the dirt. You have any idea what happened to him? I'm gonna need something if I want to run interference between these two."

"No. I've never looked into his past, beyond what I did when I okayed his clearance for the CIA. But, admittedly, the dossier I had was complete bullshit, or I would've found our connection."

I couldn't imagine how Violet had felt when she found out the brother she didn't remember having sat across from her as she interviewed him for a long-term undercover mission with the CIA. Talk about a kick in the teeth. And what was worse, Declan had remembered her. He had known Violet was his twin sister and had chosen not to disclose the information to her.

"And since Zane hired him?"

"Zane may have a real file on him, but I've never asked, and I've never looked into him. It feels like a violation of trust. When my brother's ready, he'll tell me."

"Maybe it's time—"

"No," Violet snapped. "He'll bolt. He'll never forgive that kind of betrayal and we'll all lose him."

Fuck it all to hell, she was right. But I was desperate. I hated seeing the pain in my friend's eyes and I didn't think Anaya could handle another blow. And she certainly didn't deserve it.

Back to square one.

"I'll keep my eye on him."

"I'd appreciate that. Zane said he'd fly over if you need him. He's worried, too."

"We're fine. How's the investigation going into Omni?"

"Good. Tex and Garrett hit pay dirt. Ashaki Maloof got to Emilio Ruiz and convinced him she's his best way out of Omni. Emilio is still seething his daughter was targeted for a kidnapping attempt. I think he's feeling vulnerable and that's why he wants to extradite his family from Omni ties."

Ashaki Maloof was an undercover CIA agent. The team was still on the fence about her, on the outside she looked way too cozy with the bad guys. Which was the point of undercover work, but even to the trained eye it had looked like she turned. Then there was the fact she'd disappeared and had failed to check in. Now she'd resurfaced and had dumped intel.

Emilio Ruiz was also worrisome. He was up to his ass in Omni business. And he may've been disgruntled that someone in the organization had arranged for his daughter to be kidnapped, but the man was far from stupid. He was the second wealthiest man in his home country of Mexico, he didn't find success by making off-the-cuff decisions based on emotion.

Then there was Omni. There was no way the group would allow dissension in their ranks. The secret group was comprised of the richest men in the world. They'd infiltrated the government and made behind the scenes plays that would further ensure their businesses and power would grow. It was doubtful Emilio would seriously try to leave the organization. If he felt vulnerable now, if he left, he'd be feeling something else entirely. Or typically, he wouldn't be feeling much of anything considering he'd be dead.

"And Tex and Garrett verified Maloof's intel? Ruiz isn't dumb, he'll understand if he tries to fuck over Omni, he and his family won't be breathin' for very long."

"Tex verified but no one's running headfirst into this blind. Ashaki's intel is good, but Harry Landry screwed up and we hit gold."

Harry Landry was a dirtbag of the highest order. He peddled in drug and flesh. Thad's wife Emerson had dealt with him in the past but unfortunately she'd left him alive when she was done with him.

"What'd he do?" I asked.

"Arranged a shipment of girls on an unsecured line. You'll never guess where from."

"If you tell me Timor-Leste, I'm going to tell you it's a setup."

"Nope. Cambodia. Don't be surprised if Zane reroutes your flight home. You and Dec are the closest."

"No goddamn way. We'll have Anaya with us."

"She'll catch a flight back to the States first."

There was zero chance I was leaving Anaya to fly home on her own after this was over. Not only would the rescue dredge up painful memories for her, it would be dangerous. Even if we took Amisha out, there would be a lot of people who would be unhappy about their steady stream of income and girls getting cut off.

"Not happening. I won't leave her unprotected."

"Kyle—"

"No. You can tell Zane that Anaya stays with us. Period."

"I'll tell him, but you know Z, he's gonna have a shit hemorrhage."

My boss likely would have a few choice words for me.

"Never mind. Don't mention it to him. I'll tell him when he calls."

"I'd appreciate that," she sighed in relief. "Is there a reason why you're acting so weird?"

"Weird?"

"Yeah, about this woman. She lived in Timor-Leste for six months, she knows the area. And from what I read about her, she's used to flying around the world on her own. She doesn't seem like the type of woman who needs to be taken care of."

Anaya wasn't that type of woman, and she'd likely not be happy I was treating her like she was, yet I still wasn't going to let her out of my sight until I knew she was safe and sound back in the United States. At least that was the story I was telling myself and it was far easier to go with that than admit I simply wanted to be around her.

"Is there something more going on?" Violet asked when I didn't answer her fast enough.

"Nope. Everything's gravy. I just don't feel comfortable with her flying back alone."

And I didn't want to think about why the thought of her leaving and me never seeing her again had my gut twisting.

"Right," Violet muttered, her tone full of unasked questions. "You'll let me know about my brother?"

"No, I won't babysit him and check in with you, but I will take his back if he needs it."

"But—"

"I know you're worried. But he's a big boy and you know he'd be pissed if I was keeping tabs on him and checking in with you."

"Fine. You're right," she huffed.

"We'll call in after we hit the city tonight."

I disconnected and shoved my phone in my back pocket.

"My sister?" Declan asked from behind me.

It was disturbing how quiet he could be for such a large man.

"She's concerned about your mental health." I smirked. "I assured her you're the asshole you always are, and your disposition is that of a starved crocodile. She seemed to be satisfied with my description."

"Fuck. She's pregnant, she doesn't need to be worried about me." Dec scrubbed his hands over his face.

Without warning Dec did something he'd never done, he shared. "When I was a kid, about seven, I lived in a foster home that was so wicked, I swear at seven I could feel it. I just knew. There were two of us boys sharing a room, next to us there was another bedroom, four girls lived in there. Every weekend my foster father would leave with one of the girls and be gone from Friday afternoon to Sunday night. No one talked about it, no one questioned where they went, no one asked why he chose the girl he did. It was business as usual. But one day the other boy who was older than me asked one of the girls where they went. Natalie refused to tell him. But not only that, even at my age I could feel the fear rollin' off her.

"I'd been there almost six months when I came home from school and she'd hanged herself in my bedroom. First time I ever saw a dead person." Declan stopped and shook his head, disgust clear as day. "I'll never forget her hanging there. The cops came, the ME, the house was swarmin'. None of the other girls would talk, until a week later when the social worker and the police came back. Natalie was pregnant. She was thirteen when she killed herself. The five of us were removed that day and the Petersons were arrested."

Declan paused and blew out a long, tortured breath. "Anaya reminds me of Natalie. Same color hair, same soft eyes even though they've seen more than they should. It doesn't help that Anaya was

thirteen when she was kidnapped and trafficked. All of this is dredging up shit I long ago buried."

"Do you think it might be time to stop burying it and start dealing with it?"

"Fuck no. Once you break the seal on the vault all sorts of ghosts start making their way to the surface."

"And Violet? You ever gonna open up to her?"

"That's a hell no. She had a good family who adopted her, she doesn't need to dwell on my shit. She has Jaxon, they live a good life, and they're working on giving me nieces and nephews."

"But—"

"Serious as shit, Kyle, I don't want her knowing anything. I didn't live through shit to dirty my sister up. I'll talk to Anaya and I'll keep my issues to myself."

Ugly jealousy reared its head. I had no claim on Anaya, but I'd seen it once before when Declan was talking about her and I just saw it again—he admired her.

"If you need someone to talk to about all that shit, I'm here to listen," I told him.

"Preciate it. But I'm straight."

No he was not straight, he wasn't even bent, he was fuckin' broken and refused to ask for help.

Declan took off back toward the house and I stood on the beach a little while longer staring out at the water. Dec's childhood had been hellacious, I didn't think his time in the CIA had been any better. Some of my earlier anger toward him waned, and I hoped to God he'd reach out instead of bottling it up.

Declan Crenshaw was a ticking time bomb waiting to explode and I wanted Anaya clear of the blast.

CHAPTER 5

I WAS HALF-SULKING, half-berating myself for lashing out the way I had.

I'd said too much.

I hated thinking about that time in my life and every time I did, my skin crawled. I could remember every last detail down to what the metal cage had felt like as the bars dug into my sides when I tried to lie down. I remember what the room looked like, what each girl had sounded like as she sobbed, what they'd said, how much the man who bought me had paid.

My life had been worth a whopping eighty-five thousand dollars. I was thirteen and untouched. My price was higher than the others. I was told I was special—a treasure.

But the truth was, I was a nobody. No one missed a foster kid when they wound up gone.

The knock at the door made me jump. I knew I was hiding out but I didn't want to face Kyle. I slowly walked to the door, needing every step to pull myself together.

Shockingly, Declan was standing there instead of Kyle.

"May I come in?"

I absolutely did not want to go for round two with the man. He was infuriating but I stepped to the side and allowed him to enter anyway.

His gaze went around the plain room. It was ugly and bland with wood paneling covering the bottom half of the wall, the top half was painted white, and the trim and closet doors painted a glossy black.

The color scheme made no sense and it left your eye fighting for a focal point when you added in the baby blue and white comforter.

"Interesting décor," Declan noted.

"Is that what you came in for? To discuss the homeowner's decorating style?"

His brow creased and he sighed. "I deserved that."

I didn't respond. What he deserved was a kick in the balls for being an asshole, but I kept my retort to myself. I had to work with him over the next few days and there was already enough tension between us. Threatening physical violence wouldn't do anything but add to it.

"I owe you an apology."

My face must've registered surprise because Declan sighed again. "I was a complete douche and let my personal shit get the better of me."

He paused and once again glanced around the room. When his eyes came back to mine, they were unguarded and troubled. "My parents died when I was a kid. With no family to take us, my sister and I were put in the system and separated. I guess the social workers thought it would be easier to adopt us out individually. Not to mention, there were no state run orphanages that allowed boys and girls to live together. Violet was adopted quickly. I was not."

Holy shit.

"I'm sorry, Declan. How old were you when your parents died?"

"Three, just like you."

My body jerked and my eyes drifted closed. The funny thing about that age was, you couldn't remember but you could. I had some vague recollections but not enough to know if they were actual memories.

"Damn," I whispered.

"I know it doesn't make it right, but I thought I owed you an explanation. When we first met, I didn't think I'd have an issue with this assignment. But the more intel we got on the orphanage, the more shit started creeping up. Things I long ago buried."

"I get it," I told him.

"I suppose you do. What happened earlier won't happen again," he vowed.

I figured he meant what he said, but trauma has a way of bubbling to the surface at the worst times. The tiniest things could trig-

ger a memory and you're left fighting to push it back.

"If this is too much—"

"It's not. I have it under control. If you're worried about us keeping you safe, you don't have to be."

"I'm not worried about me. I'm worried about you and what being at the orphanage will bring up."

His lips tipped up into a sad smile.

"Preciate your concern, especially after I was such a twat, but I'll be fine. How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine as long as I don't think about it," I told him honestly. "It was a long time ago. I'd like to think I've moved on."

"You and me both." He chuckled without humor. "But we both know the venom is just under the surface eating away at our insides, fighting to get out. Time doesn't erase the memories." He was right, time didn't. And I didn't think there was anything, time or otherwise, that would dull the horror. "I'm glad you were rescued in time."

"Sorry to interrupt, but we need to talk about tonight," Kyle said from the doorway.

Declan's eyes cut to Kyle and with a nod he agreed, "You're not interrupting. We were done anyway."

I was grateful Kyle had shown up when he had, I needed to stop thinking about the past, stop with the idiotic daydreams about Kyle, and start concentrating on helping the girls escape Amisha.

I followed the men into the living room that was no better than the bedroom. With so many different patterns it was enough to make you dizzy. Only instead of white on the walls above the wood paneling this room was Pepto-Bismol pink. No joke. Bright pink that made no sense and matched nothing in the room and made the brown couch look dingier than it already did.

A map was spread out on the coffee table and I knelt next to it to get a better look. Kyle sat on one couch and Declan took the one opposite from him.

"We're here." Kyle pointed. "We'll take the direct route through the center of the city to Amisha's house. But our egress will be around the city, we'll zigzag our way back here. Each time we go to recon we'll take a different route, both there and back, but for tonight we can go direct."

Declan picked up one of the aerial images I'd provided and studied it.

"Tex confirmed the building across the way from the house is abandoned, but we can expect transients. I still think it's our best option to watch the house. Unless you have an idea."

I looked up from the map to find Declan looking at me.

"You're asking me?"

"You're the one that pointed out you've spent time in the city. We haven't. Do you have any suggestions?"

"I do but it's risky," I answered.

"Hit us with it," Kyle encouraged.

"There's an apartment building here." I pointed to the map. "From the roof you have a better view of the front of the house. You're right about the transients and we have to take into consideration they'll talk. No doubt they won't give us trouble when we're there, but come morning they'll sell us out. We have a better chance sneaking around the apartment building unseen."

"Have you been on the roof?" Kyle asked.

"Yeah. There's an access door on the third floor. If we use the apartment building, I suggest we split up—"

"No fucking way," Kyle interrupted. "We stay together."

"Here me out before you shoot me down. If someone sees the three of us together, we're basically screwed. But there's four sets of staircases. If we split up and each use a different one, meeting on the third floor, if someone happens to see *one* of us, it wouldn't be so alarming."

"She's right," Declan said. "We'll use the apartment building. What else can you tell us?"

Kyle didn't look pleased as I told them everything I remembered about the three-story building. Amisha's house wasn't in the best area of the city, but neither was it in the ghetto. The apartments were decent but not fancy and they lacked security, which was perfect.

"I'll go up first and clear the third floor and check out the roof. When I'm done, you send up Anaya, and make your way to the south side stairwell," Declan told Kyle.

With a sharp nod Kyle conceded. I started to feel funny, Declan had agreed flat out my idea was a good one, and even though Kyle didn't want to split up he, too, had seen the benefits of the higher vantage point and he'd given in. They were both watching me with

something that looked a lot like respect, and the longer they did it the more I came to understand the funny feeling that was swirling around in my stomach felt a lot like happiness. I felt useful, respected—they'd heard me out and didn't have a problem switching their plan to mine. It felt good to be considered, to be useful, to be heard, but mostly to be valued. But it was Kyle and the warmth in his gaze that made me the happiest.

"Tonight is recon only," Declan reminded me.

"Okay."

"Seriously, Anaya, no matter what we see we do not engage. Before we make our move, we need to know the players and see if there's a schedule Amisha keeps."

"I know."

"Then why do you look like I need to be worried?" Declan pushed.

"I said I understood, not that I liked it. Every night that goes by, those girls are being hurt."

The happiness I was feeling fled and all that was left was pain and disgust.

"They are." Declan's tone had softened. "But you have to be alive to save them. And if we rush in before we have all the intel, we need..."

Declan let his sentence hang. I knew what he was saying, I didn't need him to finish.

"I get it."

"Good. We straight, Kyle?"

"Yep," he clipped.

"Great. I'm gonna grab a snack and shower and we'll hit the road in an hour." Declan stood.

"What about a car?" I asked. "We took a taxi here."

Declan smiled wide and shook his head in amusement. "We'll borrow one."

When Declan left the room, I turned to Kyle and inquired, "Did he mean we'll steal one?"

"It's not stealing if you return it."

"Um..." I didn't know what to say.

Kyle chuckled and smiled. "Don't worry, we know what we're doing."

"I hope so," I grumbled.

I wasn't sure stealing a car was the best plan, but I had no choice but to go with it. And if Kyle said they had it under control, I trusted him.

"Are you hungry? We're gonna be out most of the night. If you wanna eat you better do it now."

Food? Was he kidding? I was already in knots and thinking about Amisha and her house of horrors made me want to throw up. The last thing I needed was food in my belly.

"I'm not hungry."

He studied me for a long time and looked like he wanted to say something but he refrained.

"Everything good with Dec?" he asked instead of pressing me about eating.

"Yeah. He apologized and explained."

Kyle's forehead creased and his shock couldn't be missed. "Good."

"Does that surprise you?"

"Yeah, Declan is a vault of secrets. He doesn't share and he rarely apologizes. Glad he did though. You didn't need the shit he shoveled at you earlier."

Again, Kyle looked like he wanted to say more but he stopped himself. I wished he would've told me what he was thinking but I wouldn't ask. And he was right, I didn't deserve Declan's attitude. But now that I understood why Declan had acted like he had a pole shoved up his ass I couldn't blame him. People dealt with their emotions in all sorts of ways. Declan's response was to lash out when he couldn't deal with his, mine was to wall myself off as soon as I started to feel something.

Neither were necessarily right, or healthy, but you had to do what you had to do to keep the demons at bay.

* * *

DECLAN HAD INDEED HOTWIRED A CAR, and to my surprise the junker made it across the city. Now, the thing starting again to get us home was up for debate.

Declan had already entered the building, leaving Kyle and me near the entrance I was going to use when there was movement on

the pathway.

Before I understood what was happening, Kyle had me pressed up against the building, his big body concealing mine. My insides seized and desperation had edged out the fear. Desperation that was so fierce I couldn't push it back but neither could I make my legs work to flee.

I was paralyzed.

"Breathe, Anaya," he whispered.

I hadn't realized I was holding my breath, but when I exhaled my lungs burned.

"That's it," he cajoled. "Just relax. I'm not going to hurt you."

I was beyond comprehending his words. We were connected from hip to chest. But his hands were flat against the brick exterior. I was trapped. There was nowhere to go—not that I could get my muscles to work to fight him off.

"You're safe, Anaya. I need you to breathe or you're going to pass out. I'm not going to hurt you."

He was still whispering, his head was lowered and his mouth was close to my ear. So close I could feel his minty breath on my skin. Too close.

I tried to exhale again but panic started to bubble up. Kyle had me boxed in and I hadn't been ready for it.

"Look at me," he snapped.

I couldn't move. I was completely frozen. Shit, I was doing exactly what I'd told Declan I wouldn't do.

One of Kyle's hands moved under my chin and gently lifted my face, forcing me to meet his stare. And what I saw wasn't making it any easier to breathe. There was so much concern and understanding now I wanted run away for different reasons. He knew. There was no missing what a freak I was. We couldn't pretend this away like we'd done on the plane. I couldn't change the subject and steer us to something more comfortable. My crazy had slapped him in the face and no amount of him being nice about the situation would ever make him forget.

"It's almost over. Just look at me. I'm not going to hurt you."

His hazel eyes were full of sincerity but there was a hint of menace that lurked in the shadows. The sincerity hurt my heart. He was trying his best to calm me down, and damn if that wasn't embarrass-

ing. I was thirty-two and he was treating me like I was five. My humiliation knew no bounds.

I heard feet shuffling and a man mumbled something in Tetum about it being a disgrace to have sex in public.

Kyle's body shifted, keeping me out of sight from the passersby, and my muscles ached from straining. I was putting in an ungodly amount of effort not to fight to get away but even more not to pull him closer. Which was the most ridiculous thought, ever. I was freaked out and scared, yet I wanted to feel more of Kyle, and considering he was already pressed against me was even more asinine. I'd lost my mind. Total crazy person.

"Almost, Anaya. You're doing good. Just keep looking at me."

Doing good? I was on the verge of a full-blown anxiety attack. If Kyle hadn't been talking to me, I would've given in. If it'd been Declan who had me against a wall, I would've freaked out.

Finally, he started to pull back. But he was still pressing his hips into mine to keep me steady and I was grateful for the support, but I missed the warmth of his chest against mine. See? Totally bat shit crazy. My legs felt like jelly and my head was still swimming with fear and something else I couldn't put my finger on and never wanted to.

I didn't want to think about how in the middle of an anxiety attack I was thinking about how I liked Kyle's big strong body pressed against mine. Because if I thought about why that was, and how it was possible I was feeling that, I'd realize I needed to be committed to the looney bin. And I liked my freedom even if it meant the population at large had no idea they were consorting with a psycho when I was around.

I felt his phone vibrating in his pocket, and he pulled it out and answered without breaking eye contact.

"Yeah?" Kyle paused then spoke again. "Give us five minutes and I'll send her up." Another pause. "We need a minute, someone walked by. As soon as I know we're clear she'll be up."

He pocketed his phone and I wanted to thank him for not telling Declan about my come apart. It was bad enough Kyle had witnessed what happened.

"Take your time, Anaya. Just breathe, sweetheart. No one's gonna hurt you."

Sweetheart?

Then the craziness continued as I remained focused on his eyes, and in the low light the full moon provided, I memorized the dark green circle that highlighted the lighter green in the middle of his irises. His pupils were dilated, and I wondered how different his eyes would look if I could see more of their color.

My breathing started to even out and I felt steadier on my legs. But no less confused.

"Thank you," I murmured.

"I'm so damn sorry I scared you. I didn't have time to think, I just reacted. I would never hurt you."

"I know." And weirdly I did know Kyle wouldn't intentionally scare me. "I'm sorry I'm a basket case."

"Don't do that, Anaya. I took you by surprise and closed in on you. Of course you'd have that reaction. You barely know me and I'm twice your size."

I nodded, not wanting to explain that if it had been anyone else who'd done that to me, I would've come unglued and survival mode would've kicked in. I would've blown the whole operation. But more than that, I didn't want to him to move away from me. I wanted to feel his breath on my neck again, how good his body had felt against mine, how feeling that was so much better than him holding my hand. And I really didn't want to even think about why that was.

Since I'd never tell him any of that, instead I mumbled, "I'm okay now."

"Don't rush yourself. We have time."

He was back to being Mr. Nice Guy and I didn't know if I was grateful or if I wanted to scream at him.

"Really, I'm okay. Can we keep this little episode to ourselves?"

"I need to tell Declan, to be careful." I started to look away, but Kyle reached out, his warm hand going to my jaw, his thumb brushing my cheek. So feather light I wanted to tilt my face to feel more of him. He'd meant to stop me, to keep my attention focused on him. And he accomplished what he'd set out to do, only he had my attention in a whole other way.

"I wouldn't tell him," he continued, "if it wasn't a matter of safety. And I think you can imagine, Dec of all people will understand. I know you two didn't get off on the right foot, but he's a good guy. He won't judge you and he certainly would never hurt you."

Damn. He was right. About everything. Intellectually, I knew Declan would never hurt me, but if he touched me the way Kyle had, there was no telling how I'd react. Declan was not Kyle, there was no connection, there were no crazy fantasies, no wild thoughts about wanting to be close to him. But for the safety of the mission, Declan had to know even if I didn't want him to.

"It's embarrassing," I told him. "I'm a grown woman who can't be touched—"

"Stop. That's not true. I held your hand on the plane and I'm touching you now. You're a woman who doesn't like to be startled and manhandled. I think that's pretty normal."

He was being kind again, but we didn't have enough time for me to explain all the ways I was screwed up.

After a minute he asked, "You'll be okay if I step away?"

Knowing this was going to be my one and only chance to feel him this close, I wanted to tell him no. I wanted to savor this, memorize it, so I could remember it for the rest of my life. I never wanted to forget what it felt like to have Kyle's hand on my face, his eyes on mine, his hips pressed deep against mine, the intimacy of our position.

But now that the threat had passed and my anxiety had waned, he probably wanted to get as far away from me as he could and I couldn't blame him.

"Yeah."

He slowly stepped back, but his hand traveled down my arm and I memorized that, too. He clasped our hands together and he gave mine a squeeze.

"I'm serious, Anaya, you did great."

He was lying, I hadn't. But I gave him a nod, our moment over. Or should I say mine, since it was one-sided. He walked me to the door and opened it. We stepped inside the stairwell and he gestured for me to go up.

"I'll see you in a few minutes," he told me.

I stiffened my back, gathered my wits, and climbed the stairs.

"Come on, Anaya, you're stronger than this," I muttered to myself as I rounded the second floor.

I had to pull myself together before I screwed everything up and those girls were left to a life of misery.

CHAPTER 6

EVERY NERVE ENDING in my body tingled. I wasn't sure if it was from the feel of Anaya's body pressed against mine or if it was from her violent reaction to my proximity.

If I was being honest, it was from both, which made me a complete asshole.

I couldn't deny she'd felt right in my arms. But when her body had gone solid before she'd started to tremble, all sense of rightness faded and disgust at what had happened to her to make her so scared washed over me.

I'd read the police reports. She'd been held in a cage—that alone would've been enough to permanently scar someone—but to add to that, when she was let out of the metal box she'd been chained to a wall. She'd been held captive and not able to move. When I'd heard someone approaching, my only concern had been to shield Anaya and conceal our identities the best I could. I wasn't thinking about the consequences of me boxing her in. What kind of effect that would have on her mentally.

But even with all of that, I'd felt it, the moment her fear slid from her body. I saw the trust in her eyes, and it was then I knew I needed to step away. My body had a very strong reaction to her proximity, one I couldn't hide with my hips balancing her against the wall. The longer she stared up at me with her eyes soft and trusting the harder it was to keep my dick in check. She had no idea what she did to me. No clue how badly I'd wanted to kiss her.

"That's the fourth man in the last hour," Anaya grumbled, pulling me from my thoughts.

She was correct, four scumbags had entered the house in the last hour. Which meant we'd been on the rooftop a full sixty minutes and I was still thinking about what she'd felt like in my arms. What I needed to do, but found it impossible, was to concentrate on the job.

Declan was taking pictures with a telephoto lens to send back to Garrett, our intel specialist, so he could run the men through facial recognition. Anything Garrett couldn't find, Tex would. Anaya and I were scanning the area using night vision binoculars. The full moon provided enough light that even though everything was tinged in green it looked like it was daylight. We could see every detail crystal clear.

"Sucks to say, but the more men we can ID the better. And it seems Amisha spaces out their arrivals to every fifteen minutes," Dec noted.

"Privacy?" Anaya asked.

"That'd be my guess."

"But no one has left yet."

Her statement lingered. None of us wanting to voice the reason why. Likely the girls were rented by the hour, or increments thereof. There was no way to know for sure, but the first man had entered on the hour, the next fifteen after, and so on. But no one had exited.

We were coming up on a new hour, so we'd know soon.

Another car pulled up and I watched the man inside. He remained in his car and it looked as though he'd checked his watch before he sat back and waited.

"The door's opening," Anaya whispered.

A man stepped onto the porch and looked both ways before he headed to his car.

"You think he knows someone's in their car waiting?" she asked.

"No idea. But probably. Sick fuck wouldn't want to miss a minute of his time."

She didn't comment on my answer, likely because there was nothing to say. I was right. The men might not want to run into each other in the house, but they had to know their disgusting proclivities weren't a secret from the other men who visited Amisha's.

"That's the first man that went in. Fifty-five minutes," Declan muttered. "Fucking pig."

Once again, silence fell as we continued to watch.

* * *

ON THE DRIVE across the city, my stomach churned and for once it had nothing to do with Declan's erratic driving.

Over the last five hours we'd watched twelve men enter and leave Amisha's.

Twelve men who deserved a bullet to the forehead.

At midnight the last man had entered, but we'd stayed the fifth hour to watch the last man leave. It seemed Amisha was open four hours a night.

We had a minimum of three more nights of the shit. Just sitting on our hands watching, gathering intel.

"Maybe tomorrow—"

"Patience," Dec growled, cutting me off. "I don't wanna see that shit anymore than you. And I don't want to even think about what's going on. Detach, Kyle. We have to play this smart. We also have to figure out how and where the payoffs happen. There's no fucking way that's happening out in the open like that without serious greasing going on. Someone's on the take for sure. And I'd bet it's more than the Defense Force."

Goddamn, he was right. But I didn't like it one fucking bit.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead and turned to the back seat where Anaya was silently sitting. She looked pissed-off and shell-shocked.

"You holding it together?" I asked.

"Barely."

Her candor surprised me. I thought she'd try to cover up her revulsion and say she was fine.

"You did great tonight."

"That was horrific. I hated it. Every second of it. I can't stop thinking about—"

"You can't think about it. It'll tear you up inside. Because of you, in a few days those girls will be saved."

"Days, Kyle. Days. I hate this!" Her tiny hands were clenched into fists.

Declan made the last turn off the main road and cut the headlights.

"I'm gonna let you two off here, and go return the car."

He rolled to a stop in front of the driveway and waited for Anaya and me to exit the car. I pulled my sidearm out of my holster and scanned the area.

"Stay right next to me while I clear the house."

Without argument she plastered herself to my side and damn if that didn't feel good. And not only her trust but the feel of her. Every few steps her tits would graze my arm and I couldn't deny my cock liked it, too. All of it. I could honestly say, I'd never found a woman's trust arousing, but knowing Anaya gave it freely, woke something deep inside of me. It stirred to life a need to protect, to cherish. Things I'd seen in my teammates but had never felt.

By the time we'd made our way back to the living room, Declan was walking in the front door. But I still hadn't found a way to tamp down my racing thoughts. Thoughts that included Anaya in my bed. Under me. On top of me. Curled safely next to me.

"Perimeter is clear," he told me.

"I'm gonna take a shower," Anaya announced and headed down the hall.

I fought back a groan thinking about Anaya naked in the shower, warm water sluicing over her skin. Her rubbing soapy hands over her body, washing away the day's grime. How sexy she'd look with her hands above her head, washing her hair. I wanted to—no, *needed* to know—how sweet her nipples would taste. Christ, I could spend a good amount of time exploring her tits. Hours. By the time I'd get to the treasure between her legs I'd have her begging for more.

"What happened outside earlier?" Declan asked.

Five seconds ago, I would've said nothing could've pulled me out of my fantasy of a slippery and wet Anaya. But Dec's question did it. Gone were all thoughts of me tasting Anaya and watching her fall apart with my mouth latched onto her pussy.

Goddamn, I was a jackass.

Even though I told her I needed to talk to Dec about what happened, it still felt like a betrayal as I told him.

When I was done, Dec had a stony expression that said it all, but he still muttered a curse.

"She didn't fight me," I told him. "She didn't yell out, but she was jackhammering so fucking hard I was surprised her teeth weren't rattling. We're gonna hafta handle that with care, if either of us need to touch her."

"I saw you holding her hand on the plane," Dec said. There was no accusation in his tone, just curiosity.

"I didn't know she had issues then. I saw her pulling into herself and grabbed her hand on instinct. She told me she couldn't remember the last time someone had held her hand and she left hers in mine."

"It's good she seems somewhat comfortable with you. I'll keep my distance."

"I don't think that's what she wants. Hell, she didn't want me to tell you in the first place. But if something happens and one of us has to grab her, you have to know."

Dec nodded. "No, I get it, man. There's something inside of you that breaks when you've never been handled with kindness. It makes even the smallest touch hard to bear. Couple that with what happened to her. Can't say I blame her for keeping herself walled off."

It seemed Dec was in the mood to share so I pushed. "You have problems with people touching you?"

"Fuck yeah."

I'd only seen Declan and his sister together a few times, but as I thought about it, I'd never seen him hug her.

"Damn, brother, we've touched you. Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"Man, you don't touch me. You smack my arm and shake my hand."

"There's a difference?"

"Huge." Dec didn't look like he wanted to elaborate and I wasn't going to pry more than I had. "You're gonna have to be gentle with her," he continued.

"Say what?"

"Slow and gentle, Kyle, or she'll shut down on you."

Hell no, I did not want to have this conversation. I had enough crazy shit swirling around in my head, I didn't need more. What I did need was to figure out a way to stop thinking dirty thoughts about a woman who'd been through so much in her life she didn't need me piling more shit on top of her. If she was scared of me pressing her against a wall, she'd lose her mind if she knew all the ways I wanted to fuck her. She'd be freaked the hell out if she knew I wanted her to open up and let me in, tell me every secret she kept buried.

And she'd really have a panic attack if I told her there was a part of me that wanted to toss her over my shoulder like we'd talked about and carry her off, never to let her go.

But I couldn't have her, not like I wanted, not like I needed, so she'd never know how impressed I was with her strength, how sexy I thought she was when she was being brave. How fucking gorgeous I thought she was. And I'd certainly never tell her that my cock throbbed thinking about fucking her in the shower.

So knowing all of that, I played dumb and asked, "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Being as Declan was not stupid and had caught on to my play, and didn't call me out.

"Right. I see you're not ready. Just as long as you know you're shit at hiding your feelings. I'm gonna hit the sack. I'll be up in a few hours to take watch."

Declan beat feet down the hall, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Slow and gentle was not what I needed to hear. What I'd needed was my friend to beat some sense into me. I needed him to give me shit and remind me I couldn't have her. That in a few days I'd never see her again.

A few minutes later Anaya came into the living room in a pair of sweats and a tee. I had no idea how the hell she was going to wear pants to bed when it was hot as balls in the house, but I didn't comment. Mainly because I was trying not to think about her, period. And wondering how she was going to sleep in sweats would lead me to think about her in bed, which would make me think about how badly I wanted to join her in that bed and strip those damn pants off her.

"Do you need help with anything?" she asked.

"Nope," I rushed out and she flinched at my harsh response, making me feel like an asshole. But the only help I needed from her was her going to bed, which would put much needed distance between us. "I'm going to upload the pictures Dec took tonight and send them to Garrett, and hopefully we'll have something by morning," I explained, hoping to soften my previous response.

"Who's Garrett?"

"He works with us. A roadside bomb ended his career in the military and due to his injuries, he doesn't deploy with one of our

teams. He's strictly intel. Anything computer-related goes through him."

"But he's okay now? His injury?"

Her sweet concern for my teammate wasn't helping my quest to push her away. Instead it made me want to pull her into my arms. What the hell was it about Anaya Baker that had me so tied in knots? Why couldn't I stop thinking the craziest shit when she was around? Pull her into my arms? Where the fuck had that come from?

"Yeah, he's fine. It was a long time ago."

"Good." She smiled. "If you're sure, I'm gonna head to bed."

And why did her smile make me feel so fucking good?

"I'm sure. Get some sleep."

"Night."

"Goodnight, Anaya."

It had taken me almost two hours to get all the pictures sorted, uploaded, and a SITREP drafted and sent to Garrett. And through it all I was still thinking about Anaya. Her ferocious desire to save a bunch of girls she'd never met, never even seen. Most people would've gone home, thinking that it was horrible what was happening but wouldn't have made the choice to help. But not Anaya, she faced her fears straight on. How she thought she was screwed up was beyond me.

My attention went to my laptop when I got an immediate email back from Garrett. He was running the images now and would have something for us in a few hours. Good, the sooner we knew what we were dealing with the better. None of us wanted to delay getting the girls to safety, but we had to be smart about it.

My eyes were getting heavy and I debated making sure Declan was awake and ready to take over watch so I could take a nap when I heard a blood-curdling scream.

Before I could think better of it, I was in Anaya's room. But at the last second, I stopped myself from touching her. My palms were mere millimeters from her arms, fighting the urge to shake her awake. So close I could feel her nightmare rolling off her in waves.

"Anaya. Wake up." She started to shout again, and I had no choice. I grabbed her arms and shook. "Anaya," I snapped. "Wake. Up."

Her eyes came open wide and in shock and I immediately yanked my hands back.

"What's wrong?" she slurred.

"You had a nightmare."

She blinked the sleep from her eyes and her brows furrowed. Any other situation, I'd think the look was cute as hell. But right then knowing that something so horrific had happened in her dreams that she'd thrashed and shouted in her sleep made me murderous.

"Shit. I did?"

"You good in here?" Declan asked from the doorway.

"Yeah."

"I got watch," he said, and I heard the door click closed.

"You always sleep with the light on?" I inquired.

"No. But I fell asleep reading." I glanced at the bed and next to her was the paperback.

Don't go there, I reminded myself, eyeing the book.

I glanced back at her face and she was covered in sweat. "You're burning up under all those covers."

I started to pull the comforter back, but she clung to it.

"I'm fine."

"Sweetheart, you have sweat rolling down your face. You're all bundled up and you're wearing sweats."

"No, I'm not," she muttered.

My gaze shifted to the floor and both the sweats and tee were there.

Good Christ, she was naked, or damn close to it, under the covers. Fuck, *shit*, fuck. Now was not the time to think about her sweaty and half-naked but damn if I could stop the visions from flooding.

Dick. I was a total dick.

"Let's at least take off the blanket. You can leave the sheet on."

Relief washed over me when I noticed her bra straps. At least she was wearing something.

And didn't that thought make me an even bigger dick? She'd just woken up from a nightmare and all I was thinking about was what she had on.

Get your damn head out of the gutter and on straight.

Anaya pushed down the heavy comforter but kept the sheet pulled up to her throat.

"You wanna talk about your dream?"

"No."

"All right. I'll let you get back to sleep."

One hand left the sheet, shot out, and grabbed my wrist. "Will you stay here with me for a few minutes?"

It looked like it pained her to ask.

"Of course."

I was half-sitting on the mattress and she moved over, giving me more room.

What was I supposed to do now? Sit like this with my ass on the edge of the bed? Lie next to her? That didn't sound like a good option for a variety of reasons. One being I *wanted* desperately to be in this bed with her, just not under these circumstances.

Anaya rolled to her side facing me and shook her head against the pillow.

"I'm being ridiculous. You have to be exhausted. You don't—"

I made a split-second decision, one I hoped wouldn't bite me in the ass but I couldn't stop myself from making it. I simply couldn't pull myself away. The unexplainable tether was shortening with every moment I was with her. I was playing a dangerous game that would likely have disastrous consequences. But the fuck of it was, I was willing to pay the penalty if it meant I got to be near her.

"Scoot over a little more."

When she moved to the other side of the queen-sized bed, I kicked off my boots, pulled my holster and gun free, set them on the nightstand, and laid down next to her on my side.

Face-to-face but plenty of room between us. Space I needed more than her.

"This okay?"

"Yeah," she sighed. "I swear, I'm normally not this much of a baby."

"Tonight was hard on all of us. More so on you."

"And Declan, too."

I tamped down the jealousy that had crept up at hearing her concern for my friend and agreed, "Yes, and for Dec, too."

"I haven't had a nightmare in a long time," she started. "Not even after what happened in the village after the rebels came and destroyed everything. I could hear people crying and begging. But I hadn't had any bad dreams."

Anaya's eyes left mine and she focused on my hand between us. I opened my fingers and left it palm side up in invitation but made no

move to touch her.

Much to my shock she started to trace the lines on my hand with her finger. The touch so simple, yet it still garnered a strong reaction.

"It was because I was thinking about the girls," she whispered.

My attention went to the book still on the bed, now laying by her hip and something dawned on me.

"In that book, the woman is kept in—"

"I'm not a total freak. I don't get triggered from reading a book. I know the difference between reality and fiction. Hell, I worked with missing children for almost five years."

"What does trigger you?"

"Normally nothing. Well, that's kind of a lie. Obviously, you saw my reaction to being caged in. I don't like to feel trapped or restrained in any way. That always sends me over the edge. But tonight, it was seeing those men go into the house. And knowing what was happening to the girls."

I nodded my understanding, even though I could never understand what Anaya was feeling, I had rescued my fair share of trafficked women. Both young and old. Shitbags didn't have an age preference. Older women were at just as much risk as the young ones.

"Tell me something about you?" she asked quietly.

I thought about something lighthearted I could tell her and found I had to search way back before I could come up with something that didn't involve death and destruction.

"I grew up in small town in eastern Wyoming called Pine Bluffs. Population twelve-hundred."

"Twelve hundred?" she gasped.

"Yep. One elementary school, and one junior high and high school combined. I'm telling you the truth when I tell you I knew every kid in town and my parents knew every one of their parents. As you can imagine there wasn't much to do except cause trouble. And when young boys wanna find trouble, they find it. Nothing but wide-open spaces and clean air." I smiled remembering all the fun we'd had. "Pine Bluffs borders Nebraska. So, when I was a kid my friends and I would ride our bikes over the border into Nebraska thinking we were hot shit being in a different state alone without our parents. This one time we figured we go south into Colorado."

"How old were you?"

"Ten maybe eleven."

"Holy crap." Anaya smiled.

"Yeah, so the Colorado border was a little farther, almost thirteen miles. But we figured we could do it. We all got on our bikes and headed down old Country Road 164. Our only problem was after almost two hours of riding we hadn't seen the Colorado sign and we started to get nervous. There was nothing around. I mean nothing. We were on an old dirt road and hadn't seen another car or house for about thirty minutes."

"What'd you guys do?"

"We kept riding until we finally spotted an old trailer and stopped to see if someone was home. Thankfully there was, and the old man informed us we'd crossed over into Colorado five miles back."

"Oh, no. Seriously?"

"Yep." I smiled at the memory. "There was no marker on the country road welcoming you to Colorado. And let's just say, by the time my dad had driven to pick us up because there was no way we were peddling back, Wyoming wasn't very welcoming either."

"How much trouble did you get into?"

"Dad took my bike for a month. And back then, as a boy my bike was everything and a month was a lifetime. Now he laughs about it, but when it happened, he was pissed. We all would've gotten away with it if we could've ridden home but we were all too tired."

"No one knew you were gone?"

"It was summertime and back then you were up out of the house with the sun or else mom or dad would find chores for you to do and you didn't come home until sundown. Pine Bluffs, Wyoming, looks like it was frozen in time. No one thinks twice about letting their kids roam around or where they are. It's a different world."

"That must've been nice." The sadness in her voice gutted me. "Do your parents still live there?"

"No. They sold the ranch and moved to Cheyenne. My dad took a retirement job, as he calls it, with the farm bureau and my mom's always been a homemaker."

Anaya yawned then smiled. "It sounds like the perfect place to grow up."

"It was. Close your eyes and try to get some sleep."

"Will you stay?"

Her innocent request had my heart pounding in my chest. More trust. And the more she gave the more I wanted to take. The more I wanted to prove to her she was safe with me. I wanted to give to her in return, but what I wanted to give were not things she'd welcome. And those things had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with me tearing down the walls she'd erected and showing her how good life could be. I didn't think Anaya had a lot of happy in her life. She'd admitted to being closed off, and that was a damn shame because she was missing out. Knowledge that pissed me off. She had so much to offer the world, to offer a man, so she had no business hiding away allowing her life to pass her by.

"If you want me to."

"Thanks," she whispered, and her eyes drifted closed.

It didn't take her long to find sleep, but I couldn't turn my brain off. All I could think about was how different our childhoods were. I grew up with June and Ward Cleaver in a sleepy small town and she grew up in group homes with monsters lurking around every corner. Totally fucked.

Anaya Baker was an anomaly. A rare and special woman who'd managed to pull herself out of hell.

CHAPTER 7

MY EYES CAME open with a start.

After I blinked the fuzziness away, Kyle came into focus.

I knew immediately why he was in bed with me. It had been a long time since I'd had a nightmare. Years of therapy had thankfully cured me of them, or time had. Either way, I no longer had night terrors. But last night my dream had been so real. Only I wasn't back in the basement I'd been kept in, and I wasn't chained to a wall or in a cage. I was in Amisha's house forced to watch as men traipsed in and out. Even after I'd woken up, the girls' cries rang in my ears.

I studied Kyle's face for a moment, he looked different—relaxed. Less lethal, when his features were slack with sleep. There was no doubt about it, Kyle was good-looking. A hank of hair had fallen on his forehead, it was too dark to be called blond but too light to be called brown. I wasn't sure what color to call it but I was sure I wanted to push the unruly piece back and see if it was as soft as it looked. But I wouldn't, for a variety of reasons, the main being the gesture would be too forward and a little creepy. And besides, the sweep of hair almost made him look cute in a badass, former SEAL kind of way. Though he'd still yet to confirm he'd been special forces—but I knew. His movements and intensity belied his denials.

I smiled as my gaze traveled down to our hands. We were still on our sides facing one another; his hand was in the same place it had been last night when he'd offered it to me. We weren't holding hands—not really—mine was just resting on top of his. The sight made me weirdly happy but at the same time sad knowing in a few days he'd be gone. It also made me wish I was the kind of woman

who could go for what she wanted, who didn't have hang-ups, who didn't have a shipping container full of regrets. And not reaching out to touch Kyle was just another one of those regrets I'd stack on top of all the others. Another missed opportunity because I was too scared to ask for what I wanted.

Not that I thought Kyle would be receptive to me touching him, or that he'd close the distance between us so I could kiss him. A thought I couldn't get out of my head, not since he'd had me against the wall, only to intensify when he'd laid beside me. His rejection would hurt, but moreover, I was totally out of line even thinking about kissing him.

"Everything okay?" Kyle asked.

His sleep-rough voice sent chills racing down my arms. Or was it the chilly air in the room? That, of course, was the most logical explanation for my sudden shiver, if the bedroom had indeed been cold. But it wasn't, the air was stifling, leaving me to admit it was simply his sexy drawl that had made me shudder.

"Yeah." I'd been so lost studying our connection I'd missed him waking up. "Sorry if I woke you."

"You didn't. I've been awake awhile."

Oh, good Lord, had he seen me looking at him?

"You have?" My eyes snapped to his.

I started to move my hand away, but he closed his fingers around mine. His penetrating gaze held mine and I realized that last night in the moonlight, I'd been wrong, I'd thought his eyes were more green than brown. But this close with the sun spilling into the room, there were dark brown flecks that dotted his irises. They were spectacular, unique, powerful, and damn sexy.

"Anymore nightmares?"

"No."

Mortification flooded, reminding me he was not in bed with me for sexy fun times. It was because I'd been weak and shaken after my nightmare. And then there was that part of me that needed to use that as an excuse to spend time with him. Maybe I should've felt guilty about being a little dishonest but I didn't. And that brought a whole new set of uncomfortable feelings.

"Where'd you go?" Kyle muttered.

"Huh?"

"You looked like you just took an unpleasant trip in your mind."

Jeez, he didn't miss much.

"You still wanna deny you were a SEAL?" I muttered.

"What does that have to do with anything?" He chuckled.

"You're observant."

"So? Because I pay attention means I was a SEAL?"

"Pretty much."

Kyle's broad smile made my stomach flipflop and since he'd already woken up my girly parts and shaken off the dust, they certainly noticed how sexy he looked first thing in the morning with a grin on his handsome face. Too bad he wasn't smiling for other reasons.

He shook his head as if he could read my thoughts—which at this point I was worried he could—and asked, "Are you hungry?"

"More evasion," I mumbled, then answered. "Yeah, I'm actually starving."

"Good. You didn't eat last night. I'll get outta here so you can get up and get dressed."

Heat hit my cheeks at the reminder I was only in my bra and panties, something that didn't seem to faze him like it did me. With two men in the house, I'd had every intention of sleeping with sweats and a t-shirt. But within ten minutes of being in bed it was hotter than hell and I'd stripped down. By some miracle I'd been covered up when Kyle had come into the room.

I nodded my agreement, but Kyle didn't move. His gaze lingered and his pupils dilated. He looked like he was deep in thought. Finally, he came out of his trance and let go of my hand, rolled to his back, then up to sit.

With another glance down at me that sent more goosebumps over my arms he got up and without another word he left the room.

As soon as the door clicked behind Kyle I was up out of bed and rummaging through my bag finding shorts and a t-shirt. I grabbed my toothbrush and darted out of the room, across the hall into the bathroom.

I rushed through my morning routine, telling myself it was because I was hungry. But the truth was, I wanted to see Kyle again.

I was being beyond ridiculous and I knew it. Six days from now we'd part ways and he'd forget all about me. But the unexplained excitement in my belly couldn't be denied. I'd never had a crush on a man, if that's what this feeling was. And for once in my life, I just wanted to see what it felt like to be normal.

Not that I'd let him past my walls, but I wanted to enjoy the butterflies he roused.

I made my way into the small kitchen and both Declan and Kyle were leaning against the counter, matching mugs in their hands, and they were deep in conversation. Yet both of them were staring at me intently.

"Should I come back? I don't want to interrupt."

"You're not. We were talking about your friends, Donny and Camilla Rivera. When does their flight get in?" Declan asked.

"Tonight. They're staying at a hotel near the airport," I told them. "I don't mean this to be snarky, but I'm assuming they passed your background check?"

Declan smiled and the gesture transformed his whole demeanor. He didn't look so mean and opposing.

"They did. It seems they do a lot of good work around the world. Do they have a plan for the girls?"

"It depends. If it's safe enough they would like to keep the children they rescue in their home countries. But in a case like this, they're not sure. They've been in Timor-Leste before, they have some contacts with orphanages in Tutuala. It's a small village about two-hundred and fifty kilometers east of Dili. If there's room, that's where they plan to take the girls."

"And if there's not room?" Kyle inquired.

"Then they'll smuggle the girls south into West Timor, the Indonesian part of the island."

Declan and Kyle both looked like they approved of the plan.

"How soon will they know?" Kyle continued.

"By tomorrow when they get in contact with their people." Kyle looked at Declan and something passed between them. "Did something happen?"

"Declan made breakfast. Come grab a plate and we'll sit and talk."

Kyle turned and grabbed a plate full of eggs and toast off the counter and followed Declan into the living room.

I scooped a small amount onto my plate, suddenly not very hungry, and trailed behind the men into the other room.

I'd barely sat down when Declan started. "Garrett sent back info on the men from last night."

"Okay." I placed the plate on the table in front of me, the smell of my breakfast now churning my stomach.

"It's what we expected, most were rich businessmen, one's a politician, one's a professor," Declan answered.

"I'm sensing there's more."

"One of the men is an American and he has ties to a large trafficking organization. That's concerning in itself but considering there's been talk of this group making a purchase from Cambodia it leaves us wondering if this man is preparing to make purchases from several countries in the region."

I was grateful I'd already abandoned my eggs because bile was burning my throat.

"Amisha's gonna sell them, isn't she? They'll be gone and we'll never find them again."

"That's what we're thinking," Kyle confirmed.

"Our team back in Maryland caught a lucky break and they're working on gathering intel on the Cambodia purchase." Declan paused and looked over at an unhappy Kyle. "We may have to move up the rescue of the girls."

"Okay." I couldn't keep the approval out of my tone.

"That means this mission just became more dangerous," Declan warned. "We wanted time to recon. But if Preston Lockhart is here to make a buy, we can't wait. That also means the Riveras need to be ready to move tonight. It's gonna be a snatch and grab with a quick hand-off. Then we're out of the country."

"We? You mean all of us? I can stay and help Donny and Camilla."

"No way," Kyle snapped. "It will be too dangerous for you to stay. You're with us."

"But I can—"

"Anaya, you stand out. The rebels are still attacking villages and we're going to be pissing off a lot of people in power when we take out Amisha. I'm not leaving you behind."

"Camilla's going to need help," I pushed.

"Then she's gonna have to figure it out."

"Kyle—"

"I don't mean to sound like a dick, but our mission is to rescue the girls and keep you safe. I can't do that if you're in Timor-Leste and I'm in Cambodia."

"I don't get it. Am I going to Cambodia with you?"

"Yes." Kyle's grunt sounded almost like a growl.

"He refuses to put you on a plane back to the States by yourself," Declan informed me. He, too, sounded irritated.

"What am I missing here? Why can't I fly home alone?"

"Ask the over-protective jackass here." Declan tilted his head toward Kyle.

"I'm not being over-protective, I'm being smart."

Declan's phone buzzed, cutting off our conversation, and he announced, "It's Zane."

He fiddled with his phone before answering, "You're on speaker and Anaya Baker's in the room."

"Have you reviewed everything Garrett sent you?" A deep voice came over the phone.

"Twice," Declan confirmed. "We just finished talking to Anaya about the mission shift."

What in the world was going on? I was thrilled the girls would be out of that house tonight, but I thought we'd have time to help Donny and Camilla get the girls to their new home.

"Will your friends be ready to take possession of the girls by tomorrow?"

Kyle and Declan were looking at me expectantly, so I assumed Zane was speaking to me.

"I won't know until I talk to them tonight when they land. I presume they will be. They've done this before and understand the urgency in getting the girls to safety," I answered.

"We need to contact the Riveras now. Another call was made, you're needed in Cambodia tomorrow night. That will give us thirty hours to recon and get into place. I want this shit done, so we can move on."

"Anaya Baker will be with us," Declan said.

"The fuck?" Zane barked. "Put her on a plane and get her back to the States."

"Kyle—"

"Christ," Zane cut off Declan. "Kyle what?"

"Thinks she'll be safer with us."

"Of course he does."

"I have to agree with him, boss. Have you seen her? She sticks out like a beacon. If one person sees her, she'll be—"

"Yeah, I've seen her. That's why I know what Kyle's thinking and it has nothing to do with her safety and everything to do with his—"

"Don't go there, Z," Kyle demanded.

My gaze was bouncing back and forth trying to keep up with the bizarre conversation but still lost on the part where Donny and Camilla would have no protection after they got the girls.

"Just once. That's all I ask. One time a mission to run smooth without one of men losing their ever-loving mind over a woman. Is that too much?" Zane exhaled loudly. "Declan, it's your team, your operation, your call, the buck stops with you, friend. If you agree with lover-boy then Anaya tags along. If you don't, lock Kyle down and put Hot Lips Houlihan on a plane."

Declan cut his eyes at Kyle before he answered. "She stays with us."

"Goddamn, I hope you know what you're doing. We have fifteen women in Cambodia who are ready for transport. It won't be pretty. And if Anaya's with you there will be no way to shield her from it."

"I can handle it," I said, praying my voice was stronger than I felt.

I was still recovering from the shock of agreeing to go, when I really wanted to stay in Timor-Leste and help Camilla and Donny. But I didn't like being talked about like I was some weak woman who couldn't take care of herself. Not to mention, the Hot Lips dig had crawled under my skin.

"Anaya," Zane sighed. "I've read—"

"I'm sure you have. Everyone seems to have read something about me. However, you must've skipped over the part where I pulled myself out of that life and I did that all by myself. I'm not thirteen locked away in some basement. I survived that and have moved on. I've dedicated my life to helping people. Not only did I live through it, but I've seen it countless times since then. I don't need to be shielded from anything."

"I hope you're prepared, it's gonna be ugly."

"It always is," I returned.

CHAPTER 8

ANAYA WAS NERVOUS. It was the wobble in her voice that gave her away.

I doubted Zane missed it, he didn't miss much.

Thankfully Declan changed the subject and asked, "Is Harry still in Connecticut?"

"Yes. It seems Harry Landry and Ruiz are in some sort of negotiations. But our intel says Ruiz wants out."

I kept my eyes on Anaya as she worried her bottom lip in concentration. Which also served as a reminder to have a chat with Zane in private about his Hot Lips Houlihan comment.

"What's wrong, Anaya?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"Then why are you staring off into space again?"

"I'm trying to remember how I know that name."

"What name?" Zane asked.

"Harry Landry." Her eyes flashed and she nodded. "I know someone by that name but it can't be the same man. Just a coincidence they have the same name."

"How do you know the man?" Zane questioned.

"The Harry I know made a sizable donation to a project I worked on when I was with the NCMEC."

"I don't remember Landry making any donations to Missing and Exploited Children," Declan said. "We checked all of his personal donations."

"Technically, the donation came from his company, but Mr. Landry attended the gala for the donors," she explained. "But it

couldn't be the same man. The Harry Landry I know gave over a million dollars to help fund a cyber program to stop sextortion."

Declan glanced at me with his brows pinched together, no doubt thinking the same thing I was. Harry Landry was a smart mother-fucker, donating to NCMEC was right up his alley. Diversion at its finest.

"What's sextortion?" Zane asked.

"Online exploitation of children. Some of these assholes don't know how to use the dark web, so they still troll chatrooms. Gaming, social media, WhatsApp chats, even online made-up tutorial groups, you name it and they try to worm their way in. And it doesn't always involve meeting for sex. Some of these offenders are happy with pictures or will engage in sexting or online sexual role play. Some of the victims have been as young as eight years old."

"Do the donors get updates about the program? Advances that are being made. Anything like that?" Zane inquired.

"Yeah. Nothing in-depth. But as a way to get them to donate more money, a quarterly newsletter is sent out. It wouldn't detail the backend of the programs being used, but it would get a general update how their money is being spent, and what's being planned for the future."

"Fuck," Zane growled. "Do you remember the name of the company Harry was representing?"

"Corella," she told him.

"You're sure?"

"Yeah, I'm positive. I remember thinking it was funny that I'd been to Australia the year before and a Corella bird had been driving me crazy squawking nonstop outside my hotel room."

"Would you recognize him if you saw a picture?"

"I think so. It was years ago, but I'm pretty good with faces and I did speak to the man that night. But it really can't be the same person. Harry Landry wants to help stop the exploitation of children. It sounds like the man you know sells them."

"I'll send a picture over for you to look at, Anaya. If Harry Landry owns Corella Industries, shit just got even worse. I'll be in touch."

That was an understatement. Corella manufactured smart chips. Most of their business was government contracts. God knows what kind of intel they could be stealing.

Zane disconnected and I could feel Declan fidgeting next to me. We had no idea Landry had any involvement with Corella. How the hell was that missed?

"I don't understand what's going on," Anaya started. "It really can't be the same person."

"It's the same person," I sighed.

"There's—"

"What I'm going to tell you is never to be repeated. Not to anyone, ever. But for you to understand what's going on, and how deep this runs you need to know a few things." Declan was being weirdly delicate and frankly I was shocked he was going to share.

"Okay. I won't ever repeat it. But please don't sugarcoat it for me. You sound like you're speaking to a toddler."

"Harry Landry put together a network of former CIA, FBI, and other three-letter agency personnel to form a group he called The Company. He propositioned these highly intelligent individuals and convinced them The Company was a black ops group working under the CIA. Of course the very nature of being off the books meant no one could check. This was a front for him to work military style operations using operatives the government had trained. The agents thought they were working for the good guys, taking out drug smugglers, human traffickers, and all sorts of scumbags that the government couldn't officially touch. What they were really doing was eliminating the competition. Landry is a part of a much larger group called Omni. It's an organization that infiltrates governments and uses their leverage to ensure their wealth continues to grow. Think of them as the ultimate special interest lobbyists. They are worldwide and have their hands in a multitude of different financial sectors."

"Well, that's actually scary how smart of plan that is. But—"

"There's more," Declan continued. "Landry is one of the largest human traffickers in the world. He controls the majority of the women taken from the US. He's smart. He works all angles. Him donating to NCMEC makes perfect sense. Those quarterly newsletters would keep him up to date on their progress and he'd be able to stay one step ahead. You said it also talks about future projects."

Declan's phone vibrated. He picked it up, tapped the screen, then turned it toward Anaya.

Her face paled and she looked like she was going to be sick.

"I take it that's the Harry you know?" I asked.

Anaya nodded and closed her eyes. "I danced with him," she whispered. "He had his sick hands on me. He crooned on about how happy he was his company's financial donation would help stop the harm of children."

"That's what criminals do," Dec reminded her. "They lie, Anaya. Ones who are sick fucks like him are smooth. The lie rolls off their tongues like silk."

"Are you going to eat that?" I pointed to Anaya's untouched breakfast.

"God, no. My stomach is in knots."

"You gotta eat something," Dec told her. "We have a long day today."

"I will. Later." Anaya covered her mouth to stifle a yawn. "Maybe I just need some coffee to wake up first."

Anaya stood and picked up her plate and started for the kitchen. When she was clear of earshot, Dec turned to me.

"Are you sure about this?"

I thought about his question and the answer was no. I wasn't sure about anything I was doing. I had a riot of conflicting emotions. I wanted Anaya home in the US far away from this mess. Especially away from Preston Lockhart and Harry Landry. I didn't want her near Amisha's house and the horrors of what that woman was doing to those girls.

However, I didn't want her out of my sight and it went beyond keeping her safe. I wanted more quiet nights with her. I wanted her comfortable with me. I wanted her to know she could trust me never to hurt her. I simply wanted more and I couldn't explain why that was.

"Yeah. I'm positive."

Dec frowned. "You know she's going to be an uphill battle, right?"

"You have it all wrong."

"Don't bullshit me. This ain't my first rodeo, friend. I've already seen this twice. Brooks took one look at Tatiana in that UN Annex and it was on. Thaddeus and Em, well, that was a given. The man was off his chain as soon as she was around. You have that same look. So I'm gonna warn you. This isn't smart. We have Omni threatening the company as a whole, and the women. You bringing Anaya into the fold will put her in danger. And with all of her issues...

brother...I'm not sure you wanna attempt to take those on. There's a strong possibility she'll burn you."

"Let me ask you something, Dec. Say you're right, do you really think I'm some shallow prick that would turn my back on someone because of their issues?"

"That's not how—"

"It sure sounded like that's what you were saying to me. That because of what happened to her, what still lingers inside of her, she's not worth the effort. But I'm telling you, the man who finally breaks through Anaya's walls will be one lucky son of a bitch. That woman is strong as hell. When she finds the right man, she'll let him in and he'll find paradise."

Part of me wished I could be that man. But the fuck of it was, Dec was right, there was too much going on, it was bad timing, and I didn't have anything to offer Anaya. I had no idea what I was doing or where I was going to be beyond today. My life was in constant turmoil. I didn't even have a place to live.

Anaya deserved stability and peace. Two things my life would never offer no matter how badly I wanted to give those things to her. I was not the type of man who wanted to settle down. I didn't want kids and I didn't want to ever be tied to one place. I enjoyed being a nomad, travelling when I wanted. Not worried about what I was leaving behind. But for the first time in my life I wished I could be that sort of man. I wanted to be that man for Anaya.

I was being an idiot thinking I could keep her, allowing my feelings for a woman I just met cloud my better judgment. She'd made it clear she didn't want to stay with me, and I had to respect that even if it wasn't what I wanted. The knot in my gut tightened and acid started to build.

I had to let her go.

"I just want this done and her safe. That's all," I told Dec.

With a lift of his chin and disbelief in his eyes, he stood. "If you say so. I'm gonna go walk the perimeter again. After we hear back from Zane, we'll figure out the rest of our day."

I sat back into the couch and pressed the heels of my palms against my brow trying to relieve some of the pressure building.

What the hell was I thinking, forcing Anaya to something she didn't want to do? She was perfectly capable of taking care of her-

self. And the truth was, going to Cambodia with us would put her in more danger.

"You okay?" Anaya asked.

I opened my eyes and she was leaning against the wall on the opposite side of the room.

Smart woman. It was best she stayed far away from me.

"Sure. What's up?"

"I talked to Camilla." Anaya held her cellphone up so I could see it. "She said they're catching an earlier flight. And good news, one orphanage in Tutuala has room for ten girls. If there are more than ten, they'll take them to West Timor. Either way, they're ready to go."

"After this is over, where's your next assignment?"

"Assignment?"

"With the Peace Corps? Where do you go next?"

I held my breath hoping she'd tell me she was going back to the US for good. I might not be in a place where I could keep her, but maybe there would be a possibility in the future. Maybe after we took out Omni, I could seek her out and see if there was more to these crazy feelings I had.

"Oh. I'm not sure yet. South America, I think. Maybe Guyana or Peru. The volunteers who were pulled from Timor-Leste are being sent wherever they're needed."

Hearing the possibility of her going to Guyana had my gut clenching. The team had just come back from there. I'd seen first-hand what a corrupt government could do to good people. The country was beautiful and should've been thriving. Instead, greed and criminals had a stranglehold.

"How long will you be gone?"

"Every assignment is a two-year commitment. But I don't know what the Peace Corps will do in a case like this. Why?"

Two years? Fuck. I had no business even entertaining the idea of getting involved with Anaya. Declan was right—yet again, he'd warned me I could get burned. What he didn't know was, that burn was now hearing she'd be gone for years and all thoughts of a possible future had gone up in smoke.

"You wanna stay with the Riveras and help transport the girls?"

My question had my stomach churning.

"I thought we already worked that out." Her brows pulled together in confusion.

Yeah, sweetheart, I'm confused, too.

"No. *I* worked it out. I didn't leave much room for your opinion."

She continued to study me and something that looked a lot like hurt crossed her face before she stiffened her spine and pushed off the wall.

"Then, yes, I want to stay."

Fuck, that hurt—more than I thought it would. Everything I'd thought I'd been feeling toward her was one-sided. She had no interest in staying with us—with me.

"Then you should stay and help." My chest ached at the thought of leaving her behind. "But you need to be careful. It's dangerous here. The rebels are still a problem. Tonight when we go in to get the girls you have to stay hidden. We can't take the chance someone sees you."

"Tonight is so soon." Disappointment flashed before she covered it up. "That's still the plan, huh?"

"Looks that way. We're waiting on Zane to call back."

"Oh." She paused for a moment. "That's good. We need to get them out of there."

Declan walked back into the house as he was shoving his phone back into his pocket.

"That was Tex," he announced. "Preston Lockhart is on his way to Cambodia. We need to grab the girls tonight. Anaya, make arrangements for Donny and Camilla to be ready. We'll hit the house as soon as the last man leaves. Load the girls and get gone. Garrett has three tickets booked for the first flight out of Dili. Oh-five-hundred. That doesn't leave us much wiggle room."

"Call Garrett back and make that two tickets. Anaya's gonna stay," I told him, trying my best to keep my tone flat even though my heart was pounding.

It felt wrong leaving her behind. It went against everything I wanted and my gut was screaming at me not to let her go. But it didn't matter how badly I wanted her. She would never be mine. What's the saying? Right girl, wrong time. Not that it would ever be the right time for me. I'd always known that but somehow Anaya had made me forget.

Forget I was a man who didn't want commitments or a family. Didn't want to tie a good woman to me only to have her hate me when she saw the real me later.

We both had lives to live and we weren't on the same paths. Not even close. I knew myself well enough to know that I would never be okay with my woman traipsing around the world, putting herself in danger. Not without me by her side.

But damn, it sucked having to let Anaya go.

CHAPTER 9

WHY THE HELL did I feel like someone had kicked me in the stomach?

I was getting what I wanted. Wasn't I? Camilla and Donny would need help safely getting the girls to the eastern side of the island. I could see for myself they were being left in a good place. That's why I'd come back to Timor-Leste. To rescue girls from Amisha's, from the horrific things she was doing to them. I wasn't supposed to be behaving like some silly lovesick girl with a crush. Hell, I didn't even know what a crush was.

Boy, I'd been stupid letting my mind go there. Too inexperienced with men to know that Kyle had no interest in me. I read the situation wrong. He was just being nice to me because he was a nice guy, not because he'd felt the same connection I had.

So, so, dumb and very much out of character for me. But there was something about Kyle that put me at ease, made me want to open the padlocks I had around my life and invite him in. Not that it would work between the two of us. I was screwed up with a capital S and exclamation point after the P.

One look at Kyle told me he could have any woman he wanted, and he'd probably had a lot. There was no way I'd be able to satisfy a man like him. At this point, I didn't even know if I could have sex anymore. I'd allowed myself to slide so far into myself and detach from any physical interaction, I didn't think I'd ever be able to pull myself back out.

A week ago, I'd been fine with that. It wasn't like there was time for relationships and sex when I was spending all of my time helping other people. But now, I wished I was normal. What would it be

like to have Kyle just once? Feel his muscled chest pressed against mine, without clothes this time. His warm body covering me.

I turned to my side and adjusted the pillow under my head. I should've been taking a nap, getting ready for tonight. There was a strong possibility I'd be awake for the next twenty-four hours. Yet I couldn't stop thinking about Kyle and how easily he'd gotten rid of me.

I picked my book back up and opened it to the beginning, hoping I could get lost in Susan Stoker's fictional world where there's always a happy ending.

Why couldn't I be like one of her heroines? Strong and capable of overcoming all the shit that life piles on them. Why couldn't I find my hero—possessive and growly and determined never to let me go?

Because it's not real-life, you idiot. Men like that don't really exist.

But if they did, Kyle Smith would fit the mold.

But he'd let me walk away. He hadn't thrown me over his shoulder and carried me back to his mountain home. And that's what he'd said he'd do if he found the right woman.

* * *

"HEY. WAKE UP."

Someone was shaking me. My eyes popped open.

"Time to leave?" I muttered, and felt the bed compress behind me.

"No. You had another nightmare."

Damn. It was no wonder the man wanted to get away from me as soon as possible. I was crazy.

"Sorry," I grumbled.

"Want me to stay?"

I should've said no. My heart was already breaking, but in a few hours I'd never see him again. I'd have plenty of time to nurse my hurt but this would be my last chance to spend time with him. And damn if that didn't hurt, it killed.

"Please."

I felt more shuffling behind me, then his warm body molded against my back and his arm draped over my middle.

"Is this okay?"

His strong arm was trapping me to the bed, his hard body pressed against mine all the way down to his long legs tangling with mine. Yet I didn't feel confined.

"Yes."

"We have a few more hours. Go back to sleep."

I didn't want to sleep and waste what time I had left with Kyle, but exhaustion pulled me under.

* * *

EVERYONE'S MOOD had sucked when we'd left the house. Something had changed with Kyle. He'd been up and ready to go before he came back into the bedroom and had woken me up. He'd been polite but completely detached. It was like a light switch had flipped and all traces of the man who'd held my hand or cuddled behind me were gone.

Now I was sitting in the passenger seat of a box truck that looked like it'd seen better days. I had no idea where Donny and Camilla had procured it and I hadn't asked.

Neither Declan or Kyle had made time for pleasantries when I introduced them to the Riveras. They'd gone over the plan, asked if they had any questions, told all three of us to stay in the truck, and told Donny to keep the engine running.

Kyle and Declan had disappeared around the back of the house, and that was five minutes ago. Now I had sweat dripping down my back and I was getting antsy by the second. Donny was as cool as a cucumber, but Camilla was squished between us and she was bouncing her knee.

"Calm down, love, it will all be over soon," he said to his wife and my heart squeezed.

I didn't need to look over to know he'd placed his hand on her leg to make it stop moving. As a matter of fact, I couldn't peel my eyes away from the house Kyle had entered.

Everything was eerily quiet, too silent for this part of the city. I felt like everyone in the area knew we were coming so they'd stayed home and battened down the hatches.

Movement caught my eye as someone got out of the car, but didn't slam the door closed. He gently eased the metal to the frame and didn't latch it. Donny and Camilla had gratuitously sunk down in their seats. With the truck running, it was obvious someone was in it.

I watched as the man walked down the cracked sidewalk toward Amisha's house. I held my breath as he continued up her small driveway, his head swiveling back and forth like he was looking for something.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

My hand went for the door handle and Camilla grabbed me. "No way, Anaya," she whispered. "They said to stay in the truck."

"I have to stop him. If he bangs on the door or rings the doorbell the guys will be screwed."

As silently as I could I creaked the truck door open, which meant the old hinges in desperate need of some WD-40 had probably woken up the neighborhood. I crouched and waited but the man never looked my way. Once he stepped foot onto the porch I took off across a yard and stayed behind the overgrown shrubs.

Damn, the man was too close to the door. I darted from my hidey-hole, not sure what I was going to do to stop him from entering the house. I was half a dozen steps from him when his attention came to me. The front door opened, a figure dressed in black stepped through and the next thing I knew the man in black lunged forward. His arm came up, and in one fluid motion came down, making contact with the would-be intruder's throat.

I froze. One second my feet had been moving, the next they weren't.

A set of very angry eyes came to mine and Kyle pulled his knife free, wiped the blade on his pants before he closed the knife and shoved it in his pocket. He did all of that without breaking eye contact.

Holy shit.

Something wholly sinister passed over Kyle's features before he looked down at the man who was now sagging against his one-arm hold. With a shove, the man fell back and into the bushes that lined the porch.

"Get the fuck back into the truck," Kyle growled.

Declan appeared behind him, three girls struggling as he herded them out the door.

Without thinking, I rushed forward—ignoring Kyle’s demand—and went to the girls.

“We’re here to help. You’re safe now.”

All three shook their heads and struggled.

“We’re Americans,” I told them in Tetum. “We’re going to take you away from here. You’re safe now.”

Relief was stark on two of their faces but the third was still struggling with her decision.

“Come on.” I gestured. “We have to hurry. She won’t hurt you again.”

I tugged on the girl’s hand and she reluctantly followed. Camilla was already out of the truck and waiting.

“How many more are in the house?” I asked, still speaking in Tetum.

“Six,” one of the girls whispered.

“And next door?”

“I don’t know. Haven’t been there in a long time.”

I rushed back to the house to help Declan and Kyle. There was no way they were getting six more scared girls out of the house.

Declan met me on the porch and yanked me to a stop.

“It’s not pretty in there.”

“I’m fine.”

He let me go and I finally got my first look inside of Amisha’s House of Horrors.

The first thing I noticed was the smell. It was enough to knock you on your ass. Next, there was no living room, it had been partitioned off. I didn’t want to think about why that was, why she needed the extra rooms. I didn’t want to think about anything that had gone on in this house.

I glanced to my right and Amisha lay dead next to two men. Blood surrounded the three on the already-stained floor. I wouldn’t say I was filled with joy seeing them dead, but I did feel the rightness of their deaths. She was gone. Amisha could never hurt a young girl again. Kyle and Declan had made sure of it and for that I was grateful.

To my left, six young girls huddled together. Kyle was standing behind them, anger rolling off him. It was no surprise the girls were

scared of him.

I repeated the same speech to the girls and coaxed them out the door.

With the nine girls in the back of the box truck, Camilla had gone back to the cab. I was getting ready to climb in so Kyle could lock us in, when he stopped me and pulled me close.

His strong arms wrapped around me so tightly all the air in my lungs whooshed out. He lowered his head and pressed his lips to my forehead.

"Be safe, Anaya."

The gruffness of his voice made my eyes sting. This was it. I'd never see him again.

Why couldn't I just tell him what I wanted? Why wasn't I strong enough to ask him if I could stay with him?

"You, too, Kyle." I rolled to my toes and brushed my lips against his. I hadn't meant for it to be more than that, but at the last second, I realized I'd never see him again and for once in my life I was taking what I wanted. My tongue came out and licked the seam of his mouth, his came out and brushed against mine and fireworks exploded in my chest. One taste, that was all I'd ever have. "Thank you," I whispered.

He held my eyes for a beat, conflicted and confused, before he cursed under his breath, then let me go.

With a small jump, I was in the back of the truck.

Kyle rolled the door down and I watched as he closed it, unable to look away as I lost sight of him. I heard the latch lock and I scrambled to the door, placing my hand on the metal. The truck jerked and we were moving.

He was gone.

My heart shattered.

CHAPTER 10

DEC WAS GIVING me a wide berth.

The moment I'd closed the door behind Anaya, I knew I'd made a mistake.

Arguably the biggest one of my life.

I'd let her go even after she'd kissed me.

The only conversation that had passed between me and Declan since I'd watched Anaya being driven away was him informing me Tex had already arranged a local organization to come in to handle the girls who had been left at the orphanage.

I had to stay on target and stop thinking about how sweet Anaya tasted. How hard I'd fought the urge to deepen the kiss. How I'd wanted to throw her over my shoulder and run away with her. How I never wanted her to leave me.

She was gone and I'd allowed that to happen. It was for her own good—now our only objective was to take out Preston Lockhart.

We'd been in Cambodia ten hours and had already recon-ed the area.

"There's only three guards," Declan unnecessarily told me.

"I guess they feel safe with the area being so remote."

"That's my take, too."

"Preston will be there for the buy, that makes four. Possibly more if one of the men on the premises isn't the boss."

"Tex said Preston is travelling alone. We'll take him out en route."

"Agreed."

Declan leveled me with his stare and I braced. "We should talk about Anaya."

Nope. That was the last thing I wanted to talk about.

"Nothing to talk about," I told him.

"You didn't—"

"I did, Declan. You were right. I wasn't thinking. Bringing her along would've been too dangerous. She's safer where she is."

"We'll be back home in a few days, her a couple more after that. You could—"

"Could what?" I snapped. "Call her? Ask her out on a date? We'll be in Maryland, she lives in San Diego. Then there's the fact she's off to South America for two years and we're at war with Omni." I wanted to tug at my hair in frustration but I refrained. "I'm not cut out for that shit anyway."

"What shit?"

"A woman. A family. None of it. Hell, I don't even want kids. What the hell's the point of being serious with a woman if you don't want a family? I have nothing to offer her. She's better off on the other side of the country as far away as she can get from me."

Declan's gaze lost some of its hardness and he turned thoughtful.

"Just saying, maybe you should reconsider."

"Come again?"

"Nothing better than waking up next to the woman you love."

What the fuck, who was this man? And love? Who the hell said anything about love?

"If that's the case, why don't you have a woman in your bed?"

"Had one. So fucking sweet all she had to do was smile and she made me forget all about my shitty life."

"What?"

"I'll never get back what they gave me, but it doesn't mean I don't remember every goddamn second I had with them. It's branded onto my soul, that's how I know. I fucking know in a way I can never forget how great it is waking up with your woman in your arms knowing that your once-lonely and dark life is so fucking bright you're damn near blinded with it."

A cold dread hit my chest and Declan looked like he was far away, lost in his memories.

"Them?"

"Had a daughter, Violet. So damn beautiful just like her mama was."

I didn't like how he was talking about his family in the past tense. And I didn't know what to do with the fact he'd named his daughter after his sister.

"Christ, Dec. I don't know what to say."

Puzzle pieces were snapping into place at a rapid rate, so much about Declan made sense now.

"Brother—"

"There's a lot I regret," he cut me off. "Loving my wife isn't one of them."

His wife?

Declan had been married, too?

Holy shit.

"Can't say how fuckin' sorry I am that you lost them. But—"

"If you're still thinking about her in a week, reconsider and call her. That's all I'm sayin'."

I wasn't gonna argue my case with Dec, not after what he'd just revealed. Instead I gave him a chin lift in agreement and said, "Means a lot you told me about your wife and daughter. Swear, I'll take it to the grave."

"Know you will." And just like that, Declan checked his emotions. "I'm gonna grab a shower and try to get some sleep. You should do the same. As soon as Tex calls back, it's go time."

Declan disappeared through the door connecting our hotel rooms and I sat on the bed reeling from all that he'd told me. The man couldn't catch a break, everything good in his life had been torn away. How he remained standing I did not know.

Dec was right, I needed to catch a nap before we hit the road. But I couldn't bring myself to lie down. The last time I was in a bed, Anaya was with me.

She'd allowed me to wrap my arm around her and hold her close. And, Jesus, I couldn't close my eyes without thinking about her lips on mine. And damn if it hadn't set me on fire and made it all that harder for me to let her leave.

But that was what she'd wanted.

* * *

I WAS SOAKED through with sweat, my body armor trapping heat and moisture making my wet tee cling to my skin. The sun hadn't risen and it was already in the eighties. In another hour the rays would peek over the horizon and the temperature would soar.

"I feel like I'm in Florida with all this humidity," Dec grumbled.

"Brother, I'd take Florida any day over this."

We continued to walk the last quarter mile to the only road leading into the camp where the girls were being held and stopped to survey the area. A one lane dirt road that wouldn't be travelled by anyone who didn't have business down the road.

"What do you think?" I asked Declan.

"Looks good." He glanced around. "There's a downed tree, we don't even have to cut one down."

And thank God for that. Not only would us axing down a tree make noise but it would take time.

Declan and I dragged the large tree across the lane, blocking the path of all vehicles, making sure Preston Lockhart couldn't swerve around it.

"Now we wait," Declan said when everything was in place.

We disappeared into the overgrown brush on the side of the road to conceal our presence and waited. With nothing else to do to pass the time, my thoughts wandered to Anaya.

I couldn't stop thinking about her nightmares and if she'd been able to sleep. Would they subside now that the girls were rescued? I'd spent the last twenty-four hours trying to tamp down my worry. But a niggling feeling in my gut wouldn't stop. She was supposed to stay in the truck away from prying eyes. What if someone had seen her? What if they were followed? Declan and I had stayed behind to make sure the truck had made it out of the neighborhood safely but someone could've picked up their tail anywhere in the city.

Amisha was dead, so were her two bodyguards. But we hadn't made an attempt to enter the other house. Was someone in there watching? Tex had called the Timorese officials, and as we were leaving, a swarm of people had approached the orphanage. Would those girls be safe? They were all younger; they'd have time but how much time? Something felt wrong.

"You're thinking," Dec commented.

"What'd Tex say about the girls in the orphanage?"

"He said an Australian-run charity already took custody of the girls and were moving them. It's all good." I nodded thinking that was good. "What else is on your mind?"

"You didn't see anyone watching the truck, right?"

"No. But it's always a possibility."

That was one thing I liked about Declan, he didn't sugarcoat shit. He was a straight shooter and would tell you the truth even if it wasn't what you wanted to hear.

"You're worried about Anaya?" he surmised. "Call her and check in when this is done."

"I'm being—"

"Fuck, Kyle, just call her. When we get home, we got shit to do. Important shit that's going to require your full attention."

He was not wrong. Omni had waged war, and I couldn't have my head full of Anaya. I needed to sort myself and put her behind me. She was gone. And most likely safely getting the girls she'd rescued settled before she headed home, then off to South America for two goddamn years.

"I'll check in with her later."

Declan perked up and tilted his head. "You hear that?"

I nodded and adjusted my Colt M4 and watched as Dec did the same. We inched closer to the road, staying hidden behind the thick brush, and listened as the crunching of tires on gravel got louder.

We didn't have to wait long for the car to roll to a stop, unable to pass thanks to our trap. The driver's door opened and a man stepped out and looked around.

Declan nudged me and I gave him a quick lift of my chin acknowledging the nonverbal question positively identifying the man.

Preston Lockhart.

Declan didn't delay. Though he never did. Two snaps rang out and the man dropped where he'd stood. The gunshots echoed through the forestry and we moved.

Dec went to the vehicle and I moved to Preston's body. Confirming he was indeed dead, I checked his pockets and came away with his wallet and phone.

After the car was thoroughly checked, we slipped back into the woods and started our trek to the camp.

"One down," Declan said into his phone, calling in the kill. With no other conversation he slipped it back into his pocket.

Two more hours max and this would be done.

Two more hours and I could call Anaya and check in.

She'd tell me she was fine and I'd fly home.

Then what?

I'd go about my life, she'd go about hers, and never again shall
the two pass.

Fuck, that thought turned my stomach.

CHAPTER 11

THE ORPHANAGE DONNY and Camilla had chosen was perfect.

The mountainside was beautiful. A clean crisp ocean breeze rolled over the small village and it smelled of new beginnings. I wasn't stupid. It would take more than fresh air to heal the girls, but it was a start. The owners of the orphanage were kind and immediately welcomed the girls.

One man roamed the property, but he kept to the outskirts and gave the girls a wide berth. All of the other caretakers were women, both young and old alike.

As soon as we'd arrived, the girls were offered showers, clean clothes, and food. All nine had stayed huddled together through the process. Even though there was room for the girls to be separated and sleep in cots, they'd refused and were now sleeping on mats in the corner of the room.

It broke my heart but I understood. They also didn't want much to do with me. I was an outsider, a stranger. All I'd wanted was to see them safe and they were. Besides, I'd be leaving at sunrise. There was no point for me to push my way into their lives, they'd been traumatized enough.

Donny and Camilla had left immediately after our arrival. They'd received word they were needed back in Dili. I opted to stay to make sure the girls had settled, though now I regretted my decision. I wasn't needed here and someone from the nearby village had to drive me six hours back to the city.

But I'd wanted to stay and see for myself that the girls would be okay.

I tried to get comfortable in the small cot and turned on my side. Staring into the darkness, I thought about Kyle. Did he get to the Cambodian girls in time? Was he okay? Was he thinking about me, too?

Of course he wasn't.

* * *

"Miss." A woman shook me from sleep. "Car here."

Crap. I overslept.

Which was not surprising since I'd tossed and turned all night. And every time I'd woken up all I could think about was how good it had felt when I'd fallen asleep in Kyle's arms. I couldn't forget the feel of his chest against my back, his strong arms holding me close. I couldn't figure out what it was about him that had me sinking into his embrace instead of freaking out. And I'd spent much of my night thinking on it and I still couldn't understand.

I sat up and tossed my legs over the metal frame of the cot and tried to shake the last of my lethargy away. I'd wanted to say goodbye to the girls but now I'd have no time.

I stood and finger-combed my hair, pulled it into a ponytail, and grabbed my backpack. I'd brush my teeth and change my clothes at the airport. Not that anyone would care what I looked like—but they would appreciate minty fresh breath.

I followed the girl out of the room I'd been given and made my way outside. All nine girls were waiting for me and I couldn't stop my smile. They were here, they were safe, and they'd heal.

The oldest of the group slowly approached and stopped a few feet from me. "Thank you," she spoke in English. "You save us."

"Be well and take care of each other."

With a nod she went back to the group, and for the first time in a long time I wanted to reach out and pull the small girl into a hug. But I refrained, knowing my embrace would be unwelcomed. God, I hoped one day she'd learn to trust again and not wall herself off like I'd done. It was a lonely life full of regrets.

After a quick goodbye to the owner and the staff, I was on my way back to Dili. Back to my dull life. Alone. Without Kyle.

I wished I knew where he was and what he was doing.

* * *

FIVE AND A HALF hours was a long time to ride on a bumpy road that winded down a mountain then zigzagged over more foothills. My stomach was queasy and my ass hurt. It felt like I was sitting on a piece of plywood covered in upholstery. And considering the car I was in had been manufactured sometime in the 1980s, I probably was.

For the last half hour, the driver kept stealing glances at me through the rearview mirror, making my unease grow. The man looked to be in his thirties but he had a scraggly beard and unkept hair which made it difficult to accurately pinpoint his age. He could've been in his teens for all I knew. While I couldn't guess his age, I could tell something was off. He was acting strange.

"Everything okay? Is someone following us?" I turned to look out the back window but there were no other cars in sight.

"No, Miss," he said in heavily accented English.

The hair on the back of my neck tingled. Something wasn't right. The driver started to slow and I pulled my phone out of my backpack.

"Okay." I smiled broadly trying not to alert the man that I was now freaking the hell out.

I scrolled to the only number I could think of for help and sent a text: *Weird feeling. Could be nothing. I'm thirtyish minutes west of Dili. My driver is acting funny. We passed two power plants a minute ago. No street signs.*

I sent the message and looked around. *Come on, what else could I tell Kyle? Think, Anaya.*

I went back to my phone and tapped out another message: *I can see the ocean. There's a big church with a red roof and a sign to Maritimia.*

My phone vibrated with an incoming message: *When the car stops run. I'm on my way.*

He was on his way?

Me: *It might be nothing. Wait. I just have a weird feeling.*

Kyle: *Never ignore what your intuition is telling you. We're coming. Run, Anaya. Promise me you'll run.*

If I'd been freaked-out before, I was seriously freaking out now. I knew something was wrong, just like I had the day the rebels had

stormed the village. There'd been something telling me to hide even before I'd heard the first gunshot. The same voice was whispering now. The same feeling of panic was starting to well in my stomach.

Me: *I'll run.*

My hands were shaking as I smiled and took in my surroundings.

"Why are we stopping?" I asked when the driver turned off the main road.

"Petrol," he lied.

There were no gas stations around but I smiled again and nodded.

I went back to my phone and sent Kyle an update: *He pulled off the road. North toward the water. There's a big marina. I don't see anything else.*

My heart was pounding in my chest and perspiration dotted my forehead.

Kyle: *As soon as he slows jump out and run. I'll find you.*

The car started to slow and dread hit me like a tsunami.

Me: *5 men. We're stopping. I'll try to run. Please find me.*

Kyle: *I WILL find you. Run, sweetheart. RUN.*

I shoved my phone in my pack, secured the strap over my shoulders, and didn't wait another second. I pushed open the door—which was much harder than it looked in the movies while a car was in motion—and jumped out.

I hit the ground with a thud and all the oxygen was knocked from my lungs. That, too, looked much easier in the movies. My shoulder and hip hurt from the impact and I was still trying to catch my breath when I rolled to my side to get my feet under me, but it never happened.

A booted foot made contact with my ribs and I screamed out in pain. A second kick landed and I would swear I heard a bone snap. A hand grabbed my bicep, the other my ponytail, and pulled me to my feet and roughly shoved me forward. My head tilted back, trying to alleviate some of the pain from my hair being yanked, but nothing could stop the fear that had taken over.

I swung wildly trying to evade my captor—my feet kicked, and I screamed until my throat burned. A second man approached, his fist raised. Pain blistered across my face, then the lights went out.

* * *

I CAME AWAKE WITH A START.

Chained.

No, *no*, no. Not again.

Panicked bubbled and I couldn't breathe.

My body swayed and I wasn't sure if it was because I was hyper-ventilating or if I was moving.

I yanked on my wrists but they wouldn't budge.

Chained.

Please, God, let Kyle find me.

Fuzziness clouded my vision and darkness pulled me under.

I WILL find you.

Kyle would come.

CHAPTER 12

"WE'RE GETTING CLOSER," Declan assured me.

Closer?

Anaya had been gone seventeen hours.

Seventeen fucking hours of pure hell.

With no direct flights to Dili, we'd stopped in Australia. By the time we'd landed, Tex had tracked Anaya, or more accurately he thought he had. So we were waiting in Darwin, Australia, for the boat Anaya was supposed to be on to cross into Australian waters.

With an ongoing feud over the maritime border over who controlled the oil-rich seabed, the Royal Australian Navy wouldn't fly us out to the vessel until it cleared the border.

The longer we waited the longer Anaya was at the hands of men who meant her harm.

My gut churned at the thought.

She had to be scared out of her goddamn head.

Declan looked down at his phone and swiped the screen.

"You're on speaker." Dec's curt greeting echoed in the small hangar we were waiting in.

Fucking waiting. Anaya had been kidnapped and we were waiting. Not hunting, not finding, not killing the men who'd taken her. Waiting.

"Get ready," Garrett came on the line. "The boat crossed the border and is anchored."

"Thank fuck," I grouched, ready to board the Seahawk that would fly us out to meet the boat.

"Kyle," Zane barked, joining the conversation. "Keep your head on straight."

My boss's demand pissed me off. My head wasn't on straight, nor would it be. It was exactly where it needed to be. Maximum destruction.

"Copy," I returned and Zane sighed.

"Don't get dead and bring your woman home."

My woman. That's what she was and there was no more fucking denying it. No more pissing away opportunities. No more pushing away what I knew to be true. But now, it might be too late. All because I was a dumb fuck. This was on me.

The line disconnected and two Australian Navy pilots headed our way in flight suits. Declan and I stood ready to follow the team out to the tarmac.

"Have you ever flown on an MH-60 Romeo?" the female pilot asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Declan clipped.

The woman looked me over and lifted her chin. "Someone better get this one a jubie. He looks like he's gonna chunder."

"He's fine," Dec clipped and pounded me on the shoulder, reminding me to keep my mouth shut.

I didn't need a goddamned drink and I wasn't going to throw up. But I was going to hijack the fucking helicopter if they didn't get a move on.

"Flight check's been done, unless you'd like to inspect her, we're ready," the male interjected.

"We're good. Let's roll," Dec answered.

The pilots parted ways, each climbing in the opposite side of the helicopter. Dec and I made our way to the open gunner's window and hopped in.

Each of us secured a pair of headsets and settled in.

"Hold tight." Declan's hard features told me he was feeling this, too.

We shouldn't have left Anaya. I'd allowed my personal feelings to get in the way of what I'd known—she'd be in danger if she stayed.

Now she was on board a fucking boat with an unknown number of male kidnappers. God only knew what had been done to her, or what they were still doing to her.

Fury hit my gut and turned it over, slushing around until it mixed with murderous intent.

The chopping of rotor blades started and a moment later the Seahawk started to lift.

"Should be a smooth flight. ETA forty minutes," the female pilot announced.

"What's your name?" I asked over the radio.

"Taylor," the woman answered.

"Lee," the man sounded off next.

"Preciate the lift today."

"We'll cut down the time for you if we can," Taylor told me.

"That'd be helpful."

The longer I sat strapped into the back of the helicopter, the more antsy I became. Every minute meant Anaya was in harm's way. Every second longer meant she was in fear.

Declan and I had a loose mission plan, but without knowing how many tingos were on the boat we couldn't come up with a finite plan. Something that had my nerves in a constant state of upheaval. We always planned. We always had a clear mission strategy and backup plans. That was what had kept us alive all these years.

This whole thing felt like we were flying by the seat of our pants and I didn't fucking like it one bit. And the reality of the situation was, we were jumping into an unknown situation, with a half-assed evac plan in place. And the cold truth was, Anaya may not be on the boat.

And if she was, she may not even be alive.

We were relying on reports Tex and Garrett had dug up about a woman being abducted and carried to a personal water craft near the Maritimia museum and surplus store. Thankfully a group of school children had been visiting and the teacher had reported the abduction.

Anaya's text messages gave us a starting point to look for her, but with the time lapse she could've been anywhere and we would've been searching by land, not the Timor Sea.

Once again, Tex's skills, even from the other side of the world, were impressive. The former SEAL ruled the internet from his living room. And I'd never been more grateful he was on our side.

"We have your craft at three o'clock," Lee came over the radio. "We're going to circle around. Prepare for insertion."

Dec and I unstrapped and carefully made our way to the gunner's window. Wind rushed in, salty air blasted my face, doing nothing to cool my overheated body. He patted my shoulder and I glanced in his direction.

"We got this, Kyle. We're bringing your woman home."

My jaw ticked and my heart thundered in my chest. She had to be on that boat. Fucking had to be, or we were screwed. This was our one chance at rescue. It would be hours before we'd be back to shore and by then Anaya's window would be slammed closed.

"I told her I'd find her," I croaked.

"And you did. She's right down there." Dec motioned down to the water. "Easy day, friend. We've done this a thousand times. Strong hand over weak, hook your foot, turn and go."

I didn't need the goddamned reminder how to fast-rope out of a helo—that I'd done enough times I could perform the task in my sleep. But Dec was wrong, I'd never done *this*, because the woman I'd felt some odd and overwhelming connection to had never been fucking kidnapped.

"Throw the rope," Taylor instructed. "We called in the coordinates for your evac. ETA on that is sixty minutes. Be safe, gentlemen."

"Jump when ready. Holding fast." Lee's voice crackled over the radio and he was much harder to hear now that we were sitting with our legs dangling over the open door.

Dec nodded and we removed our headsets and latched them in the aircraft and both donned heavy gloves.

With one last check of my gear, I made sure everything was secure and reached for the thick rope dangling in front of me. Without delay I pushed myself off the perch, hooked my foot, and slid down. Seconds later I hit the water feet first and looked up to see Dec had not followed protocol and he was halfway down the rope. He hit the water with a splash and a second later his head popped up and he shook the water from his face.

"Let's get this done," I growled.

Hold on, sweetheart, I'm coming for you.

CHAPTER 13

“WHO ARE THEY?”

I shook my head and braced for impact. A hard smack hit my cheek, the crack reverberated in the small room, and I didn't bother to try to lift my head. “This will be much easier on you if you tell me who the men are.” The man's nasty breath fanned across my face—but then we'd been at this a long time so I was used to the putrid smell.

Every part of me hurt. But the man would have to kill me, because I wasn't giving up Kyle and Declan. I'd made peace with my decision. No matter what he did, I wasn't telling.

“I already know who they are, but I want to hear you say it!” the man shouted.

He was an American, that much I knew. He sounded like he was from the east coast, maybe Philly or Jersey. Jet-black hair, olive skin, I'd say he was of Italian descent. Not that it mattered, but just in case I got out of this alive I was committing everything to memory.

“Where did they go?” He tried a new line of questioning.

Before I could give my denial, the man stepped back and cocked his head to the side.

“I'm done fucking around. When I get back, if you don't talk, I'm killing you.”

The man left, slamming the door behind him, leaving me hanging in the middle of the room. My hands were chained to a pipe above my head and I was on my tiptoes. I'd settled into the position a long time ago. I couldn't feel my hands and numbness had travelled from my arms down to my shoulders.

I licked some of the blood off my lips. With no other option, I waited for the man to return. At least I would die safe in the knowledge I didn't break. A tear rolled down my cheek, stinging a path down my abraded skin.

All the ways there were for a person to die, I'd never imagined this was how my life would end. I had so many regrets and I'd never get a chance to rectify any of them. I'd never fallen in love, never allowed anyone close enough to love me. I'd never walked hand in hand on a beach at sunset. I'd lived my life afraid of everything. Then there was Kyle. And I regretted leaving him the most. I could've fallen in love with him. I should've been stronger. I should've been honest and told him I wanted to go with him. I shouldn't have let him push me away.

But I was a coward.

What a damn waste.

I'd been given a second chance when I'd been rescued from sex traffickers and I'd squandered it. Now I was out of chances and out of time.

So freaking stupid.

Two very loud bangs sounded above my head and I froze, straining to hear what was going on. There was a third crash but I still couldn't hear voices. Were the men fighting? The captain didn't look happy when I woke up as I was being carried onto the boat. An argument had ensued but the Italian had won and we pulled away from the dock.

The door swung open and suddenly a black rifle was pointed at me. My eyes drifted closed, not wanting to witness the moment the guy pulled the trigger. Knowing I was going to die, I quickly pulled up a mental image of Kyle, wanting his smile to be the last thing I saw.

"Goddammit." My lids flew open. As if by magic he was in front of me. I blinked a few times trying to clear the mirage, but each time I reopened my eyes, Kyle was there. "Hold on, sweetheart, I'll have you down in a minute."

His hands went above my head and a moment later I was falling. Kyle's arms wrapped around me before I hit the floor and I cried out in pain.

"Where are you hurt?"

"Everywhere," I choked.

If I hadn't been looking at him, I would've missed it—anger so extreme I flinched away.

"I'd never hurt you, Anaya. I swear it."

"I know."

"You're gonna have to trust me. I need to pick you up." He waited until I nodded, then he swung me up in his arms. Pain sliced through me and I held back a sob.

Kyle rushed up a narrow set of stairs and I closed my eyes against the blinding sunshine and the overwhelming urge to throw up. My head throbbed, my ribs were on fire, I couldn't feel my arms, but I was alive.

Kyle found me.

"Get the fuck off the boat!" Declan shouted.

"This is gonna hurt like a son of a bitch," Kyle warned as he started to run. "Hold on, sweetheart."

We were suddenly airborne, then my stomach dropped right before we hit the water. My mouth and nose filled with water and I struggled to get away from Kyle. The salt from the ocean burned every abrasion I had. The torture so intense I thought I was going to pass out.

We emerged from what I feared would be our watery tomb and I sucked in a painful mouthful of air.

"Can you swim?"

"I don't think so. I still can't feel my arms."

"Just stay on your back and don't fight me." Kyle turned onto his side and started towing me next to him as he sliced through the water.

"The boat's rigged. Move your ass!" Declan yelled.

We hadn't moved another five yards when the boat exploded. A sound like I'd never heard before rocked me, the ocean around us rippled, and debris and smoke filled the air.

"Hold your breath."

I quickly took in as much oxygen as I could and closed my eyes right before Kyle yanked me underwater and started kicking his feet. I tried my hardest to follow what he was doing and help propel us faster, but the more energy I expelled the sooner I was needing to resurface for air.

I couldn't be the reason Kyle got hurt, I had to push through. Had to. My lungs burned, my thighs were giving out, my face was

on fire. But I kicked as hard as I could. I didn't want to die.

I wanted a third chance to make things right, make my life count.
I wanted to live.

Finally, Kyle took me up to the surface and treaded water as he kept my head above water.

"I got you, Anaya. Turn on your back and float."

"You found me," I muttered. "You saved me."

"I told you I would, sweetheart. Just try to relax." He looked around then yelled, "Declan!"

Declan swam to us and tread water, too. "Hold her while I pull out a life vest."

My body went solid as Kyle transferred me to Declan.

"Anaya," Declan called. "Look at me and breathe." I heard Kyle mutter a curse before Declan started talking to me. "You're safe. No one's gonna hurt you."

I was being ridiculous. "I know. I'm sorry. I don't think you'd hurt me."

"Nothing to apologize for."

Kyle fitted a deflated life preserver over my head and fastened the straps around my waist before he pulled the handle and the rubber inflated. Declan slowly let go, testing my buoyancy. When I didn't sink, he pulled his pack off and started rummaging through it until he came out with his own life preserver.

"Always prepared," I muttered gratefully.

"Always," Declan said and smiled.

Kyle was bobbing in the water next me, studying my face with a grimace.

"Does it look bad?" I asked.

"Motherfuckers."

It wasn't necessarily the answer I was after, but it pretty much told me everything I needed to know.

"My ribs are the worst," I told them. "It hurts when I take a deep breath."

"Anywhere else?"

I held my chafed wrists out of the water. "This and whatever happened to my face." Kyle nodded and brushed a few strands of hair off my forehead. "Thank you for coming."

"I'm so fucking sorry it took us so long."

"You made it just in time. He was getting ready to kill me."

"Who was?"

"I don't know his name. He was tall, black hair, looked like an Italian."

Kyle's eyes squinted and his jaw ticked. "He won't ever get near you again."

"I'd guess not. The boat exploded," I reminded him.

"He was dead before that happened."

A piece of debris floated by and Kyle pushed it away as he inflated his flotation device.

"I can't believe that just happened." Both men looked at me with their brows pulled together. "That really happened, the boat exploded."

Without warning, lunacy hit and a laugh bubbled to the surface. I was alive. They made it to me in time. My giggle started slowly until my body was shaking with laughter. Each time I moved it felt like someone was stabbing me in the side but I couldn't stop it.

"Sweetheart?"

"Oh my God!" I croaked and my hilarity turned to sobs. "The boat..."

"Anaya, look at me," Kyle murmured at the same time Declan muttered, "Fuck."

"He was going to kill me." I tried to stop the tears from coming but all of the emotions I had bottled up spilled over and I couldn't stop them. "I promise I didn't tell."

"Tell what?" Kyle asked and smoothed my hair.

"The man. He wanted to know who you were. He kept asking over and over who took the girls. He said it would be easier for me if I told. But I would've rather died than give you two up."

"He hit you because you wouldn't tell him our names?" Declan growled.

"He said...he said he knew but he wanted to hear me say it. I swear, I didn't tell."

Kyle was vibrating with so much anger it shocked me into silence.

Declan let out a long string of curse words, and if I hadn't been floating in the middle of the ocean after almost dying, I would've been impressed by his creativity.

"You should've told him," Kyle spat.

"What?"

Was he mad at me?

"He hit you. You should've told him our names."

"I would never do that. I would've rather him kill me than put you two in danger."

Kyle's gaze left mine and I followed his eyes to Declan. He, too, looked furious. Something important passed between them in a silent conversation. I didn't ask what it was, instead I asked, "What now?"

"Now we wait," Kyle answered.

"Wait?"

"The rescue boat has been deployed."

"How long until they get here?"

"Probably another thirty minutes."

"Thirty minutes?"

Panic started to set in. What if the boat couldn't find us? Were we going to die out here bobbing in the ocean?

"We were hoping to wait on the boat until the rescue team got to us. But the asshole who detonated the bomb shot that plan to shit," Declan told me.

"Everything's gonna be fine. Easy day, sweetheart." I was sure Kyle was trying to be reassuring but now I couldn't stop thinking about a frenzy of sharks circling below us. I didn't want to survive a kidnapping, a beating, and a boat explosion only to become lunch for hungry fish.

"All we need to do is float. Just like in your book." Kyle smiled at me.

"My book?"

"Yeah. You know in the beginning after the woman is rescued, they end up in the water. Just like them, all we have to do is wait."

I knew the part he was talking about. And when I'd read it, I thought it was romantic how the couple was drifting in the water together. The fantasy of being rescued by a man as strong and protective as the hero had sent chills down my arms. Now that I was living it, I wasn't—

"Sweetheart." Kyle cut into my thoughts. "I promise everything's gonna be fine."

"Okay."

Kyle had promised he'd find me and he had. If he said we were going to be fine, we would be. I knew it with everything inside of

me.

I tried to adjust the life preserver to alleviate some of the pressure it was putting on my neck, and when Kyle noticed he said, "Sucks to say, but we're gonna be out here awhile. You might as well get comfortable with being uncomfortable."

"Not a SEAL, huh?" I smirked when he used a Navy SEAL motivational saying.

"Never said I wasn't." Kyle chuckled.

"But you never said you were."

"Didn't think I needed to confirm what you already knew."

"No. You were just enjoying making me work for it."

Declan's bark of laughter startled me and I turned to look at him.

"What's funny?"

"Nothing," Declan answered.

"Then why are you laughing?"

"Because you're funny if you think Kyle would make you work for anything."

"What?"

"Nothin', Anaya."

I looked back to Kyle, hoping he'd explain Declan's weird response, but when my eyes met his, my inquiry died in my throat.

His features had grown soft and eyes were thoughtful.

"You should rest, sweetheart. Close your eyes and relax."

"But—"

"I got this. You just relax."

There it was, another promise I knew he'd keep.

"Okay."

I closed my eyes and my head felt a hundred times better. I took a few shallow breaths and tried to relax as Kyle had suggested. He was right next to me, his hand still on my back holding me up even though it was no longer needed. Protecting me. Keeping me safe.

Then my mind wandered to my book. Maybe Susan Stoker had it right. There was something amazing about being in the middle of the ocean with a big, badass former Navy SEAL. There was something astoundingly wonderful knowing he'd keep you safe. Kyle's hand started moving back and forth and I realized real life was way better than any book I could ever read.

No more regrets, I vowed.

No more hiding.

I had another chance and I was never again going to be too afraid to take what I wanted.

CHAPTER 14

ANAYA HAD SHOWERED and was standing in front of the window in her hotel room looking out at the city lights when I came into the room.

"Are you ready for me to bandage your ribs?" I asked and she jerked in surprise.

Fuck, I wished I could go back and kill every one of those assholes again.

"Yeah."

When she turned it took all of my control not to flinch at the sight of her face.

The motherfucker had done a number on her. From her left temple down to her chin her face was red, swollen, and scratched.

"It could be worse," she mumbled. "At least he didn't punch me."

She needed to stop saying shit like that. Making light of what had been done to her. Every time she'd mentioned it, rage consumed me.

"All he did was slap me. If he'd punched me, he would have broken bones. This will heal in a few days," she finished.

Christ.

But would her soul heal? Could she get past this trauma? I still didn't know the details about what happened in the hours she was gone, but when I'd found her, she'd been restrained. She'd been chained to a pipe above her head, an image I would never forget. Blood dripping from her face, her wrists raw, up on her toes. Bare feet, torn clothes, beat to hell. Yeah, I'd never fucking forget it—not for as long as I lived.

"Kyle?" she called.

"You're gonna have to pull the shirt up so I can wrap you up. Are you okay with that?"

"Yeah," she sighed.

"I won't—"

"I know you won't. You don't have to keep telling me. I trust you, Kyle." Anaya slowly made her way to me and stopped a few feet away. "I think it looks worse than it really is."

She pulled up the t-shirt I let her borrow, gathering the extra material as she went, and tucked it under her breasts, exposing her bare midriff. The boxers I'd loaned her were rolled down low on her hips and I sucked in a breath.

"I told you it looked worse than it feels."

My eyes traveled over the purple and green bruises and my hand shook from the sight of her pretty pale flesh marred and injured. I'd fucked up so huge. This was my fault.

"Never fucking again will anyone fucking touch you in anger. I swear it on my life."

Anaya's eyes drifted closed and her inhale was audible.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart."

My gaze traveled over her marred flesh and I couldn't believe this beautiful, strong woman had taken a goddamn beating to protect me. She could've easily given my name, Declan's name, given up Z Corps, Cambodia, everything. Yet she'd willingly took hit after hit. I knew men twice her size who'd broken under less pressure. Un-fucking-believable.

My woman was strong. Mine. And I'd never again make the mistake of denying it again.

With my hands trembling, it took me two tries to open the Ace bandage. When I had the elastic compress where I needed it, I carefully started to unwind it around her.

"Please stop," Anaya huffed, and I froze making sure I wasn't hurting her. "Not that." She exhaled loudly.

"What do you mean, 'not that'?"

"Not the wrapping. The way you're acting."

"How am I acting?"

"Like I'm made of glass. Like I'll freak out if you touch me. Like I'm broken."

"Anaya—"

"Just stop, Kyle. Don't treat me like I'm some fragile victim. Wrap my fucking ribs and stop trying so hard not to touch me."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Bullshit," she snapped and stepped away, forcing the bandage to fall to the floor.

Steely determination shone bright on her face, and it was radiating out of every pore.

"You know what I was thinking about when that asshole was slapping me?"

My body locked tight, not sure if I wanted to hear this. Not yet. I was still too raw. Too angry. Too emotionally overwhelmed with all the feelings I had racing through my mind.

"How much I regretted locking myself away being scared of everything and everyone. How I'd wasted the second chance I'd been given. How I'd spent my life pretending I was brave and travelling the world when all I was really doing was putting emotional distance between me and every person I came in contact with. It's kinda hard to forge lasting friendships when you're always moving around. I was play-acting at living. I'd perpetrated a grand lie."

Her eyes filled with tears and my chest ached at the sight. Anaya Baker was not a victim. I doubted she ever was, even at thirteen when she'd been sold into a sex trafficking ring.

Strong and loyal, that was who Anaya was.

"Then I'd thought about you."

"Me?" I asked, shocked she'd think about me while she'd thought her life was going to end.

"Yes, you. I wanted your smile to be the last thing I saw before I died. I was thinking about how if I'd been stronger, I would've been able to tell you the truth."

Her admission had me on edge for a very different reason. I'd been wrong, I thought everything I'd been feeling was one-sided. I'd been so caught up in my shit, I'd missed it. And damn if that was an even bigger kick to the gut.

"What truth is that?"

"That I wanted to stay with you. That I wanted *you* to want *me* to stay, and maybe if I wasn't so fucked up, you wouldn't have wanted to get away from me so quickly. Maybe if I wasn't such a freak—"

"What the fuck?" The question was ripped from somewhere deep inside of me. "What the actual fuck, Anaya? That's what you

think? That I wanted away from you?"

"Well, yeah. One second you were talking about me coming with you, then you were pushing me away. I know I have issues and I don't blame you. That's part of what I regretted. Maybe if I was a different kind of woman, I could have a man like you. But instead I've spent the last eighteen years of my life acting like a freak with a flashing warning sign above my head that says, 'stay away.' Do you know when the last time I had sex was?"

My gut clenched, not wanting to hear the answer, but she continued. "When I was twenty. I'm thirty-two, Kyle. You do the math. Do you know how many men I've slept with? Two. What unmarried, unattached woman my age who's *not* fucked up has only slept with two men?" She stopped and looked down at the floor shaking her head. "I get it. I really do. But please stop treating me like I'm going to have a nervous breakdown if you touch me."

"What do you get?" I growled. My own regret and irritation swirling together making it difficult for me to contain my ire.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what is it that you *think* you get?"

"Let's see. I acted like a freak the first time—"

"Stop calling yourself a goddamn freak, Anaya."

"Well, if the shoe fits..." she trailed off before she continued with her original thought. "The first time you touched me on the plane, I admitted it had been years since I'd touched another human. Then, like a weirdo I asked if I could hold your hand for the next twenty hours we were in the air. Then I had a total come apart when you pushed me against a wall—to protect me. Then I had two different nightmares where you had to come in and calm me down. So with all of that, I get why you wouldn't want anything to do with me. Which brings me to what I do know. No man wants to deal with a basket case. So there's my regret—if I was normal, maybe you wouldn't have pushed me away."

Her entire explanation was such bullshit and so far from how I felt about her I didn't know where to begin. I wanted to shake the hell out of her until every bad thought she had about herself rattled free.

"Straight up, Anaya, I'm gonna set a few things straight, then we're getting into bed so you can get some rest." I paused, trying my best to get my temper under check, but when I'd thought about what

she'd said about herself I couldn't tamp it down. "Don't you ever call yourself a freak, a weirdo, a basket case, or any other fucking adjective other than 'strong' again, or so help me God, you'll see a side of me you wish you hadn't. You are so fucking brave. Your courage and kindness leave me in awe. Who in the actual fuck cares if you haven't had sex in however many years it's been? That doesn't say one thing about you that's bad.

"And I want you to listen to me real careful now. I did not leave you because I wanted to *get* away from you, period. You wanna talk about regrets? It's my fault you were kidnapped. If I would've listened to my gut and kept you with me, none of this would've happened. But instead I acted like a pussy, too afraid to admit to myself I was feeling something for you. Too weak. Too stupid. I thought I was behaving like an over-protective asshole when you wanted to stay in Timor-Leste, yet I demanded you come with me. So I backed down—worst mistake of my life—but that decision had everything to do with my job and the shit that's happening there. The fuck of it is, I wanted you safe, and I thought you'd be better off without me. But you need to understand this, that will not be happening again. I will not back down. And you may think I'm an asshole for sayin' it, but from now on, I'm operating on instincts. When my gut is screamin' at me to hold you close, I'm holding you close. You can push me away, but I swear it will be useless."

Anaya was standing two feet away from me, trembling. *Too damn far*. I closed the distance and moved in front of her, slowly raising my hands to gently cup her face. She might as well get used to my touch now, because I planned on doing it a lot.

I waited until some of the stiffness subsided then told her, "We're gonna get you through this. You and me. We're gonna work all that bad shit you got bottled up inside of you out." She held my gaze but didn't respond. "I need to trust you when you tell me you know I won't hurt you. I'll stop treating you like you're made of glass if you promise me, you understand that when I touch you, it will never be done with cruel intentions."

"I promise," she whispered.

"Do you feel the same connection I do?" She nodded wordlessly, answering my question. "Do you want to explore those feelings?"

"Yes, but—"

"No buts. Yes or no."

"It's not that simple." Her cheeks tinged pink and I knew where her thoughts had gone.

"You're worried about a physical relationship?" Again she nodded and tried to look away. "Don't hide from me." Her gaze came back to mine. "We'll worry about that when the time comes."

"But—"

"Babe, I hate to sound so crass, but if the need arises, I gotta hand and I'm not afraid to use it."

Her lips twitched and her face flamed.

"I wasn't thinking about you," she grumbled and my dormant cock twitched, thinking about her needing to get off and all the ways I could help her with that.

"Yes or no, do you want to explore those feelings?" I asked again, needing to steer my thoughts away from bringing her to a screaming orgasm. Twelve years was a long time to go without having sex and when we got to the point where she was in my bed, and she could trust me enough to let go, I had no doubt it would be magnificent. But it was going to be a time-consuming endeavor, one I was going to enjoy.

"Yes."

"Good." I hadn't realized how hard my heart had been pounding waiting for her to answer. "There are plenty of other ways for me to make you feel good without me on top of you making you feel trapped. Things that do not involve my dick anywhere near you." My cock jerked in my pants making its protest known.

"Um..."

"Never been in a situation like this," I started. "But my take is, we need open communication. Total honesty about everything. There's no room for embarrassment. Physically we'll go as slow as you need and I'll take you as far as you want to go. You'll never need to worry about me and my body's reaction to you. Straight up, Anaya, I think you're beautiful, sexy, smart, and so damn strong I can't control my dick from getting hard when I touch you, but I promise I can and will control what I do with it."

"I like it when you hold my hand," she whispered.

"Good. We'll start there."

"I like when you slept behind me and held me."

"I like that, too."

Anaya was quiet for a long moment and I gave her time to process her thoughts before I prompted, "What are you thinking about?" She remained silent so I reminded her, "Complete honesty. You can tell me anything. I won't judge you and I'll never be mad—unless you call yourself a bad name."

She smiled and straightened gathering her courage. "I don't want you to treat me any different than you would any other woman you've been with."

My brows pulled together and I said, "But you're not any other woman. Not even close, sweetheart."

"I just mean I don't want you to hold back, always waiting for my reaction or for me to, you know, freak out."

My eyes narrowed as she came dangerously close to saying something disparaging about herself.

"I need to have a care and watch your reactions to me."

"But—"

"Didn't say I'd hold back, babe, I only know one way to be and that's me. But that doesn't mean I won't be watchful, so don't mistake that for hesitation."

"Are we really talking about this?" she whispered. "Is this normal?"

"Don't know, don't care. Really, I don't give the first fuck what normal is supposed to be. Bottomline is, it's who we are and how I want us to be. I want to get to know you better and when the time comes when sex is introduced, we'll both be ready."

I'd told Anaya the truth, I *didn't* know what normal was. But I knew I'd never started anything with a woman that began with extreme openness and honesty like this. There was no need when there'd be no relationship. But Anaya was different for a variety of reasons, and one of them was she'd been hurt in the past. The fact couldn't be denied and swept away no matter how badly she wanted to pretend it hadn't happened to her.

I had one shot at making this right for her.

One attempt to prove to her I was a man she could trust with her body and her heart.

"Let me wrap your ribs so we can get into bed."

She wordlessly repeated the process of pulling up her shirt and exposing her midsection. This time I didn't shy away from allowing

my knuckles to graze her bare skin. I was as gentle as the situation called for, but didn't waver in my confidence to take care of her.

CHAPTER 15

IT HAD TAKEN me a few minutes to find a comfortable position, but when Kyle propped some extra pillows behind me keeping my head elevated, I could breathe. That was, until Kyle pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it on top of his open backpack.

With nothing more than a lift of his brow he climbed into bed next me. I might've been a tad more appreciative than I should've been when he didn't ask me if I was all right. I didn't want him treating me like I was some crazy woman he had to check in with every five seconds to make sure I wouldn't freak out.

But the truth was, I totally *wasn't* okay. But it had nothing to do with fear and everything to do with him being shirtless and abso-freaking-lutely hot bare-chested. Well-defined pecs and a six pack graced his front and I wanted to ask him to turn around so I could verify his back was just as muscular, but I didn't. Only because I was afraid that would be a little weird—but I had no problem staring at him as he got into bed.

Kyle rolled to his side facing me, propped his elbow on the bed to support his head, and stared at me.

His gaze was disconcerting and I braced when he opened his mouth. "Tell me about what happened after you left Amisha's."

Not at all what I wanted to talk about while Kyle was lying next to me with his shirt off after he'd told me straight out he felt the same way I did and wanted to explore those feelings. Then he'd led the conversation to sex, and as embarrassed as I'd been, his candor and openness made it easy for me to be honest in return. I was wor-

ried about a physical relationship. How could I not be? But I trust Kyle to take us where we needed to be.

"Do you really want to do this?"

"Want to? Fuck, no. Do we need to do it? Yes."

"And if I don't want to talk about it?"

"Then we shelve it for another day, but I'd strongly try to persuade you to get it all out now so it doesn't fester."

On a heavy sigh I told him everything; from taking the girls to the new orphanage, to the drive back to Dili, about my fear when I knew something was wrong with my driver. I was as honest as I could be about all my thoughts and feelings. I told him how my ribs had been injured, being chained below deck. The interrogation by the Italian guy, getting slapped over and over again because I wouldn't tell him Kyle and Declan's name.

Kyle didn't interrupt me once, but he didn't have to verbally tell me how he was feeling. His features did the talking for him. They'd turned stone-cold when I talked about being chained and slapped. But gentled when I promised I hadn't given his name. He let me ramble and get out what I had to. I felt safe for the first time in a very long time. And not just since being rescued from the boat, or since the rebels had invaded my village. Maybe for the first time in my life.

"Did anyone violate you?" His question took me off-guard and it took me a moment to understand.

"Are you asking me if I was raped?"

"Yes, sweetheart, that's what I'm asking." His tone was gentle and his voice just above a whisper.

"No, and no one tried."

Kyle nodded but his features were unreadable.

"You wanna try to get some sleep? We have about four hours until we have to get ready to go to the airport."

"You okay?" I inquired.

"No. And since we're starting what's happening between us off with complete honesty, I'll tell you straight up, I boarded that boat knowing I was going to end every man's life aboard. I felt no remorse in doing so. Had I known the details, I wouldn't have made it as painless for them as I did. And here's some more honesty for you, I wasn't feeling all that generous seeing as the woman who'd captured my attention had been kidnapped, so I didn't go easy."

I was speechless. I couldn't form words as I tried and failed to process what he'd told me. Never had anyone ever been on my side, cared about my safety, protected me. No one, not ever, so I didn't know how to process that, either. I couldn't begin to understand how it was possible this big, strong, good-looking man would drop everything to come to my aid. I just knew it felt good he had. I knew it felt like my heart was beating out of my chest and I didn't want this feeling to go away.

"I don't know what to say," I finally spoke.

"Nothin' to say. But you also should know what you're getting into with me. My job takes me lots of places, dangerous places, where dangerous men mean to do others harm. It's my mission to make sure that doesn't happen."

"I assumed that was the case," I whispered.

"Assuming and knowing are two very different things. Can you handle that?"

"Knowing what you do for a living? Yes. Knowing that you'll be facing off with dangerous men? That part will scare me, but I think I can handle it."

Maybe. Kind of. Sort of. The thought of Kyle putting himself in danger scared the hell out of me, but it was who he was. Hadn't he just done that very thing to rescue me? It was a huge part of why I admired him. What attracted me to him, his bravery, his willingness to help those who couldn't help themselves. I understood that calling. I appreciated it. And as much as it freaked me out, I'd do my best to handle it.

"Thank you for your honesty." Kyle brought our hands to his lips and he kissed my fingers.

"Do you feel it, too?" I blurted out.

"Yeah, sweetheart, I do."

Thank God he understood what I was asking because I wasn't sure if I was questioning the intense connection I felt, or the sparks when he did something as simple as kiss my hand.

"This feels like more than getting to know each other," I told him.

"It does," he confirmed. "And I have to tell you I'm pleased as fuck you see it that way. It'd suck if I was the only one feeling it."

What man says that?

I thought men were supposed to hide their feelings.

"What happens after tomorrow?"

"We go back to Maryland and figure things out."

"Is that where you live?"

It was so totally bizarre that Kyle and I had had a conversation about sex and what sounded like to me starting a relationship, yet I didn't even know where he lived. Hell, I didn't know much about him, period. But strangely I knew all the important stuff. I knew he'd drop everything he was doing if I needed help. I knew he was honest and trustworthy. I knew he had a heart for service and he was humble about it. I knew he was kind and gentle and was willing to put up with all my crazy. That was good enough for me for now.

"At the moment, yes."

"What does that mean?"

"I've spent the last few years overseas. There was no point in paying for a house or apartment when I wasn't going to use it. So I don't have one."

How did I forget about that? My eyes drifted closed and my heart started to hurt. He travelled for work. I travelled with the Peace Corps. How would a relationship work? Phone calls? Emails? Long distance and time between us? I didn't like that thought at all.

"Maybe—"

"Don't say it, Anaya. We'll work it out. Headquarters is based in Maryland and I'm stateside now. The contract we were working is done and Zane, my boss, knows the team doesn't want to spend another two years in the sandbox."

"Earlier you said there were issues with your job."

"Told you about Harry Landry and his ties to Omni," Kyle started and I nodded because I remembered. It still freaked me out that a man who'd made a large donation to NCMEC was actually a sex trafficker. "Right before you and I met, the team was finishing a mission. Emerson, who is married to one of my teammates, Thad, was kidnapped and taken to Mexico. After we rescued her, we found a note threatening the company if we didn't pull back."

"And these Omni people are the ones that threatened you?"

"Yes. Not just my team, who'd been tracking them, the company as a whole. The note mentioned some of the wives."

"You didn't want to bring me into the middle of that?"

It doesn't sound like I want to be in the middle of that mess.

"I won't lie to you, these men are seriously fucked-up. Their reach is far and wide and we only know the half of it. But, and this is

the part you need to trust me on, we will not let anything happen to you. *I* won't let anything happen. That was why I thought I was making the right decision letting you go, told you I was wrong about that. I'm not perfect, I fuck up, but I never make the same mistake twice. You have a choice; we can stash you away in a safehouse until this is over or you can trust me to keep you safe and stay with me. But you have to know, the endgame is the same. We're gonna explore what's between us. We can continue that now, or hit the pause button and wait. Either way, I'm not letting you go."

"A safehouse?" I whispered.

"We have many. You'd be completely cut off from the outside world and guarded twenty-four-seven."

"But you wouldn't be that guard?"

"No."

Kyle said I had a choice, but I didn't. Not really. I didn't want to be locked away in a safehouse somewhere without him. I wanted to explore a relationship with Kyle. I'd promised myself I wouldn't waste another opportunity, and a safehouse, while it may've been the smarter of the two options, felt a lot like hiding. Something I'd done too much of.

"I wanna stay with you."

"Yeah?" He sounded surprised and I didn't like it.

"If you say you'll keep me safe, I trust you."

His body relaxed and his eyes had gone lazy. The new look made him incredibly sexy. A look I wanted more of—a lot more.

I tried to stifle a yawn but Kyle saw it. He rolled to the side, hit the little switch near the nightstand, plunging the hotel room into darkness, and rolled back to me.

"Get some sleep, sweetheart."

I wanted to verify he wasn't going to leave but I refrained. Kyle had promised to keep me safe and I knew down to my soul, he'd keep that promise. So really there was no need to ask; I knew he'd stay beside me.

I closed my eyes and tried to go to sleep but my mind wouldn't shut off. In a few hours I was going back to the States with a man I desperately wanted to get to know better. A man who scared me shitless because I knew if things didn't work out, I'd be crushed. And it was only a matter of time before he realized I was too fucked-up to fix. I talked a big game about wanting to move forward, about

wanting to be normal, but the truth was, I wasn't brave. Not when it came to my demons. They always won.

"Take a chance, Anaya," Kyle whispered in the darkness. "I swear I won't let you fall." But I would fall, I already was. "Be brave and jump, sweetheart."

He tightened his grip on my hand and I squeezed back. A non-verbal agreement I hoped like hell I would survive.

CHAPTER 16

WE'D MADE the long journey back to Maryland.

As soon as we'd hit altitude, I let go of the breath I'd been holding. Last night as I laid in the darkness next to Anaya, I'd been afraid she was going to change her mind and decide being with me wasn't worth the risk. I'd been stupid and almost lost her once. I didn't think I could handle it happening again, especially after she'd admitted she felt the same way I did. There was something between us that was worth exploring and I was willing to pull out all the stops to make sure that happened.

The first half of the plane ride, Anaya and I had talked. Most of the conversation had been innocuous. Favorite books and movies. Places she liked to go in San Diego. We waxed poetic about both of us being in the same city for years and had never run into each other. How different would my life have been if I'd met her when I was stationed in Coronado? Would I have recognized then that Anaya Baker would be the woman to crawl under my skin? Or would I've been too young and dumb to accept what my heart was telling me? By the end of our conversation, I was grateful I hadn't met her back then—neither of us had been ready for the other.

But now I was ready. More than ready. Not only did I welcome the knowledge; I was ready to fight to keep her in my life.

Anaya had looked shell-shocked when Brooks, Thad, and Max had picked us up from the airport. She'd taken one look at the three overly large men and had stepped closer to me. I can't deny that it felt good, her looking to me for protection.

The team hadn't missed her reaction even if she'd immediately tried to hide it. Pride swelled in my chest when she stood tall next to me and offered her hand in greeting. For a woman who didn't think she was brave, who had admitted she'd gone years without so much as a handshake, she sure was courageous.

We'd all piled into the SUV and gone straight to the Z Corps office in downtown Annapolis. During the drive Anaya sat between Dec and me, and with her hand firmly in mine, she'd engaged the team in conversation. I was grateful they hadn't brought up what had happened in Timor-Leste. If she wanted to talk about it with them, she'd bring it up.

Brooks pulled into the parking structure and I glanced around at all the cars occupying the reserved parking for Z Corps.

"Who's in today?" I asked.

"Full house," Max returned.

"The women?"

"Seriously? You even need to ask."

Fuck, *shit*, and goddamn.

Brooks cut the engine and we all piled out.

"You guys go ahead and go up. I need to talk to Anaya a minute."

The team all nodded, except for Max. He was staring at Anaya and I didn't like how he was eyeing her with suspicion. Such was his way—he and Declan were neck-and-neck in the trust department. Meaning, neither trusted outsiders, and to Max, Anaya was an unwelcomed stranger.

Declan passed by Max and slapped him on the shoulder twice and gestured toward the exit. Max followed, but not before his gaze swung to mine and his eyes narrowed. Something Anaya wouldn't miss because he didn't want her to.

Shit, fuck, goddamn.

I waited for the team to disappear and turned to Anaya. Her back was ramrod straight and fear danced in her eyes.

I needed to shut this shit down before she closed down.

"Anaya, look at me." My gaze went from the exit to mine. "Everything's gonna be okay."

"Why doesn't Max like me?"

"It's not you," I sighed. "Max has serious trust issues. Actually, issues don't begin to cover it. He'll come around. In the meantime,

ignore him. I wanted to warn you, there's gonna be a lot of people in the office. Not only all the men, but their women, too."

"Okay." Her brows pulled together.

"The women are..." Anaya stiffened, misreading my pause. "They'll mean well but they're gonna swarm around you."

"What? Why?"

"Because they all know what happened in Timor-Leste. They'll want to make sure you're okay. They know you mean something to me so they'll also want to feel you out. But mostly they're gonna want to make sure you feel welcome. They'll just be pushy when they go about that."

"They know?" she whispered.

"Sweetheart, when you went missing it was a companywide effort to find you. With Omni looming over our heads, the women are in the office every day and their husbands don't keep shit from them. Which means they know you were taken. They don't know anything about your past and they won't, not unless you feel like sharing. With that said, if you wanna share, you won't find a better group of women to have your back."

"I mean something to you?"

Anaya didn't miss much and I didn't think she'd allow my admission to go unquestioned.

"Hell, yeah you do. What is it you think we're doing here?"

"I guess I just don't understand how I could mean anything to you when we just met."

"That makes two of us. But I'm not questioning it and I'm not fighting it."

On that thought, I slowly brought my hands up to cup her cheeks and leaned down to brush my lips against hers. I was desperate to really kiss her. Wet, deep, and thorough. But I tamped down the urge knowing the parking garage was not the right place to push her.

When I straightened, her eyes were hazy, and fuck I wanted to see that look more often. Preferably when we were alone where I could test her boundaries, or rather after I'd tested those boundaries and she was lying satisfied in my arms. I bet that look would be even better—way fucking better.

Slow and steady wins the race.

And I definitely planned on winning.

"You ready to go up?" I asked.

Her entire being transformed right in front of me and I smiled.
“Of course I am.”

There was the Anaya I first met.

At the time, I hadn't known her confidence was laced with a healthy dose of fortitude. That just under the surface lay fear she worked hard to overcome, and every time I witnessed her conquer it, I had the urge to kiss the hell out of her. Tell her I was so proud of her. Tell her I was impressed with her tenacity.

So fucking strong.

“Then let's go up. But if at any time it gets to be too much for you, let me know.”

“You're handling me again,” she snapped.

“No,” I denied. “I'm telling you, I have your back. And when we get upstairs, you'll get it.”

I led us out of the garage and into the front door of Z Corps. Ivy was noticeably missing from the front desk where she spent most of her day. Zane's wife had taken over most of the duties his old personal assistant, Rena, had performed and then some, but Ivy refused to work in the office next to her husband, and no one in their right mind would refer to Ivy as Zane's assistant. She preferred to do her work at the front desk, work that consisted of running the company so Zane didn't have to.

I keyed in the code to unlock the front door and walked us through the empty reception area to another door and stopped. I placed my fingers on the biometric scanner and entered my eight-digit code, once accepted the lock clicked and I pushed open the door.

Our footsteps echoed in the hallway leading us to the elevator and when we stopped, I placed my face in front of the retinal scanner and waited.

“Where are you taking me, Area 51?” Anaya muttered beside me.

The elevator door slid open and I motioned for her to precede me.

“There's one more security checkpoint,” I informed her.

“Seriously?”

We stepped out into another hallway and I repeated the processes, waiting for my fingerprints to be logged.

“The information we deal with could be catastrophic if it fell into the wrong hands. And the clients Zane meets with in the office re-

quire a certain level of privacy and protection.”

“Who does he meet with, the president?” She giggled.

Damn, I liked that sound. And after I waited for the feeling to finish ricocheting through me, I thought about her comment. She’d hit the nail on the head with her off-handed remark. Not only did Zane meet with the president, Tom Anderson was a close friend of his. I wondered what Anaya’s reaction to Erin Anderson-Doyle would be. My teammate Colin’s wife was the president’s daughter.

Guess I’ll find out soon enough. Erin was in the building along with all the other women.

I pushed open the door, entering Z Corps’ inner sanctum, and Anaya stopped walking.

“Holy shit,” she muttered.

I followed her gaze around the room. Several doors opened to private offices and a large command room was enclosed in smart glass. This room housed all the surveillance monitors and was supervised twenty-four seven. In the middle was a maze of cubicles with high-tech work stations. Zane had spared no expense. All clean lines with gray walls and chrome accents. The space was enormous and impressive. It was also bustling with people.

All of whom stopped what they were doing to face us.

Zane straightened from the table he was bent over and started in our direction. I could feel the waves of nervousness coming from Anaya but she made no move.

“Anaya Baker. Nice to meet you, I’m Zane Lewis.”

“Nice to meet you face-to-face,” she greeted.

Zane took in her bruised face, and like the master of disguise he was, he showed no hint of emotion. But I knew Zane; he was seething that someone had hit her, and most especially the reason behind why she’d been struck.

My boss shifted toward the room and made the introductions. “Meet the Red Team, that’s Lincoln Parker, Colin Doyle, Jaxon Cain, Leo Gillonardo, and Jasmin Parker.” Each person gave Anaya a lift of their chin as their name was called.

Jasmin studied Anaya, her eyes squinted, and deep frown lines formed.

“What the fuck?” Jas growled and stepped closer. Anaya flinched at her aggressive approach and Jasmin’s very pissed-off eyes swung to mine. “Serious as shit, Kyle, I hope you gutted the fucker that did

that. I hear you went easy on the douchebag, I'll be totally disappointed in you."

"I didn't go easy," I confirmed.

With a nod of approval, Jasmin went back to looking at Anaya and immediately changed directions.

"You shoulda sold 'em out and saved your face," Jas said.

Here we go...

Anaya's body went solid, her shoulders went back, and anger flashed. She was pissed and unlike all the men in the room, she wasn't trying to hide her feelings.

"Sold them out?" Anaya spat out the words like they tasted like shit.

"Yeah. I heard that's what the asshole who was slappin' you around wanted. All you had to do was give two names and he would've stopped."

Anaya sucked in a breath and my temper flared. I knew Jas was testing Anaya, but she'd gone too far. I promised Anaya she'd be safe and Jasmin was making me a liar. I understood her need to feel out Anaya but I would not allow her to push any further.

"Jas," I growled.

"What? I'm just sayin'."

No, she wasn't just saying anything. Jasmin had almost died protecting the identity of her team. She was putting Anaya through unnecessary bullshit and I was done.

But before I could speak, Anaya did.

"What kind of person do you think I am?"

Jasmin shrugged like it was all the same to her. "Most people would talk."

"Then most people are assholes. I wasn't giving up Kyle and Declan no matter what. I'd rather die before I sold them out."

There was a small gasp and Anaya and I turned to our right. A very pregnant Violet had come down the stairs along with Emerson.

The team had obviously not shared with Violet that Anaya had taken a beating to protect her brother.

Good to know some things could be kept secret around Z Corps.

I glanced over at Declan and he was looking down at his shoes shaking his head. Violet was getting ready to go all mother hen on his ass.

Time to shut this shit down, for good this time.

"On that note, you're fuckin' done, Jas. No more of that shit," I demanded, barely keeping my temper under wraps.

Her eyes locked with mine and she nodded. She felt like hell she'd gone down that particular road with Anaya. And more so because Violet would now be upset, too.

"Great," I grunted sarcastically, too pissed-off to articulate the word any better.

"Conference room," Zane barked. "You, too, Emerson."

I waited for everyone to file into the other room, then turned to Anaya.

"You okay?"

"Stop asking me that."

"Anaya—"

"I'm fine. I'm not stupid, I understand what she was doing even if I didn't like the reminder of what happened to me. Look around..." Anaya paused and motioned around the room. "I'm an outsider among a group of people who work behind more security than Fort Knox with a command center that rivals NASA. I get it. I have to earn their trust, and if you keep babying me in front of them, they'll never respect me. I have nothing to hide from any of you. They can prod all they like, I won't break and that's something you're gonna have to trust *me* about."

My eyes went over her shoulder and Max stood in the doorway waiting for us. Arms folded over his chest and eyes hard, with a lift of his chin he dipped back into the room.

"Fuck. You're right. I'm sorry."

She gave me a tentative smile and grabbed my hand.

"Let's get this over with."

She yanked my hand and moved toward the door.

I needed to pull my head from my ass and stop doubting her. But fuck if I knew how to stop my insistent need to protect her, even from my teammates who were doing exactly what she'd said they were doing.

CHAPTER 17

MY RIBS ACHED and my head throbbed but there was no chance in hell I was going to complain. Admitting weakness would be like tossing blood in the water while sharks were circling.

I had something to prove to these people and I wouldn't back down.

Ten men and two women sat around a huge table with Zane at the helm, all looking at me like I was an interloper. Well, eight of the men were, save Declan and Kyle.

"Violet thinks she found something," Zane started. "She sent all her intel to Tex and Garrett. They're combing through it to verify—"

"Respect, Z, but do you think this should be discussed in front of Anaya?" Max asked.

Kyle sighed beside me but held his tongue. Something I was grateful for. I couldn't have him fight my battles for me.

"Just come out with it," Zane instructed. "I hate this fucking part of the game. Every time one of you fucknuts falls in love this shit happens. You got something to say, Max, air it."

Fall in love?

"Yeah, I got shit to say. We're at war with Omni. They've proven to be one step ahead of us, around every turn. And here we are in the presence of a woman who has ties to Harry Landry and we're getting ready to discuss business. Who the fuck is this woman anyway? She shows up out of the blue, Kyle takes one fuckin' look at her, loses his goddamn mind, and now what? She's just here?"

"I don't have ties to Harry Landry," I told Max.

"Sure you do. You admitted to knowing him."

"Meeting someone at a donor gala one time and having ties with them are two different things."

"Not in my book. Not when Landry's proving to be pretty high up in the Omni food chain. We're all just supposed to believe it's a coincidence you know the man we're after?"

My blood was boiling.

"You...you..." I was struggling to find my words I was so frustrated. "You think I'd work with some asshole who you say traffics women? Are you out of your goddamn mind?" I shouted. "No. Don't answer that, because you are if you think that. I was taken and sold when I was a teenager. Paraded around in front of a room full of sleezy men and auctioned off. I was *bought*, you asshole, and put in a cage. Picture that, a man *bought* me like I was a fucking animal and caged me. So, I don't care what you fucking believe. But I am not now, nor would I ever, work for or with anyone like Harry Landry."

"Anaya—" Max started.

"Anyone else have any questions?" I ignored Max. "Wanna talk more about the dickhead who slapped me around while I was chained up on the boat? Want a play-by-play of my life? Anything? Wanna talk about how I freak the hell out if someone tries to touch me? I'm an open book and have nothing to hide."

"Anaya," Kyle growled from his seat next to me.

"Don't start, Kyle. They all need to know, I may be completely fucked-up from what happened to me but I'm not a bad person and I have never and would never be associated with a dick like Harry Landry. And—"

"Enough, Anaya," Declan gently cut me off before he turned his angry eyes to Max. "You done?"

Max nodded and looked away from the table, but I could feel everyone else's gaze burning my skin. I took a few deep breaths and tried to calm my temper.

"Sorry—"

"Nothing to apologize for," Zane interrupted. "Swear to all things holy, when the last two of you lose your shit over a woman, I'm sending you away. Far, far away from the rest of us so you can figure shit out on your own."

"What'd Violet find?" Declan asked.

"A woman named Monica Chandler," Zane announced. "Violet's not sure if she's an accomplice or a victim but we had her picked up."

Emerson, have you ever heard of the woman?"

"No. When I was with him, he was careful to hide his women from me. But he did visit a massage parlor four, sometimes five times a week. I never gained access to the building."

"No secretary, women who worked for him?"

"No. Out of all the men, Harry was the most careful. He kept everything locked up in a safe. He was extra careful on the phone."

Wait? What? Emerson, Thad's wife, knew Harry Landry?

"What about you, Anaya? The night of the gala, was Harry there alone?" Zane asked, but I couldn't pull my attention from Emerson.

"It's not what you think," Emerson said when she caught me staring at her.

"So you don't know Harry?" I asked her.

"No, I do know him. I was pretending to be his girlfriend—"

"What?"

Emerson's face twisted in disgust. "It's a long story. One I'd very much like to talk to you about after Zane's done with us."

"Anaya? The gala?" Zane's tone was impatient.

"I don't know. I think he was there alone." I shrugged. "But I wasn't paying attention. My boss was walking me around the room introducing me to so many people I couldn't keep track of who was with who. I only remember Harry because he asked me to dance. It was one song, and he talked about how happy he was his company could contribute. You know what creeps me out the most? He was so normal."

"I know what you mean," Emerson commiserated. "Like you'd never guess he was a dirtbag if you saw him walking down the street."

"Exactly. He was nice—non-threatening. He wasn't leering at the women in the room, or acting strange. He was just *normal*."

"You didn't see him leave with anyone?" Zane continued.

"No. But again, I wasn't paying attention to him."

"Sucks I have to ask, Anaya, but we need to talk about the men who took you."

Now that I wasn't having a come apart and my temper was in check, I really didn't want to talk about being kidnapped.

Kyle's hand landed on my thigh and I jerked in surprise, but he didn't move it away. He gave me a gentle squeeze then waited for me to relax.

"Okay. What do you want to know?"

"Everything. Take us through it from the time you and Kyle parted ways."

I took a deep breath and told them everything I'd told Kyle back in Darwin. From start to finish, I didn't leave anything out, save my regrets about Kyle.

"This Italian guy, he said he already knew who Kyle and Dec were, he just wanted to hear you say it?" Zane asked.

"That's what he said. And I don't know that he was Italian. He just looked like he was. Olive complexion and dark hair and eyes. I think he was from Jersey or Philly. Not quite a New York accent but definitely east coast."

"He was the only American?" Lincoln, I think his name was, clarified.

"Yeah. The others were local, they all spoke Tetum."

There was a knock at the door, and after Zane shouted for the person to enter, the door opened and a man appeared with a deep scowl on his face.

"Check your tablet. I sent you more info on Monica."

"Thanks, Garrett."

"Tex called in. He thinks he identified the man who interrogated Anaya. I sent you that intel as well."

The man backed out of the door and closed it behind him and the room was silent as Zane swiped his tablet and stared at the screen. His face a mask of concentration, the only indication he didn't like what he was reading was the small tic in his cheek.

"Let's get this shit over with," he said.

A large flat screen TV mounted on the wall flickered to life. A second later an image filled the monitor and I flinched. Kyle's arm came around me and he held me close. I wanted to tell him not to baby me in front of his team but I couldn't inhale enough oxygen into my lungs to get the words out.

"He can't ever hurt you again," Kyle whispered.

"That him?" Zane clipped.

"Yes," I answered.

"Yeah," Kyle confirmed.

Thankfully the image disappeared but it was too late, I was shaking and my head was spinning.

"Anaya," Emerson called softly. "Look at me."

My gaze swung from the screen to her and she smiled.

"You're safe here. No one's going to hurt you again."

I nodded because what else was there to do? The man who'd beat me up was dead. Logically I knew that. But the fear was still raw, the bruises on my face still fresh. I wanted to believe, but right then in that moment, I couldn't. What if there were more of them? What if—

"Anaya," Max snapped and my back shot straight.

I'd had enough of his attitude.

"No one will touch you again," he vowed.

I didn't get a chance to answer. The screen filled with a very pretty young girl. Glossy blonde hair and dead blue eyes.

"Monica Chandler," Zane started. "Born Monica Tremblay. She's twenty-three now. Monica disappeared from Ontario, Canada, when she was thirteen."

I couldn't pull my gaze from her eyes. The poor girl looked lost and defeated. She was smiling in the picture, perfect straight white teeth, flawless skin, but her eyes—dull and dead.

"What's that on her wrist?" someone asked and Zane zoomed in on her hands.

A hint of a black tattoo peeked out on the side of her inner wrist.

"A QR code," I answered.

"Come again?" the man asked. I really wished they had name tags on. I thought his name was Jaxon but I wasn't sure.

"Welcome to the technological age of prostitution," I told him. "I've seen it before. Pimps brand their stables with QR codes or regular bar codes. A john scans the code and pays with Bitcoin or any other type of cyber currency."

"No shit?"

"No cash exchanges hands. If a girl is nabbed, the pimp doesn't lose that night's take. Also makes it difficult for the prostitutes to run away. They never have cash in hand."

"Fuck me," Zane growled. "If I have the man who has her scan the code Tex and Garrett can track the account."

"No. If she's gone from the stable the QR code will be a dead link," I told him. "We've tried that when I was with NCMEC. We rescued one girl and tried to scan her code within the first hour we had her and the link had already been disabled."

"You have a man sitting on a sex trafficking victim?" Emerson gasped. "Zane! She'll be scared out of her head."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We're still eliminating her as an accomplice," he shot back.

"No way. She's a victim. Look at her eyes," Emerson demanded.

"I agree." I looked at Emerson then back to Zane. "You can fake a smile, but the eyes? They tell the story. She's lost and defeated. She's given up. And don't mistake willing accomplice with being forced to do something against your will. Most prostitutes are sent out to recruit. And they do it because the alternative is so devastating, they don't fight it. I've interviewed girls who've told me that recruiting is worse than the sexual assaults they experience every day. They've told me, that was when their soul died, when they had to lie and bring an innocent girl into the life knowing what was going to happen to her."

"She's not talking," Zane stated. "You think you two could get her to turn?"

Before I could speak, Kyle and Thad simultaneously barked a very loud *hell no*.

Zane sat back in his chair and rubbed his palms over his face.

"Just once I'd like my team to think with their heads and not their dicks," he muttered.

"My woman was kidnapped a few weeks ago and held in a goddamn shipping container," Thad seethed. "You think she needs to be around a victim so all that shit can bubble back up?"

Kyle had told me one of his teammate's wives had been kidnapped, but now seeing Emerson, I couldn't believe it. She looked normal. At ease. Happy. How was that possible?

"Long story," she mouthed. "Tell you later."

She didn't look all that upset about her abduction being talked about and I was envious of her strength.

"And mine was pulled off a boat forty-eight fucking hours ago," Kyle barked. "No fucking way."

Mine. Warmth spread over me at Kyle's outburst. He was trying to protect me and damn if that didn't feel good. But I still wanted to do it.

"I want to do it," I told Kyle.

"Me, too," Emerson added. "She'd not going to talk to a man. She needs someone who can relate to her. Anaya and I know the ins and outs of—"

"Emmy Baby, hate to bring this up, but the team has worked hundreds of trafficking cases. We've rescued enough women to know how to handle the girl."

They had? I glanced at Kyle and he nodded his confirmation. There seemed to be a lot more about him than I thought, that I didn't know.

"That may be true but she won't speak to you. And just because you've rescued victims doesn't mean you understand what it means to be a survivor. Anaya and I do. We are proof there's hope. She needs to see that." Emerson turned from Thad to face Zane. "I'll do it."

I glanced back at Kyle, his face a mask of pissed-off male. I slid my hand over his and laced our fingers together.

"I need to do this, Kyle. But I'm gonna need your help." I squeezed his hand and some of the hardness subsided. "I admit I'm still scared, but if you stand by me, I can do it."

His features softened and he reluctantly nodded.

"Thank you." I couldn't help the smile that pulled at my lips.

"Well, fuck me running," Max muttered. "She has dimples. That explains a lot."

Zane chuckled and looked over at him just in time for a broad, panty-melting smile to grace his face that took him from menacing to hot. Two deep indentations had formed.

"It's always the dimples, brother," he stated. "How do you think I hooked my wife?"

"Not with your fun-loving, chipper disposition, that's for sure," Lincoln mumbled. "God knows your attitude leaves a lot to be desired."

I was enjoying the lighthearted turn the conversation had taken, when Jasmin cut in.

"If we're done, I'm gonna go check on my boys. I left Asher and Robert upstairs with their aunts and we all know how much they love to feed my kids sugar. Before they start tearing apart Z's office I need to go get them."

What the what? Jasmin was a mom? I watched as the woman stood. She may've been my size but there was an air about her warning you that you didn't want to be on her bad side.

"Glad you're home, Anaya," she said. "And thanks for having my brothers' six. Can't ever repay that, but you have our gratitude."

I didn't answer her because I was speechless. I settled back into Kyle's embrace thinking maybe I'd be all right. Maybe I could win these people over. Maybe I should enjoy the time I had with Kyle and not waste a moment of it worrying about the future. I'd deal with the fallout when it happened. But in the meantime, I wasn't going to keep piling up regrets.

CHAPTER 18

EMERSON TOOK Anaya up to Zane's office where all the women were congregated. I didn't think this was a good idea. Emerson and Anaya disagreed with me, and after Anaya gave me reassurance that she was fine, I relented.

I knew she was putting on a brave face. As she'd rightly pointed out, you could fake a lot of things but the eyes always told the truth. And she looked nervous. But she'd insisted she wanted to go meet the women and I'd promised to stop overreacting every time I thought she'd be put in a situation that might make her uncomfortable. I'd wisely kept my mouth shut.

Though, part of why I didn't want her to go with Emerson was because I didn't want to be away from her. And not because I didn't think she'd be safe in the building, because I simply wanted her by my side. I wanted her within touching distance.

"Goddamn, he has it bad," Brooks muttered.

"Yeah, like you're one to talk, friend. We hadn't even walked out of Tatiana's office and you had that same look," Thad pointed out.

"Y'all missed it but he had the look the second the woman walked into the Del. She hadn't even strutted her ass across the reception area and he was gone for her," Dec helpfully added.

I didn't correct him, because he was not wrong.

"It's like *déjà vu*," Leo muttered.

"It would be for you." Colin chuckled. "We didn't even have Olivia out of the house before you were whispering sweet nothings in her ear."

"Says the man who thought it'd be smart to claim the president's daughter." Jax shook his head. "I thought Zane was gonna have a coronary."

"Right, because Violet didn't have your ass in knots when she bold as brass broke into my building and pushed her way into my penthouse," Zane added.

"Hey." Jax put his hands up. "At least I fought it. And I can't help it if my wife is—"

"Don't go there. That's my sister," Declan growled. "I think you all are fucking crazy. Every one of you."

"Don't include me in that statement, brother," Max said. "I'm not handing my balls over to a woman. At least not just one for the rest of my life. Variety is the spice of life."

"Best decision I ever made, handing the Gold Team over to Dec. Now he gets to deal with all the drama." Zane chuckled.

"The drama ends with Kyle," Declan declared. "There's zero fucking chance I want a woman, and Max is an untrusting, cantankerous bastard who's lucky to get laid once a year. No woman would put up with his shit so I'm safe. But you, brother, you still have the Blue Team. And if you think about pulling me from Gold to send me over with Myles and the guys, I fucking quit."

I sat back in my chair enjoying the banter going on around me. I'd missed this while my team had been gone. Not that we didn't bullshit with each other. We did, we were all tight. But I'd missed the comradery within the company. Just because we were broken up into teams and sent on different operations didn't mean we weren't close. We were.

A lot had happened in the years since my team had been stuck in the desert. My friends had found their other halves. Had gotten married, had children. None of which we'd been around for.

It was then I realized I didn't want to miss anymore. Linc and Jasmin's twins were growing up. I'd only met Leo and Olivia's daughter, Gia, once. And Ivy and Violet were both pregnant. I wanted to be around, I wanted to be a part of their lives. And I wanted to give this to Anaya. Friends. Family. Steady. I wanted her to have a safe place to heal. And there was no better group of people to help her do that.

Life had passed me by.

The door slammed open and ten men all reached for their hips, when Erin came into view, her long, light brown hair flowing behind her.

"We have a problem," she panted. "Violet's—"

She didn't get to finish her sentence before Jax and Declan bolted from the room.

"Her, um, water broke," Erin rushed out.

"Fuck," Zane clipped and stood.

The rest of us followed suit, and as soon as we'd exited the conference room, we could hear a very angry Violet demand her brother and husband step away from her.

"I can walk down the stairs. No one is carrying me."

"Vi," Jax growled. "I'm helping you down the stairs. Dec, get in front."

Violet shook her head and gave in. She was halfway down when I caught sight of Anaya. Her eyes were wide but she was smiling. And damn I wished I could've taken the time to soak it in. But a very loud groan reminded me Violet was in labor.

Dec, Jax, and Violet finally cleared the staircase after the longest, slowest descent known to man and as soon as Anaya reached the bottom step, I didn't delay pulling her to my side.

"Holy crap," she muttered. "I thought *you* could get growly and bossy. Sheesh."

She hadn't seen bossy, yet.

My attention went to Ivy as her face contorted like Violet's had. She was fighting it, trying her hardest to mask the pain. I glanced at Zane and he hadn't seen it yet, he was too busy talking to Declan.

"Ivy?" I called. "What's wrong?"

Zane snapped to attention and turned to face his wife.

"Nothing," she lied.

"Bullshit."

"Really. I'm—" Her sentence hung in the air unfinished as she panted and tried to stand straight.

Zane was frozen, a look of sheer panic had firmly taken hold.

"How far apart are *your* contractions?" I asked.

"Contractions?" Zane echoed, and I wanted to laugh at the crack in his voice.

"About five minutes now. I was gonna wait until your meeting was over but I think I need to go to the hospital, too," Ivy confessed.

Pandemonium ensued.

Men scrambled, ushering women to the door. I heard Violet trying to soothe her husband as he shouted for someone to bring his car around.

But Zane stood staring at his wife.

"You ready?" Ivy asked him.

"No," he answered, and there was no missing the emotion in that one word.

"Well, ready or not, I think your boy's ready." She smiled.

"Fuck, baby, fuck," he groaned.

I'd never, not once, heard my boss's voice so full of love. Only Zane Lewis could make a curse sound like a romantic sonnet.

"Take me to the hospital, Zane. Let's make you a daddy."

He gave her a lift of his chin, moved to her, and both his hands glided over her round belly before they went to her face. "I love you, Ivy. So much, baby, so fucking much I can't tell you how happy you make me."

"Love you, Zane." Ivy's face twisted in pain and Zane muttered something unintelligible under his breath.

I stood and watched my team with their women as they all filed out the door. I did it with jealousy consuming me. I'd never wanted kids, never wanted to be tied down, never thought of having a wife because I didn't want a family.

How could I have been so stupid? So wrong? I wanted it. All of it. I'd simply convinced myself I didn't because I'd never found a woman who made me yearn for them.

* * *

WE WERE all piled back into the SUV but this time Declan was behind the wheel. On the best of days Dec's driving was a hair-raising experience. But following his sister and her husband while she was in labor was death-defying.

Whomever had thought it was a good idea to toss Dec the keys had been wrong.

Anaya was smooshed between me and Max. In an effort to not sit close to my teammate she was practically on my lap. The hard set of Max's jaw told me he hadn't missed it, and knowing him he was

pissed at himself. He may've been a hardass but he felt like shit for upsetting Anaya. But that was something he'd need to work out; I wasn't getting involved unless Anaya asked or Max stepped over the line again.

"So I was right," Anaya whispered.

"About what, sweetheart?"

"When we got to the office. I commented on the over-the-top security and asked if Zane met with the president."

Max chuckled next to her. "Over-the-top is accurate."

"I take it you recognized Erin," I asked.

"You'd have to live under a rock not to know who the First Daughter is," she noted.

"Right. So did Jas tell you that President Anderson is her uncle and she and Erin are cousins?"

"No," she breathed. "Seriously?"

"Yep."

"Holy shit."

Everyone in the SUV except for Declan laughed at her shock.

He was far too engrossed in driving as erratically as he possibly could and still make it to the hospital in one piece.

* * *

SIX HOURS later all of us, save Zane, Ivy, Jaxon, and Violet, sat in the waiting room designated for labor and delivery.

The room was packed.

Leo and Colin sat next to their wives while Linc and Declan, the two men in the room who were about to become uncles, paced.

The door opened and Zane walked in. Linc was at his brother's side before Zane could speak.

Not that he did right away. He stood taking in the room, needing a moment to gather his emotions.

"My son..." Zane stopped, his lips pinched, and with a nod he continued. "Eric Lincoln Lewis..." another pause as the men in the room sucked in all the available oxygen, "is here. Ivy did great." Zane turned to his brother and Jasmin, who'd joined her husband, and with glassy eyes asked, "You ready to meet your nephew?"

The three of them exited the room and Anaya poked my shoulder. When I turned from the door to her, she got close and whispered.

"Why did everyone react that way when Zane announced his son's name?"

Sadness hit my soul. My team had been on assignment when Eric Wheeler had died in Brazil selflessly saving the rest of his team when he jumped on a grenade. We hadn't made it back in time for his funeral, something all of us regretted.

"Eric was a teammate. And a damn good man. He gave his life for his team."

She didn't say anything else but she didn't have to—her sweet, sad smile said it all.

"Sit down, Dec. You'll wear a hole in the carpet," Brooks said.

Declan's pained expression brokered no room for further comment. He wasn't going to sit down and he wasn't going to relax until he heard from Jaxon his sister was okay.

It would take two more hours and three more rounds of coffee being refilled before a haggard Jax came into the room.

"Declan, you wanna come meet your nephew?" Jax smiled at his brother-in-law.

"Bout goddamn time," Dec muttered and Jax shook his head.

"Yeah, I wouldn't say that to your sister." Jax turned his attention to the rest of us. "Give us a few minutes, then Vi wants the rest of you to come meet him."

"Yo!" Leo bellowed. "His name?"

Jax shook his head. "Vi wants to talk to Dec first."

The two men stalked out of the room and Erin started to laugh.

"What's funny, Sunshine?" Colin asked.

"It feels like a lifetime ago I was in Zane's office when Ivy and Violet told us they were pregnant," Erin said.

"It was fun watching Zane and Jax get tied in knots the further along they got," Olivia agreed.

More envy hit my chest. I glanced at my team and they were feeling it, too. All of us had missed out and I knew one thing for sure, I wasn't missing anything else.

I'd give it a day, then I'd talk to my team.

CHAPTER 19

IT WAS after two in the morning when we left the hospital and Brooks drove us to a house Kyle had explained Zane'd rented for the team to stay in.

I hadn't wanted to say anything but I was relieved Brooks was driving and not Declan. Not that that was an option, considering he'd opted to stay at the hospital, but I was happy all the same not to have another death-defying experience.

Declan drove like a maniac.

When we'd walked in, Brooks and Tatiana and Thad and Emerson had peeled off, going to their bedrooms.

Brooks, Max, and Thad had already claimed their rooms, leaving me wondering where I was going to sleep. The house was gigantic. Spacious, open floor plan downstairs, leaving the kitchen, dining, and living rooms all in full view from the foyer. To the left when you first walked in was a formal seating area, directly in front were the stairs, and a little to the right was all the rest. There were also two closed doors—Max had explained one led to the basement and the second was the bedroom he'd taken.

There was still one unaccounted for bedroom upstairs and an in-law suite in the basement.

"We're taking the basement," Kyle announced. "Dec can take the room upstairs."

"Figured that'd be the case." Max chuckled. "You want a beer, Anaya? Or a glass of wine?"

Something had changed in Max over the last ten hours. I wouldn't go so far as to call him friendly, but his attitude had

softened.

I was dog-assed tired but didn't want him to think I was rude, even if I shouldn't have cared after the way he'd treated me. But it wasn't in me to hold a grudge. They took too much energy and effort.

"A beer would be great," I answered.

"Kyle?" Max called on his way to the kitchen.

"I'll take one, too."

Kyle led us to the couch and gestured for me to sit. Max came back in and handed us our beers and took a comfortable-looking lazy boy. He pushed out the footrest and laid back in the overstuffed chair and let out a grunt.

"Wild night, huh?"

"Always is when Tom comes to visit," Kyle returned.

"I cannot believe you all call the president by his first name. Wait, rewind, I cannot believe I was in the same room as the president," I gawked. "That was insane. And I already thought the whole day had been crazy with two babies being born."

"We don't call him that when we're in public, but when we're alone, he insists," Max started. "And believe me, it took a while for all of us to get used to it. But when you slip and call him President Anderson, he threatens bodily harm. The man may look like a polished politician but make no mistake—the man is deadly."

"That's hard to believe after I saw the man making baby talk at Ivy and Zane's son. And he sang to Jax and Violet's son."

"Declan looked..." Kyle faded.

"Emotional?" Max supplied.

"Yeah. That's the word, though I never thought I'd call Dec emotional."

I found that to be an interesting statement. I'd seen Declan lash out due to extreme emotion. He'd done it to me, twice. I wondered if they didn't consider anger an emotion.

"I think it's sweet that both babies have their uncles' names."

"I think Dec was surprised Vi and Jax would give Mason Declan as a middle name," Kyle commented.

"Why? Declan's Violet's brother."

"You've known him a short time. He told you about how he grew up, the two of them being separated. Does he seem like the type of man who forms close bonds?" Kyle asked.

I thought about his question and found it odd. "Well, yeah. He seems close to you and the rest of the guys."

"Not even close. He would give his life for any of us. He jokes with us. He sticks his nose in everyone's business but he is a vault. No one gets close to Declan. What you see is surface. Everything else is off-limits."

"But I'm a stranger and he opened up to me," I argued.

"Only because he was a dick and needed to apologize. The only way to do that was to give you a piece of his childhood. But, sweetheart, it was a sliver, not even a slice."

That made me sad. But the more I thought on how much I hated that for Declan, the more I could identify with him. I'd done the same. I wasn't close to anyone. Not really. Even with Kalee and Evie I only gave them what I could handle, which wasn't much.

I took a sip of my beer and settled into the couch.

"What's going on in your head?" Max asked.

"I'm wondering if people like us—me and Declan—if we're destined to be alone."

"Why would you wonder that?"

"Maybe the trauma of our pasts is too great to overcome. Maybe we're too damaged. I don't know, I've always kept everyone at arm's length. It's easier than having to answer uncomfortable questions about your past. It's safer to lock yourself away so no one can hurt you again. But honestly, I've never thought about what it does to the people who are trying to reach out. My friend, Evie, she tries, or maybe she used to. But I'd never open up. Kalee did, too, and I'd always redirect the conversation to something else. I wonder if they looked like the two of you do right now, every time I pushed them away."

"How do we look?" Max pushed.

"Like you're both hurt that Declan won't reach out and allow you to be the friend he needs."

"You're right, we are. Hurt, that is. He doesn't have to be the way he is. Neither do you, Anaya." Max drained the last of his beer, shoved the footrest back in, and stood. "I'm hittin' the sack. I'll leave you two to it."

Kyle waited until Max disappeared into his bedroom before he turned to me. "You ready for bed?"

Was I ready to sleep? Hell yeah. I was beat. Was I ready to go down into the basement with Kyle when he looked furious? Hell to the no.

"Are you mad at me?"

"Fuck no."

"Then why do you look so pissed?"

"Because I'm trying to remind myself that the motherfucker who hit you is dead while at the same time I'm wondering if it's possible for my buddy Tex to track down every person who's ever done you wrong so I can put them to ground, too."

Tingles started racing up my back. He was pissed-off on my behalf. I wasn't sure anyone ever had been. Sure, I'd seen the FBI agents that rescued me look at me with detached pity. I'd seen social workers look at me with kindness. But they were overworked with huge caseloads, so I was merely a blip on their radar.

But no one had ever been angry *for* me.

I wordlessly reached for his empty bottle, and when he handed it to me, I stood. After tossing the empties in the trash I went back into the living room and found Kyle had moved to the basement door.

"You okay with what I said?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You look scared, sweetheart."

"I am," I admitted, and Kyle flinched. "I'm scared because I promised myself when I was chained in that boat, I wouldn't waste another chance. I'm scared because I'm going to open myself up to you and there's a possibility you're not gonna want me. But mostly I'm scared because what if you do, and I can't give you what you need?"

Standing there in the living room, Kyle changed. It was something profound, something I didn't ever want to forget. His mouth lowered to mine, but this time instead of a brush, he kissed me. I opened for him, and ever so gently, he glided his tongue against mine. It was slow and gentle. Exploratory. Way before I was ready, Kyle pulled back and kissed my forehead.

"What you just gave me was more than enough."

"A kiss?" I whispered.

"No, not the kiss, though it was fuckin' sweet. I was talking about your honesty. You opening up to me. All I need is a crack, Anaya, and I'll crumble the rest."

"It might be hard," I admitted.

"Not afraid of a little hard work, sweetheart."

"Might be more than a little hard."

"Then let me amend. I'm not afraid of busting my ass to make sure you feel safe enough to keep giving me what you just did. I'm not afraid to put in the time and work if it means you'll get what you need to heal and move on with your life. I'm not afraid to admit there's something about you that makes me want things I never dreamed I'd want."

It was crazy. Totally and completely insane that I felt the same way. I had never dreamed in a million years I'd desperately want someone to know me. The real me. The fear. The demons. All the shit I pushed down and was scared to deal with.

I wanted to tell him everything so I could finally shed the weight of my past and find the strength I needed to put it all behind me.

CHAPTER 20

IT WAS by miracle Anaya's ribs weren't broken.

This morning she'd woken up with a groan and could barely sit up right to get out of bed. I knew she was in pain when I insisted we go to the ER and she hadn't argued.

Four hours later, we were leaving with a prescription for a pain reliever and instructions to rest for forty-eight hours.

So that was the plan: I was taking Anaya back to the house, then propping her up on the couch where she'd stay.

"Do you want to go up and see the babies while we're here?" she asked.

"Nope. I wanna get you home so you can rest," I answered.

"I feel better now that I'm up and walking. You heard the doctor, he said they're just bruised."

"I did hear him; he said no activity for two days and it would take three weeks for them to heal."

Anaya stopped and faced me. "You're one of those people who follows doctor's orders?"

She looked surprised.

"With you? Yes."

"What does that mean?"

I grabbed her hand and walked us around the throngs of people in the ER waiting room, not wanting to have this discussion around strangers, and I certainly didn't want to be in a room full of coughing people.

We cleared the sliding exit doors, made our way across the parking lot, and stopped next to the company SUV.

"It means, if the doctor ordered me off my feet for two days, I wouldn't listen. If one of the guys had bruised ribs, I'd tell him to suck it up and do his job."

"Then why are you rushing us home? Everyone's upstairs visiting little Eric and Mason. All your friends are there. Why don't we go up—"

"If they're all at the hospital, that means the house is empty." Her head cocked to the side in question so I continued. "Meaning, we can be alone."

"Oh," she whispered but then she frowned. "But you're gonna make me sit on the couch and not move, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Then what does it matter if we're alone or not?"

"It just does."

"Kyle," she whined.

Anaya looked absolutely adorable pouting.

I had no idea how she felt about PDA and I didn't stop to ask. I lowered my head with the intention of a chaste peck but Anaya had other plans. Her tongue came out and licked my bottom lip. I groaned and tried to stay strong but lost the battle when she pressed her body to mine and slanted her head. My hands moved to her face, then slid into her hair, keeping her where I wanted, and deepened the kiss.

Good God, the woman was a good kisser. She followed my lead but was not timid or shy. She tasted like the cinnamon gum she'd been chewing—spicy and hot. Her low groan made my already hard cock twitch, and unfortunately it was time to stop.

"Wow," she breathed and I smiled at her endorsement.

Wow didn't begin to cover it. The first kiss we'd shared had been hands-down the best kiss of my life. The one we just shared? A close second. Very close. The only reason it wasn't as good as the first was because it hadn't been accompanied with her sweetest admission she was going to open herself to me.

"Let's get you home."

I beeped the locks and helped her in. I took my time rounding the SUV thinking of anything I could to deflate my hard-on. Nothing worked. I climbed into the driver's seat, cock still rock hard, and drove us home.

Anaya was situated on the couch, TV remote in hand, channel surfing, while I was in the kitchen making us some lunch.

"Hey." I heard, and I turned from the sink to see Declan.

"Yo," I returned. "Didn't know you were home."

"Just got home and was trying to sleep, but you're making a fuckin' racket."

I smiled and shook my head.

"We're sorry, Declan. We thought we were alone," Anaya apologized.

"Sweetheart, he's full of shit. We didn't wake him."

I knew Declan; he was up in his room going over case files. No way he'd sleep until he went over all the intel we got yesterday.

"I hope you made enough food because now that I'm awake, I'm starving."

"Right," I mumbled and grabbed all the fixings for a sandwich back out of the fridge.

"How's your nephew?" Anaya asked.

"Fuckin' perfect. He looks just like Violet."

The sadness in his tone belied his words and I wondered if Anaya could hear it, too. I definitely needed to carve out some time to check on my friend. Now that I understood a little of what he'd lost, two babies being born had to be a kick in the gut for the man.

I quickly slapped together another sandwich and joined them in the living room.

"Find anything?" I asked Dec as I sat next to Anaya.

"No. I ran some searches on the tattoo. But without a clear image or the QR code I can't match it up to any of the others I found. Though, I have to say, tatting bar codes on the girls is a whole new level of fucked."

I had to agree.

"In all the years I've worked human trafficking, I've never seen one."

"Probably because your role was stopping the girls from being delivered," Anaya said. "And the pimps got smart and no longer tattoo the wrists. They now tat places that can't be seen, like on the girl's back. Some even have them on their butt cheek."

"Jesus fuck," Dec muttered.

"At least in those places, after a girl is rescued, she doesn't have to see the scar that laser removal leaves. If she's lucky enough to

have the resources to have it removed."

What kind of sick world did we live in that we were having a conversation about girls being bar coded like they were products on a shelf?

"I texted the man who's sitting on Monica and asked him if he could send us a clear picture of the QR code." Before I could ask Dec what the man said, his face contorted and he sneered, "He said Monica won't allow him close enough and he refuses to restrain her to get the picture."

"He can't touch her," Anaya snapped.

Dec studied Anaya for a moment and masked his disgust about the situation.

"He won't," he said softly. "That's one of the reasons Monica hasn't been brought to Maryland. Jeremy's well-versed in victim recovery and assistance."

"May I read the file on Monica?" Anaya asked.

"When you're feeling better."

"Yes," Declan said at the same time.

I cut my eyes to Dec and shook my head.

"Kyle," Anaya murmured. "You're making me sit like a bump on a log for two days. Reading the file will give me something to do."

"You need to relax, not read the gory details of this girl's life."

"You're babying me, again," she huffed.

"The hell I am. I want you rested and healed so you and Emerson can interview Monica. If she's a victim, and the two of you can get her to flip, we can finally take out Harry Landry."

"I thought you knew where Harry was."

"We do," I sighed. "But we've been ordered to stand down. Landry either has something or knows something of value. If we can figure that out, we can smoke his ass and move on. I want this shit done."

I was tired of waiting. I understood Tom Anderson's desire to collect as much intel as we could on Landry and Emilio Ruiz, especially now that we'd found Landry's connection to Corella Industries. How many other corporations did Landry own stock in?

"Did Garrett get you a list of contracts and projects Corella's been working on?" I asked Dec.

"He did. I'll forward it to you. One in particular stood out. Corella's technology was used in the remote control guidance system for

the M824 missile. The M824 is a go-onto-target system with an on-board engine. It can be launched; it doesn't need to be dropped."

The M824 was a beast and the latest and greatest in military weapons. Some missiles needed to be dropped relying on speed and height to hit their targets. And some weapons could only hit stationary targets. The M824 didn't need height due to the onboard engine and it could hit moving targets thanks to the advanced guidance chip Corella had manufactured.

"That's a fucking problem," I muttered.

"Why?" Anaya inquired.

"Theoretically, or more to the point, if a programmer at Corella wanted to, they could launch a missile," Dec explained.

"Or if they wanted to, they could render the missile inop," I added. "Say Corella didn't want the weapon to hit a certain target, they could scramble the guidance system or simply turn it off."

"That easy? But how would someone at Corella know the target?"

"If they bugged the chips? Yes, that easy," I confirmed. "As to the how, the coordinates."

"Fuck, brother, Corella could disable the launch and detonate the weapon in the silo," Declan added.

"A missile silo? Where? In the US?" Anaya gasped.

I looked at my uneaten food and contemplated how much I wanted Anaya to know. Sometimes the saying, *ignorance is bliss*, was a real thing. The majority of the population went about their daily lives not knowing what was really going on around them, and in some respects that was a good thing. If every person walked around with the knowledge of what was truly lurking in the shadows no one would leave their homes and chaos would ensue.

"Anaya, there are more silos in the US than you'd believe. Hell, Zane owns one," Dec told her.

"Zane owns a missile silo?" The shock in her voice made me smile.

It wasn't every day someone owned a silo.

"Yep," I answered. "It's an old decommissioned one, left over from the Cold War."

"Can I see it?"

"It's in upstate New York. In a town called Lewis. It's actually pretty badass," I told her. "The Launch Control Center has been

turned into a one bedroom, one bath house. But Zane kept the space authentic. All the controls the military left after the decommissioning are still in place. The main silo is eighteen stories into the ground. It's fuckin' wild. It looks like a steel door, dead set in the middle of the eight acres he owns."

"Okay, but can I see it?" she pushed.

"If you want to, we'll go up."

"I want to," she confirmed.

Declan chuckled at her excitement.

"You're a nut. No damn way are you trapping me forty feet underground."

Anaya's smile dissolved at Dec's off-the-cuff comment and I wanted to kick my friend's ass.

"Hey." I put my hand on her thigh. "Don't listen to him. He's also afraid of a little amphibian, called the Penis Snake."

"What?" she choked back a laugh.

"It's not fuckin' little," Dec argued. "The son of bitch can get thirty-two inches long. That ain't little, friend."

"Told you." I squeezed Anaya's thigh. "He gets a little worked up when someone mentions a two-foot-long penis. Not sure if it's size envy or if he really has herpetophobia. Either way, he freaks the fuck out if he sees a snake."

"Listen, fucker, when you live in Brazil for as long as I did, it's not fear, it's survival."

"You lived in Brazil?" Anaya asked. "I was in Uruguay once and got to travel up to Brazil. Rio Grande. I was only there one day but it was beautiful. Did you like living in the country?"

Declan's face turned to stone. All traces of humor gone.

"Didn't get to see much. I was working all the time." Dec stood and said, "I'm headin' up to catch some sleep."

"What'd I say?" Anaya whispered when Declan disappeared around the corner.

I waited until I heard the bedroom door upstairs close before I answered.

"There are a lot of bad memories for him in Brazil."

"Work stuff?" she pressed.

"Work and personal. He lost something there that he shouldn't have. And to top that off, Violet was kidnapped and taken to Brazil, then Eric died. All things he wishes he could forget but can't."

The front door opened and in walked the rest of my team, along with Emerson and Tatiana.

There goes our alone time.

I can't catch a goddamn break.

CHAPTER 21

"Do you want another glass of wine?" Emerson whispered.

I nodded and pushed my empty glass across the island as quietly as I could.

With a wink she filled it halfway and went back to stirring the from-scratch spaghetti sauce she'd made.

"You think you should drink a second glass?" Thad asked with one brow raised.

Dammit. Busted.

"How do you do that?" I asked in an effort to divert attention from my wine.

"Do what?" he chuckled. "Sense when my wife is participating in a covert operation?"

"Covert operation," Emerson sorted. "Hardly. And be quiet."

"You asking me to be quiet proves my point, Emmy."

"Who's planning an operation?" Kyle asked, coming into the kitchen, his eyes zeroing in on my glass before they came to mine and narrowed. "You won't be able to take a pain pill tonight if you drink that."

"I've been fine with Motrin all day," I reminded him.

"You have. But if you need something stronger you won't be able to take it."

"I'll be fine."

"All right." Then he turned to Emerson. "Smells great in here."

"That's it?" I asked.

"What do you mean, 'that's it'?"

"You're not gonna push?"

"Sweetheart, you're a big girl. You know your body. If you want another glass, drink it."

Huh. That was interesting and I wasn't sure how I felt about him giving up so easily. All day he'd been militant about me not moving from the couch. I hadn't even been allowed to get up and get myself a drink, and twenty minutes ago when I told him my butt was numb and I needed to move, he'd grumbled about me walking to the kitchen to sit, again, but this time on a stool.

But suddenly he wasn't going to fight me about a pain pill.

Kyle moved to my side of the island, and leaned down to whisper in my ear. "Anaya. All I care about is you're resting, healing, and comfortable. There's a difference between me not budging and not letting you off the couch and you drinking a glass of wine. I'm not a dick. I won't ever try to control you. But I will always make sure you're taken care of."

He straightened, kissed the top of my head, and strolled out of the kitchen with a fresh beer in hand. Thad followed with a smirk, chuckling as he went.

They'd heard.

Emerson was staring at me with wide eyes when Tatiana came into the kitchen.

"What'd I miss? Damn, that smells divine. Thank God, it's not one of the guys turn to cook. I'm over grilled cheese."

"You just missed Kyle giving her the speech," Emerson answered, ignoring the second part of Tatiana's statement.

"Damn. I missed it. Was it good?" Tatiana leaned against the counter.

"Oh, yeah. He told her he'd always make sure she was taken care of."

"He was talking about my bruised ribs," I cut in.

"Girl...if you think that, you're not with the program." Tatiana turned and got down a goblet and poured herself a glass of wine. "But don't worry. It took Emerson forever to get with it."

"Thad and I had some stuff to resolve. Ten years is a long time to be apart and I didn't leave under the best of circumstances."

"Wait, what?"

Emerson turned from the stove and smiled. "It's a very long story but here's the short of it..."

She proceeded to tell me about how she'd met and fallen in love with Thad. After what she'd called a very bad decision on her part, she left him when her younger sister, Autumn, had been kidnapped. Emerson had then spent eight years hunting men like the ones who had abused her sister. She finished by telling me about meeting Thad again when the team was tracking a man she was pretending to be involved with.

"... So there you have it. We had a lot to work out."

"And you were kidnapped?" I asked gently.

"Yeah. Not too long ago. That's what started this war. A note was left at the hotel threatening Ivy and some of the other women. But you don't need to be scared," Emerson rushed out. "The guys are good at what they do."

"I know." I nodded.

"You know? That they're good at their jobs?" Tatiana asked.

"That, too. But I know I don't need to be scared. Kyle promised to keep me safe and I trust him."

"You do?" Tatiana whispered then waved her hand in front of her. "I mean, that's good, you totally should. Kyle's a great guy. They all are."

"I know," I repeated.

Emerson and Tatiana exchanged a funny look, then they both smiled.

"Well, maybe this won't be as hard as we thought," Emerson spoke for both of them.

"What won't be?"

"You and Kyle," Tatiana explained, and I felt my stomach start to knot. "Oh, shit. You spoke too soon, Emmy."

"What's wrong?" Emerson leaned closer.

What *was* wrong?

I thought they were getting their hopes up way too high.

"I'm totally fucked up," I whispered.

Tatiana's eyes narrowed and she leaned closer. "I wouldn't let Kyle hear you say that," she warned.

"Why do you think I'm whispering?"

"I said that to Brooks, one time. Or maybe I called myself damaged when he saw all my scars. He flipped his shit on me."

"I told Thad once I was dirty, from all the things I've done. And oh, boy, he was pissed. They don't like it when their women talk bad

about themselves," Emerson added.

"But that's the thing. I'm not his woman," I protested.

Emerson and Tatiana shared another look. Silent communication passed between them and I was jealous. So jealous I wanted to yell at them to stop. I'd never been close enough to anyone to share an entire conversation with a look.

"Are you saying that because you don't want to be?" Emerson asked softly.

"No! We agreed we wanted to get to know each other, but I can't give him what he deserves. I know it. I'll try and try but when he gets sick of me being a freak about everything, he'll get rid of me and it's gonna break my heart."

"Give the guy a little more credit. He's not an asshole," Tatiana snapped.

"I don't think he is. But he *is* a guy. I've spent so many years hiding, I can't stand when someone touches me. That's a problem, don't you think?" Neither of them said anything and both had matching looks of confusion. "Sex," I whispered.

My cheeks were heating at my admission. I'd gone from not talking about anything personal with anyone to spilling my guts to two women I barely knew. It was embarrassing. It was strange. It was a relief. Like uncorking a bottle that was under so much pressure it was constantly threatening to blow. That's what I'd felt like every day of my life.

"But I've seen Kyle touch you," Emerson argued.

"Are you a virgin?" Tatiana inquired, wide-eyed.

"No. But it's been so long, I might as well be," I sighed.

"Dinner ready?" Declan asked from behind me and I was so startled I nearly fell off the stool.

A strong hand grabbed my bicep to steady me. "Whoa, Anaya. I didn't mean to scare you."

I glanced from Emerson to Tatiana then back to Emerson. Her brows were pinched together and she was staring at my arm, where Declan still had a firm grip. I waited for the panic to come. The fear of him holding me to overwhelm me, but it never came.

Then his hand was yanked away and he cleared his throat before he said, "Shit, I'm sorry. I know better, I just didn't want you to fall."

My eyes drifted closed as mortification set in. I was a freak and everyone knew it.

"What's wrong?" Kyle asked.

With my eyes still closed, I shook my head but I couldn't speak as I tried to process why I hadn't been scared when Declan grabbed me. It hadn't been exactly rough, but it wasn't gentle. Declan was big and strong, he could snap me in half, he could hold me down and trap me. Yet, I wasn't afraid. I hadn't even thought twice about him catching me as I teetered.

"I grabbed—"

"Nothing's wrong," Tatiana cut Declan off. "Dinner's ready. Why don't you go tell the others?"

There was a moment of silence and I opened my eyes but I couldn't get myself to look at anyone.

"Okay," Kyle agreed.

"Hey," Emerson murmured and my attention went to her. "I know you don't believe this yet, but you will. We..." Emerson used her thumb to motion between her and Tatiana. "Have your back. We're here for you if you need to talk. I'll say this one thing then drop it for now. You're not fucked-up. There's not a damn thing wrong with you. Declan touched you and you didn't bat an eye and wouldn't've if he hadn't made it a big deal."

"But that's my fault. I did that. The first time Kyle pushed me against a wall I had a full-blown panic attack. I taught them to behave that way around me."

"I sense there's more to that story and we don't have time to hear it before the guys come back," Tatiana said. "But have you ever thought that maybe you've never found a man you were comfortable enough with to open up to? That maybe all you needed was someone to prove to you they were strong enough to stand by you? That maybe you're not fucked-up, you're just smart and protecting your heart? Cut yourself some slack, Anaya."

No. I'd never given any of those things any consideration. Because I was too busy reminding myself of all the ways I was screwed in the head. I'd made it my life's mission to convince myself that I was too damaged, therefore not worth the effort.

Who in their right mind would want to stand beside me?

Kyle sauntered back in and his gaze came to mine—strong and sure. There was no hint of revulsion at the latest incident.

"Let's get you to the table and I'll bring you a plate."

I didn't bother arguing. I knew he wouldn't let me get my own food. And if I was being honest, it felt damn good having someone take of me for once.

* * *

"WOULD YOU LIKE AN ICE PACK?" Kyle asked after he settled me into bed.

"No, but thank you. I actually feel a lot better. I'm not sure if it's because you didn't allow me off the couch all day or the two glasses of wine."

And now that I was thinking about it, the alcohol sure had loosened my lips. I wasn't sure who that woman was at dinner, when I was joking and laughing with Kyle and his teammates, but I'd never met her before. That woman was friendly and outgoing. A far cry from my normal stoic self. And the shit of it was, I really liked her.

I'd enjoyed the comradery, the playful banter, even Declan had joined in and was being funny.

Why had I been so stupid all my life? It was on that thought I blurted out, "I don't have any friends."

"What?" Kyle stopped with his knee on the bed and looked up at me.

"I have acquaintances. I call Evette my best friend. I say I was close to Kalee and she was my friend. But that's a lie. My whole life has been a lie. Evie tells me everything and I repay her with lies. Kalee would tell me stories about growing up, about her dad, how much she loved him. She'd tell me how much she loved teaching. And what did I do? I gave her nothing."

"Anaya—"

"I've never had what you have. Tonight I was so jealous of Emerson and Tatiana. They're so close they don't need words to communicate. No words, Kyle. They just looked at each other and knew what the other was thinking. I can't imagine what it's like to be that close to someone."

"Sweetheart," he said as he settled in next to me, his features soft and gentle. "I think you may've missed this, but halfway through dinner the three of you were holding your own. You fell right into those silent conversations."

"I did?"

Kyle chuckled. "You did. Don't think we didn't miss the eye rolls, lip twitches, and brows being raised. You were just as much a part of the snarky sisterhood. Those two women are dying to get their hands on you so they can pull you in. You're safe with them."

I was safe.

I hadn't ever been safe.

"Wanna talk about what happened with Dec?" he asked.

"Nothing happened. He accidentally scared me and I almost fell off the stool. He grabbed my arm to catch me. That was it."

"Then why was your face red and head bowed when I came into the kitchen?"

"Because he'd snatched his hand away like it was on fire."

"Anaya, sweetheart, he knows better than to touch you. He felt like shit for not thinking."

"But that's the thing, I didn't care he grabbed me. I wasn't even thinking about it. Not until he yanked his hand away."

"No shit?" He sounded shocked and he should've been.

God knows I was.

"When you came in, I was embarrassed. I knew why he'd reacted that way, but I was too busy trying to process why I wasn't freaking out to tell him I was okay."

"He'd like to hear that. He thought he hurt you."

"God no," I sighed. "I'm trying, Kyle. I know it's a lot to ask, but please be patient with me."

There, I'd said it. I took a huge chance and I'd asked for what I needed. But as the silence stretched between us, nerves set in.

"I'm waiting for you to look at me," he said, and when I did, I was so taken aback I had to swallow the lump in my throat. "I'm gonna say this once more. We got nothing but time, and you take as much of it as you need. All I ask is for you to trust me. Straight up, sweetheart, you know I want to explore a relationship with you. There's no denying I'm attracted to you both physically and emotionally. Just trust me to take us where we need to go. And, Anaya, you never need to ask me to be patient. But you need to be patient with yourself."

"Will you kiss me?"

Yeah, I really liked this new woman who had the courage to ask for what she needed. And now that I'd tried her on for size, I found

that not only did she fit, but it was tailored. Like a second skin that settled over the old and wrapped around my soul.

Kyle's gaze heated, and I liked that a whole lot, too. I liked that he didn't hide his emotions from me. I liked that he was honest and said what was on his mind, but I also liked the way he looked at me when he thought I was being brave. I liked it so much I vowed to do it more.

His lips pressed against mine and I really wished my ribs would hurry up and heal. I knew Kyle was holding back, not wanting to hurt me. And I was totally looking forward to him letting go.

CHAPTER 22

I WAS LYING in bed staring up at a dark ceiling, not wanting to move and wake a still-sleeping Anaya. And just like every morning, in an effort to calm my morning hard-on, I woke before her and willed my dick to cooperate. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn't. And it seemed this was one of those mornings it wasn't.

It had been a little over a week since the night Anaya had asked me to be patient with her. A week of watching her open up to Emerson, Tatiana, and the guys. Seven days of watching her flourish. It was fucking beautiful to see.

There was this whole other side of her that she'd kept buried so deep that she looked stunned every time it came out. The woman was hilarious, her one-liners and witty comebacks when the guys were teasing her were priceless.

Emerson and Tatiana had done exactly what I'd said they'd do and had firmly pulled Anaya into the sisterhood. Those three were thick as thieves. And the silent conversations that Anaya had mentioned she'd been jealous of rivaled the nonverbal communication the team and I shared while on a mission. They could have an entire discussion with facial expressions.

She and Dec had had words about what had happened in the kitchen. They'd gone out back and were out there for hours talking. I didn't ask what the conversation entailed, but after that night a bond had been forged and for the first time, I'd witnessed Declan relaxed. Or as much as a man who carried the burdens he did, could be.

"Morning," Anaya mumbled.

Her breath fanned over my bare chest. She nuzzled in closer and kissed my pec before her hand started to glide up and down my stomach. This was one of the reasons I struggled to will away my erection. Every morning she did the same thing and every morning I tried to brace against the onslaught and failed. Her hands felt so fucking good on my skin there was no hope of hiding my reaction to her.

But she was getting bold in her exploration. At first her touch was timid and slow. Shy in her investigation of my chest and stomach. Now, it was firm and demanding.

"Mornin'," I returned, and placed my hand over hers as she traced the waistband of my shorts.

That was something new. The last two mornings, she'd made her way lower.

"Stop doing that," she whispered.

"Doin' what?"

"Stopping me when I want to touch you."

Oh, *hell* no. She could touch all she wanted above the belt, so to speak. My good intentions were being tested with every kiss, every slow glide of her hand, every sound she made when my lips were on her. My need for this woman was unreal. Nothing like it. I wanted to lay her out and taste and touch every part of her. I wanted to fuck her, make love to her, and everything in between. But part of me loved the torture of anticipation.

"You can touch all you want," I told her and moved her hand higher into safer territory.

"Not where I really want to."

I realized my error too late. I should've kept my hand over hers. But I hadn't and she moved too quickly.

"Anaya," I groaned as her hand moved over my hard-on. Thankfully, it was over my shorts, but damn, the friction felt good. "We should get out of bed," I suggested.

The sooner the better, actually. I needed to get her up and going so I could take a nice cold shower. Though the icy water never worked and the last five mornings I'd had to jerk off alone in the shower to finally get my dick under control.

"No, we shouldn't. Not yet." Her sultry voice filled my ears at the same time her hand continued to move over the nylon of my shorts and my rigid cock. There was nothing I could do but stay

frozen and fight the urge to roll her on her back and take us where she was itching to go.

"Anaya—"

"I'm ready, Kyle."

Every muscle in my body seized at her declaration.

"I don't want to hurt you. You have a few more weeks until your ribs are healed."

"They're fine and you know it. It's been days since they've hurt. I'm a hundred percent."

"No, you're—"

"Kyle," she whined in frustration. "I'm ready. I've been tryin' to tell you but all you do is kiss me and roll out of bed. I don't know how to do this and obviously I'm not good at it because you're not picking up on my hints. I want you. I'm ready."

"Babe, if you were any better, I wouldn't make it to the shower before I had to jerk off. As it stands, I barely make it there now."

"You jerk off in the shower?" she whispered. "Why?"

"Why?" I grunted as she tightened her hold on my cock. "Shit, Anaya. Slow down," I begged.

"Why would you do that?"

"For starters I wake up with you pressed against me every morning. Then you wake up and start touching me, which means as you move, your tits rub against my side. My cock feels like it's going to explode. I want nothing more than to roll you over and bury myself inside you." I felt her stiffen next to me and continued. "I warned you, I cannot control my body's reaction to you. You turn me on and there's no stopping that. But I can control my actions, which means I get out of bed and take care of it myself."

"But what if I wanted you to roll me over?"

"You're killing me, Anaya," I groaned.

"You've been very selfish, Kyle." I would've laughed at her playful tone and reprimand her if her hand wasn't steady stroking my dick.

"Anaya—"

"I. Am. Ready. Stop babying me."

That did it. I could not hold back anymore. I brushed her hand off my cock, rolled up to my elbow and looked down at her. The smile she wore hit me in two places at once—my chest swelled and my cock throbbed. So damn beautiful. So damn sweet.

"You think you're ready for this?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Ready for me?"

"Yes."

"I'm not talking about me taking you, Anaya. I'm talking about us. You ready for this? A hundred percent. Because if you're not, we'll wait. Because once this happens, you're mine, sweetheart. *Mine*. And I won't let you go."

"I thought I was already yours."

I felt that, too, straight to my heart. A feeling I never knew existed. Something so deep I took a moment to memorize it, to allow it to wash over me and absorb into my skin.

"We go down this path, it changes everything, Anaya."

"Okay."

"No, I see you're not understanding. We do this, I get all of you. Every piece of you, not just your body, your trust, but everything you've been holding back."

"I'm not—"

"You are, baby. You've given me so much, and you're lying here offering me something so precious, so sweet, and I wanna take it but I won't—not until you understand I get all of you."

Anaya stared up at me with her soft eyes still wrought with pain yet tinged with determination.

"I'm trying."

"I know you are, and you've already given me so much, but I want everything. You ready to give that to me?"

She was quiet for a moment before she finally whispered, "Yes. I'm ready."

"Good." I leaned forward to brush a soft kiss across her lips but at the moment of contact she opened and swept her tongue along my bottom lip.

Her hands moved between us, her palm cupped my cheek, the other went lower, pressing against my chest, my stomach, then I lost her touch but not her eyes. She was giving it to me, all of her. Not looking away or guarding herself. She was showing me everything. And what she was showing was confirmation she was exactly who I'd thought her to be. Fearless.

My hand started moving, too, down her neck, over the swell of her breast, her puckered nipple, and finally to the hem of her shirt.

"This needs to go."

She hurried to do what I'd asked, pushing my hand aside to take over and the tee was yanked up. I lost her eyes and her hand on my face, but only because the fabric was pulled up and over her head, revealing her taut stomach and full tits. I had to close my eyes against the beauty to regain some control.

"Kyle?"

"Give me a minute."

When I finally had a loose grip on my restraint, I opened my eyes only to find my grip wasn't loose, it was nonexistent. I had no hope of resisting this woman. None at all, and the truth was, I didn't want to hold back. I didn't want to wait to take what was mine, what she'd offered.

Each and every morning I'd felt her tits pressed against my side. I'd known she'd slept without a bra on but, Christ, seeing them bare and feeling them were two different things.

"Promise me, Anaya, you're ready for this."

"I promise."

That was all I needed to hear. I moved and allowed need to take over. Careful not to give her my weight, I settled between her open legs and lowered my mouth to her nipple and pulled it into my mouth. But she wasn't having the distance. Her hands went to my hair, she pulled me down hard, and her back arched. A low guttural moan filled the room and I couldn't get enough. I wanted to touch and taste every inch of her, all at once. I cupped her other breast and lifted it closer. I switched sides and lavished the other. Tonguing and sucking every part I could reach like I was starving. And I was. I needed to devour her.

I came up on my knees, still holding both of her breasts in my hands. Unable to take my eyes off of the erotic sight.

"You're beautiful, Anaya." My gaze went to hers and she was smiling so big both dimples dotted her cheeks. "So damn beautiful."

I rolled to the side. One hand went to her hip and tugged down her panties, and as soon as they were to her knees, Anaya wiggled and kicked them free.

Naked.

Holy fuck, was it a sight to behold. I scooted down and my lips went to her hip and I kissed my way across her stomach to the other side.

"Kyle," she whined and I smiled against her skin.

My lips parted and I licked my way back to where I started.

"Open your legs wider for me."

She immediately did as I asked and I once again hovered over her, my lips kissing and playing with her tits but this time my finger was teasing her slit. Gathering wetness as it roamed from her opening to her clit. Her hips bucked and her back came off the bed.

"Slow, baby," I murmured, then went back to tugging her nipple with my mouth.

"More," she panted.

I slid the tip of my finger into her pussy and groaned when she tightened around the digit. There was no chance in hell I would be able to last. She was too tight, too hot, too fucking eager. I'd blow the second I drove inside of her.

I pushed deeper and her pussy spasmed. No way was she going to come until I tasted her.

My lips pulled off her pebbled nipple and I fitted my shoulders between her thighs, her legs over my shoulders. My mouth latched onto her clit and I flicked my tongue in rhythm with my thrusting finger.

Good Lord, she was hot, and tight, and so fucking wet. And tasted unbelievably good.

"Oh. My. God." Her hips surged up, her hand dove into my hair and she yanked until pain radiated over my scalp. Oh, yeah, she was sexy as fuck when she caught fire.

My teeth grazed the sensitive nub and she shouted once again. I added a second finger and needed to gently work to get both inside. Her excitement coated my way even though her pussy was clenching, sucking my fingers deeper.

No damn way was I going to fit without causing her pain.

"Kyle." She paused, her body locked, and her thighs tightened on my head. "I... Kyle."

My face thrashed between her legs, rubbing her clit with my tongue and my fingers fucked harder until she screamed in pleasure.

Her body sagged and I slowed my ministrations.

When Anaya sighed in satisfaction, I pulled my fingers free and licked her clean. Good God, the woman was perfect. She'd held nothing back. Completely and totally opened herself up.

"That tickles." She wiggled her hips. "Everything's sensitive."

With one last long swipe of my tongue I pulled away. My eyes travelled up her belly, over her heavy tits, and finally to her face.

She was staring down at me and everything she was feeling was clear as day. She wasn't hiding a damn thing.

"I'm speechless," she muttered.

I placed a kiss on her pussy, one on her belly button, another between her breasts, and finally one on her lips. She flinched in surprise before her tongue came out and licked her orgasm off my lips.

So. Fucking. Sexy.

"Thank you," I whispered.

"Why are you thanking me? I should be thanking you for that out-of-this-world orgasm."

"For trusting me."

"I do trust you," she confirmed.

"I know you do, baby, means the world to me."

I was fully on top of her, caging her in and there was no sign of distress or trepidation. Both her hands roamed my back, one leg hitched around my hip, the other tangled with mine. The head of my dick had zeroed in, knowing exactly where it wanted to be with no extra guidance from me.

"You ready, sweetheart?"

A sweet smile played at her lips and her eyes danced with need. Yeah, my woman was ready and her whispered response was more than I needed.

"Yeah, honey, more than. Hurry."

My hips surged forward, and a moan was ripped not from her throat, but her soul. I could hear it, I could feel it, I could see it. And it belonged to me. All of it. All of her. She was mine in every way.

And I was never letting her go.

"Other leg up around my waist," I grunted.

She wasted no time bringing up her leg and locking her ankles at the small of my back, her heels digging in.

I drove into her, she rocked into me, and I was so fucking lost in our connection, the feel of her, the sound of her, I almost missed it. My balls started to tingle, and even though she'd come on my fingers, I wanted more. No, I needed more. I needed to her come around my cock. I moved my hand between us, found her clit, and went to work making that happen.

Her whimpers turned into impatient moans and I rubbed harder, faster, until her nails clawed my back and she lost the control she was fighting hard to keep.

“Let go, baby, come for me.”

She broke and I slammed my mouth onto her and swallowed her scream. Her pussy spasmed before it became impossibly tight and I lost it. Lost myself, lost my control, and lost my heart.

There was nothing about Anaya Baker I couldn't love.

If I'd been a different sort of man, maybe I would've had a chance to fight her pull. Maybe if I was stronger, I could've held back and not started to fall. But I wasn't, and when I looked down into her hazy, satisfied, lust-filled eyes, I knew then I didn't want to be any other kind of man. Because that man wouldn't be worthy of such beauty.

CHAPTER 23

"ANAYA," Kyle called down the basement stairs.

"Yeah?"

"Zane and Ivy are here."

"I'll be right there."

I finished pulling my shirt down and smiled. It had been another great week.

The team was a little frustrated they still hadn't gotten the green light to take out Harry Landry, but Garrett and Tex were getting closer to unraveling Harry's business dealings. I understood the need to keep the man alive while they decided his ultimate fate, but it turned my stomach thinking about what he was doing while he was still allowed to roam free.

Kyle explained there was an undercover CIA agent following his every move. They wanted Harry six feet under but they also wanted intel on the rest of his operation. Thankfully, they were getting close. At least that's what Tex had said when he called in last night.

It had also been a week of really great mornings. Seven days ago, I'd told Kyle I was ready for sex, and once that seal had been broken, Kyle decided it wasn't only broken, it was obliterated. We'd had sex in the bed, sex in the shower, sex bent over the bed, sex while he sat in the chair and I rode him. It was like a sex marathon. He was creative, he had stamina, and I couldn't get enough.

But it was more than really great orgasms. No matter how hard or rough Kyle took me, it was laced with such care and beauty he may as well have been making sweet, slow love to me. Though he did that, too. But I swear, and I still don't understand how it was

possible, but when he touched me, gentle, soft, demanding, it was still... more. Every time we came together it was emotional. We were connecting. We were communicating.

I'd never had this. I'd never trusted anyone enough to let go and be myself. I could be any way I wanted to be in bed and out of it and Kyle made it safe for me to do so. He was demonstrative with his affection, both with words and actions.

He told me every day, several times a day, how beautiful I was. How strong. How brave. He talked to me about his job like I was an equal. We'd gone over Monica's file together and he never got impatient with my questions, he never treated me like I was an idiot when he had to remind me about Omni and Harry Landry's connection. There was a lot of information to process and he remained tolerant and even asked for my opinion.

So when I said it had been a week of really great mornings what I really meant was, it had been a really *great* week, period. Everything about it was wonderful. Everything about Kyle was beyond my imagination. Better than any book boyfriend. Better than any hero ever written. Better because he was mine. Just mine.

It was so good in fact, I was now waiting for the shoe to drop, or the curtain, or whatever drops when the bad shit creeps in. And I told Kyle this. His response was 'you promised me all of you'. I had promised him that, and I was keeping it. I hadn't hidden anything. Which was scary and freeing, and I was learning it was also exciting.

Remembering Zane was upstairs, I smoothed my shirt and grabbed a hairband off the dresser before I headed up the stairs. When I made it to the living room there was some sort of standoff in progress.

"What's wrong?" I asked, glancing around the room.

Zane was holding his son close to his chest. Ivy was standing next to him shaking her head and Tatiana and Emerson were standing in front of him looking agitated.

"Go make your own," Zane growled.

"It's official. You've lost your mind," Ivy muttered.

"Come on, Zane. Just let us hold him," Tatiana said.

"Hell no. He's mine."

"Zane," Emerson whined. "Stop being crazy."

"Seriously, go make your own."

"Zane," Ivy whispered. "Give Eric to Tatiana and go talk to the team."

"I can hold my son *and* talk to my team. Never too young to start learning strategy."

"He can't cogitate, Zane." Ivy laughed.

"Did you hear that, son? Your mother doesn't think you can comprehend a mission brief." Zane shook his head in disgust.

He was being serious. The man *had* lost his mind.

"I give up." Ivy threw her hands in the air.

"You don't see my men trying to steal my kid. They understand," Zane continued.

"They're men, Zane. They don't care about babies," Tatiana put in.

"No. They understand. There are a few things in life a man doesn't share. His weapon, his woman, and his kid."

"Glad to know your weapon comes before your woman," Ivy mumbled dejectedly.

I couldn't help but to laugh. The whole conversation was crazy. Tatiana and Emerson looked totally put out Zane wasn't going to allow them to hold Eric. Ivy looked exasperated and all the men looked amused.

My gaze landed on Kyle and he shrugged his shoulders, like Zane's behavior was to be expected.

I barely knew the man, but I'd seen him with his son several times, therefore I knew he was an overprotective weirdo when it came to Eric. No way was he giving his son up.

Obviously understanding arguing with Zane was going to get them nowhere, Tatiana, Emerson, and Ivy all started for the front room.

"You coming?" Ivy asked.

"In a minute."

Zane walked clutching Eric to his chest to the kitchen table and tossed down a file.

Declan wasted no time opening the folder and I wasted no time moving to Kyle's side. His arm went around me and he tucked me close. Damn, I loved it when he did that.

"I'm meeting with Tom this afternoon," Zane started. "Landry has another purchase set up. We can't wait any longer."

"Where's the buy?" Kyle asked.

"Canada," Zane answered. "But we have a problem."

Zane tried to shuffle through the papers one-handed but was making a mess of it.

"Here." I stepped from Kyle and reached for Eric. "Give him to me so you can use both your hands."

If there was ever a time I understood the meaning of, *if looks could kill*, it was right then. I may've tinkled in my shorts a little as Zane's eyes narrowed.

"If you drop him, I'll—"

"Just give him to me."

I carefully extricated the baby from Zane's arms and forced myself not to roll my eyes as he continued to stare me down, even though he'd transferred Eric into my arms.

"Are your hands clean?" he snapped.

"What?"

"Have you washed your hands? Don't touch his face. And don't breathe on him."

"You're insane." I laughed. "Just finish what you were doing."

Kyle chuckled and my gaze caught his. He was staring at me with something shining in his eyes that looked a lot like longing. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking on my part. I'd never given much consideration to having children. Mostly because you need a man to produce them and I'd never thought that would happen.

But now that I had Kyle, and little Eric was in my arms, I couldn't stop myself from thinking what it would be like to be a mother. I glanced down at his chubby baby cheeks and his face in peaceful slumber and I wondered if Kyle wanted one.

We'd never talked about it but he had talked about not wanting to travel as much for work because he was missing out on his friends starting families. I'd seen him with Linc and Jasmin's twins and he was good with them, playful, sweet even.

We also hadn't talked about me taking a new assignment with the Peace Corps and I was purposefully not checking my email because that would mean I wouldn't be able to ignore the issue and it would need to be discussed. Something I was afraid to do. Something I was worried would be the shoe that dropped.

And not for the reasons I had originally thought. At first, I was worried Kyle would tell me he didn't want me travelling to dangerous places and give me an ultimatum. Him or the Peace Corps. But

over the last week I'd come to realize it was the opposite. What if he told me, or even encouraged me to go? What then? What would that mean? The whole situation was exhausting to think about so I didn't. I pushed it out of my mind and stayed out of my email.

"The buy is set in Abercorn. It is a small village in Quebec. North of Richford, Vermont," Zane stated, pulling me from my thoughts.

"And?" Declan inquired. "I'm sensing there's an issue."

"Garrett can't pinpoint exfil with the girls. There are three options. Straight south down I-139 or there are two water crossings."

Zane pointed to the map he'd laid out.

Abercorn was smack in the middle of two lakes that crossed into the US.

"Why would Garrett consider a water crossing when land would be easier?" Brooks asked. "Looks like it's, what? Five miles?"

"Six point nine," Zane corrected. "The reason is, there's been chatter about boats. Me and Jax are out. I'm breaking up the rest of you into three, three-man teams. Linc, Colin, and Leo. Jasmin, Brooks, and Max. Thad, Kyle, and Declan. You'll infil together, hopefully get there before the buy, shut that down, and be on your way home. If not, Linc, Colin, and Leo will take Lake Champlain to the west. Jas, Brooks, and Max will take I-139. And Thad, Kyle, and Dec will cover Lake Memphremagog to the east."

"How many girls..."

Declan's voice faded into white noise as realization dawned. Kyle was leaving. He was going on a mission and I'd be all alone. Over the years, I'd been alone a lot. I'd preferred it that way. It made it easier to live in the safety of my head. But now? Now my stomach churned. And instead of the normal butterflies I felt when I thought about Kyle, a hundred hornets were stinging me from the inside.

"No fucking way." Kyle's angry voice pulled me from my gloom.

"Christ," Zane bit out. "Stop thinkin' with your dick for thirty seconds. We need to get this shit done. Best case, you all are back in a few days. If the girls are smoke, it could take some time. Time we do not have. Ashaki reported—"

"Fuck, Ashaki," Kyle sneered. "We still don't know if she's playin' both sides."

"Calculated risk," Zane returned.

"Fuck that noise. Would you put your woman out there based on a calculated risk? Hell, no you wouldn't. But you want Anaya and

Emerson to swing in the wind. Hell to the motherfucking no.” Kyle’s growl brokered no argument.

Or at least I thought it hadn’t, but Zane felt differently. “Tex has vetted and confirmed all of Ashaki’s intel. It’s good. Emilio Ruiz refused to turn until his family was offered WITSEC. She made that happen. With Ruiz’s family safe, he’s spillin’ his guts. Emerson and Anaya are our best options.”

Best options? For what? Apparently, I’d spaced out longer than I’d thought.

“You know I’ll do anything you need me to do,” I said, even though I wasn’t sure what I was agreeing to.

“Anaya—”

“I thought you wanted Harry taken down?” I cut Kyle off.

“Not this way.”

“And what way is that?”

“The way where you and Emerson fly to Connecticut alone and interview Monica.”

Oh. That’s what I’d agreed to. Yeah, I wasn’t too keen on not having one of the men with us.

“They won’t be alone. Jeremy will be with them,” Zane cut in.

“Don’t fuckin’ like it one bit,” Thad added, and Kyle turned to his boss with a raised brow.

“I’ll call Myles and have him escort Emerson and Anaya to Connecticut. Once Jeremy has them, Myles is catchin’ a flight with his team. I cannot pull Blue off their mission. Garrett found a link with another Omni player and there’s an arms deal going down in Mexico. They have one shot to take it down.” Zane stopped and exhaled loudly. “I get it. I really fuckin’ do, but we need Anaya and Emerson. If we didn’t, I’d gladly lock their asses up at HQ with Tatiana and the rest of the women. But we need them, and you know it. Nothing left to do but pull your big boy pants up and deal with it.”

Wrong thing to say. Way wrong. Kyle’s face turned red before he turned and stomped out of the room. Thad looked like he was getting ready to challenge Zane to a duel to the death and the rest of the team weren’t happy either.

“Thad,” I started. “I know this isn’t ideal—”

“Ideal? My wife was taken. You were taken. This shitstorm is the epitome of fucked. Neither of you should be anywhere near this operation.”

"But we are. And we're the only two who can relate to Monica and hopefully get her to open up to us. It's the only way, and you know it. Myles will take us up and everything will be fine."

"You don't even know Myles," Thad barked.

"Don't need to. You and Kyle trust Zane. And if this Myles person works for Zane, then Zane trusts him."

"Anaya—"

"We're gonna be fine," I cut him off. "I need to do this. After what happened to me, I need to feel useful. I need to face my fears. And I need your help to do it. Kyle will never be okay with this, unless his team has his back. Please help me."

Everyone was silent and I sighed. They weren't going to help me.

"Thad—" I started.

"I don't like it one goddamn bit. It has 'disaster' written all over it. But I also know Emmy, she's relentless and won't back down. I feel better knowing the two of you will be together."

"Thank you. I'm gonna go find Kyle."

I turned to leave but Zane stopped me. "Not with my son, you're not."

I squared my shoulders and turned the baby away from him. "Penitence for telling my man to pull up his big boy pants. Now it's your turn. I'm giving Eric back to his mother, so her friends can cuddle and love on him, without his crazy father acting like a fool."

Zane's growl didn't scare me. He was all bark and no bite. At least with the women in his life. There was no doubt he could snap a man in half with his bare hands and not break a sweat. But he'd never hurt me.

"How'd you get the baby?" Emerson asked, stunned, when I walked into the formal living room.

"Did you have to knock out Zane?" Tatiana smiled.

"Here." I lowered Eric into Emerson's waiting arms. "Don't touch his face. Don't breathe on him. I don't even think you're allowed to look at him."

"God knows I love my husband. And part of that is because of how hard he loves. How protective he is. But this? This is so over the top it's insane. He's gonna give himself a heart attack if he doesn't calm down."

I looked at Ivy and I had to agree, Zane was being over the top. But I couldn't help feeling a little jealous of baby Eric. He was ten

days old and had no idea how loved he was. How much his father adored him. How his mother's eyes danced with joy every time she looked at him. Eric Lewis would never in his lifetime know what loneliness was. He'd never be cast away.

"But it sure beats the alternative."

"Yeah, it sure does," she whispered.

Then I went in search of my man.

CHAPTER 24

THE DAY HAD PROGRESSIVELY GONE DOWNHILL.

Ashaki reported to Garrett that the stable of girls was ready for auction.

We were leaving Maryland at zero dark thirty to head to Canada, and a few hours later, Emerson and Anaya would be on their way to Connecticut with Myles.

"You're wasting time," Anaya huffed.

"What?" I turned from my gear I was packing.

"You're sulking. We only have a few hours before you leave. Stop being mad, it's not going to change anything."

I wasn't mad, I was furious. And not only that, I was fucking scared and I didn't do scared. I'd gone into plenty of missions with my balls in my gut, but never had I been scared.

But then, I'd never sent the woman I loved to interrogate an unknown source before, either. We had no clue if Monica was a victim. It didn't matter how much Emerson and Anaya had proclaimed she was, until the woman was properly examined and vetted, as far as I was concerned, she was an accomplice.

"Anaya—"

"Don't snap at me." Anaya's hand went to her hip and her face turned hard. "Do you know why I'm not scared?"

"That's the problem. You should be scared, yet you're treating this like it's a quiet stroll in the park."

"I'm not scared," she sighed. "Because I trust you. I trust your team. Myles will be with us, then Jeremy. All we have to do is talk with Monica and wait for you, Thad, and Declan to pick us up and

bring us home. You're the one that's going into harm's way. Not me. And you can't be worried about what I'm doing *and* concentrate on your job. So stop worrying."

She was fucking crazy if she thought that was happening.

"What can I do to make this easier for you?" she asked softly.

"Stay here and go on lockdown with everyone else."

Her jaw twitched and her shoulders slumped.

"Fine. Call Zane."

Wait. What the fuck just happened?

And why did I feel like such a dick for even asking, and an even bigger one that she'd agreed?

"What?"

"Okay, fine. If this is what you need so you can go on your mission and focus so you don't get yourself killed and you come home to me, I'll go on lockdown."

Goddamn, I was prick. She'd do it. She'd give me what I needed even if it meant giving up something she felt she had to do.

"Come here, sweetheart."

Anaya closed the distance and I abandoned my gear, pulling her into my arms when she came close.

"I'm sorry for being an asshole. The last time I let you out of my sight, you were taken and beaten. I can't get the image out of my head. It's not fair to you or to the operation but there it is. I'm scared as hell to leave you."

"I get it," she mumbled against my chest. "I'm scared, too. Not for myself but for you. I need you to come home to me."

Did my idiocy ever end? I hadn't even asked her how she was feeling about me leaving. The thought hadn't crossed my mind that she'd be worried about me.

"Never had anyone waiting for me to come home before."

"Well, now you do."

"Now I do," I repeated.

We stood in the middle of the basement. Anaya in my arms and my eyes glued to the bed we'd shared for two weeks. A bed where I'd made love to her in a variety of ways, where she'd fallen asleep in my arms, where she'd whispered her secrets to me. A place where I could feel her soul starting to heal.

It felt longer than a few weeks. Much longer. I couldn't remember a time she hadn't been in my life and I didn't want to imagine a time

when she wasn't. Or worse, a time when she wouldn't be.

My arms flexed around her and I sighed. "Please promise me you'll be safe. You and Emerson will stick together. And if something feels off, the two of you leave. Zane, Jax, Garrett, and Tex will be here if you need them."

"I promise." Anaya's voice was full of surprise and happiness.

Damn.

I didn't want her to go. But I couldn't allow my insecurities to roll over onto her. She was finally coming into herself. Each day she opened herself up and her spirit shined through. I couldn't snuff it out.

"I'm serious, Anaya. If something doesn't feel right, it's not."

"Emmy and I will stick together, no matter what. And if I get a bad feeling, we'll leave."

"You won't have communication with me. Everything will have to go through headquarters."

"I remember."

Of course she did. She and Emerson had been briefed. And while neither seemed happy the team was going dark, they seemed to understand the necessity of it. No personal phones would go with us to Canada and all communication would be heavily encrypted.

"I love you, Anaya."

She went still in my arms and every muscle in her body had gone stiff.

Shit, it was too soon. I should've kept my feelings to myself.

"You do?"

I wanted to chuckle at the shock in her tone but I didn't.

"Yeah, sweetheart. I do. And if it's too—"

"I love you, too, Kyle. I've known it for a while but I was too afraid to tell you."

My eyes drifted closed and I savored her words. Words I'd never forget. A declaration that hit my chest, my gut, and if I was honest, my dick. My body filled with warmth and I prayed everything would work out—that Anaya and Emerson could get the intel we needed and the team and I could pull off a successful rescue mission.

"You should finish packing," Anaya whispered.

"In a minute. I'm not ready to let you go."

I backed her up to the bed and I knew the second the back of her knees hit the edge because her smile was blinding and her dimples

were out.

"Only a minute?"

I didn't answer my woman's saucy question, not with words. I tore her shirt over her head and commenced showing her how I felt about her telling me she loved me. It took more than minute. It took five before she was panting my name while I ate her to her first orgasm. And another twenty before she shouted her orgasm into the pillow as I took her from behind. And ten minutes after that, I was emptying myself inside of her and it was her turn to swallow my moan as her pussy took everything I had to give.

Then I went to back to packing.

* * *

THE HOURS HAD PASSED FASTER than I'd wanted.

The kiss goodbye was too damn short.

And the look on Anaya's face had me rethinking everything.

"We'll both be home in a couple of days, right?" she whispered.

"Right."

"I'm gonna miss you."

"I'll miss you, too, sweetheart. Stay safe."

"You do the same."

Unable to help myself, I leaned down for one more kiss. My hands went into her soft brown locks and I tangled my fingers in the strands, holding her where I wanted. I meant for the kiss to be gentle, I wanted to tell her how much it was going to suck being away from her. But as soon as her silky tongue brushed against mine, I was lost.

I had no idea how it happened. How had I fallen in love so quickly? How was it that Anaya had become such an important part of my life I was dreading leaving for a mission? My job had been my life. First in the Navy, then with Z Corps. There was nothing better than the thrill of an operation—until Anaya. Now I didn't want to go. I didn't want to sleep in some shitty, rundown shack away from her. I wanted her curled next me.

Anaya groaned and I knew it was time.

Time to say goodbye.

I broke the kiss and looked down into her half-masted eyes, ecstatic our kiss had affected her.

"See you soon, sweetheart."

"Yeah."

I led her to the bed and held back the covers until she got in. After I tucked her in and kissed her forehead I straightened.

"Get some sleep. You have a busy day."

"I love you, Kyle."

I stood there and allowed her sweet declaration to wash over me. I'd never tire hearing her say that.

"Love you."

I switched off the lamp on the nightstand and grabbed my gear.

I paused at the door and forced myself to leave without looking back.

The guys were all waiting for me in the living room. Thad looked as dejected as I felt. He didn't want Emerson traipsing off to Connecticut, either.

"You ready?" Dec asked.

"Almost." I turned to Myles. "You have everything you need?"

"Yep." The man's lips twitched. "Not my first escort."

"Maybe not, but it's the first time you're transporting the woman I love. So I need to know, you got this?"

Myles's grin faded and his eyes narrowed. "You know I do."

I did know. Myles was a good operator, a good teammate. There was a reason why he was the leader of the Blue Team. His instincts were spot-on. Zane had been lucky when Myles agreed to work for Z Corps; every government agency had been trying to get Myles under contract when he'd left the Army.

"Fuck. You're right. I'm just—" I scrubbed my hands over my face, not knowing how to finish that sentence.

"I got this. Both of you need to stop worrying and get your head in the mission. I'll check in after I drop them."

Thad didn't say a word, he simply headed for the door and the rest of the team followed.

"Thanks," I muttered.

"You're welcome. Later."

We all piled into the SUV with Dec behind the wheel and thankfully the roads were empty. Normally his driving was a hair-raising experience. But this morning he obviously had something on his

mind—the effect of that something was his foot was made of lead and we'd be at HQ in half the normal time.

"Where do you keep disappearing to?" Max asked Declan.

"None of your business," Dec returned.

"It is when every time you sneak back into the house, you're more pissed-off than when you left."

Leave it to Max to call Declan out on his attitude. I was just as curious as to where Declan had gone but I certainly wasn't going to ask and most definitely not when the man had my life in his hands.

"I don't sneak anywhere, asshole."

"Tomato, tomahto," Max continued. "I call it sneaking when you come home and quietly go upstairs without a word."

A thick silence fell in the SUV and I didn't need to see Declan's face to know he was pissed.

"I have a lot on my mind," Dec muttered.

"You care to share?" Max pressed, not knowing when to quit.

"Nope."

"Right." I could see Max shake his head in the dim light filtering in from the streetlamps. "You know—"

"Leave it." Declan's short answer left no room for argument and Max wisely dropped it.

Declan would share in his own time. Not a second before. And the little he had shared was more than enough for me to understand why he never wanted to talk about his past. My gut twisted even thinking about losing Anaya. I had an all new respect for the man. No way would I be able to go on if I'd lost all that he had.

CHAPTER 25

"MYLES IS IN CHARGE."

"Yes, Zane, you already said that," I returned.

"This is why I don't employ women," Zane muttered. "They roll their eyes and throw attitude."

"And Jasmin's not a woman?"

"Fuck no. Jasmin's got balls of steel. She doesn't roll her eyes, she simply shoots people."

"And Ivy? She works for you," Tatiana joined the conversation.

"And Violet? And me?"

"Good point. You're fired."

"Fired?" Tatiana laughed. "What did I do?"

"Fraternization."

"Is that somewhere in your employee handbook?"

"See, right there. That's why you're fired. My men don't ask me for an employee handbook. They have a field manual. They also don't give me lip. Well, that is until they lose their balls to a woman, then they give me nothing but grief."

There was something working behind Zane's blue eyes. They were stormy and alert. I'd come to understand the attitude he was giving at the moment was normal. Zane was sarcastic and gruff. But something was off with the way he was looking at us.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Besides the fact you're standing here givin' me—"

"Zane. What is wrong?"

On a long exhale his gaze went from me to Emerson then came back to me.

"Askin' a lot of the two of you. Askin' a lot of the men. Straight up, if it was Ivy, no way would she be going. I'd have her ass safely chained to my desk. Struggling with my decision. I have two men who are deployed who won't be dedicated to the mission because they'll be worried about their women. That's how operations fail. That's how good men get dead. And I'm sending two traumatized women into an uncertain situation asking them to relive their trauma."

"I'm not traumatized," I denied. "And don't you dare treat me like I am."

"Eight years, Zane," Emerson started. "You know how I lived. What I did. And you know I can handle this. I've been in worse situations and I was alone. Now I have you and the team at my back. Don't start acting like I can't handle the simple task of talking to a woman."

"What if Monica is Landry's partner?" Zane asked.

"Then she is and we'll sniff that out in a heartbeat," Emerson answered. "I know the difference."

"Fuck," Zane clipped.

"We got this. We're talking to the woman in a controlled environment. If it turns out she's one of the bad guys, Anaya and I leave, and Jeremy will have what he needs."

"I'm gonna come with you."

"No, you're not. Your wife just had a baby and she needs you. As you said, you have a team deployed and need to be ready to take their backs if something should happen. Besides, Garrett is unraveling the Omni network and you're needed here. Myles will drive us up. Look around, if he feels something's off, he puts us back in the car and we're gone. We have a plan and it's a good one."

"If—"

"Zane, honest to God, stop. If we were two of your men, this wouldn't be a conversation," Emerson pressed.

"But you're not two of my men. You're two women who mean something to my men. If shit goes sideways, it's on me."

"What do you need from us to make you feel better?" I asked.

"Promise me you'll follow orders. Don't question Myles, don't argue with Jeremy if he tells you something, and you listen to me if I tell you to bug out. Without hesitation or question you follow directions to the T."

"Promise," we both said in unison.

"Goddamn." Zane shook his head. "You two be safe. Myles, they're all yours. Check in."

"Copy that, boss."

Zane made his way to the front door, then he turned back and stared at Myles.

"Don't get any fuckin' ideas. And if your team does, castrate them immediately. No more goddamn women."

"No worries from us, LT. Living free and wild, just the way we all like."

"Famous last fucking words," Zane grumbled and slammed the door behind him.

I glanced over at Emerson and I returned her smile. "That was easier than I thought."

"You just have to know how to handle him," she returned.

"Handle Zane Lewis." Myles barked out a laugh. "Never thought I'd hear someone utter those words."

* * *

"WHY ARE WE DRIVING AGAIN?" I complained from the back seat.

We'd just passed Newark, New Jersey. It should've taken just over three hours from Annapolis but Myles was avoiding toll roads which had tacked another thirty minutes onto the drive so far.

"You're worse than a five-year-old." Myles laughed.

"Something's not sitting right with me," Emerson said. "You read the file on Monica, right?"

Emerson glanced over her shoulder waiting for my response.

"Yeah. But nothing stuck out."

"Monica went missing from Ontario when she was thirteen. Her parents didn't alert the police right away."

"Maybe they thought she ran away? How was her homelife?" Myles asked before I could.

"Everything looks copasetic on paper. But we all know that can be bullshit. Here's the weird part, the missing person's report was closed."

"Do you have information on why?" Myles further inquired.

"I read that, too. But I don't know anything about Canadian procedures," I told Emerson.

"I don't think the Canadian police would close an investigation into a missing thirteen-year-old without good cause. I'm gonna call Garrett and ask him."

Emerson rummaged through her purse and pulled out her phone. She put it on speaker and a few seconds later it was ringing.

"Emerson?" Garrett answered.

"Yeah. Listen, can you look into the police report from when Monica Tremblay went missing and find out why the investigation was closed?"

"Sure. What are you thinking?"

I could hear Garrett clicking his keyboard as he waited for Emerson to answer.

"Not sure. Something seems off about it. In the US that would never happen, right?"

"Correct," I answered. "The investigation would remain active and the missing person's name would be added to the federal database. The NCMEC would also be involved and have a record."

"Shit," Garrett muttered. "We didn't run the parents. And we should've. The case was closed when the Tremblays reported Monica had gone to live with a family member in the United States."

"Was there a visa issued?" Myles asked.

"Negative. Nothing was filed with INS. Though Monica's mom had dual citizenship, which means Monica does, too."

"Is there anything that supports their claim?" I probed. "School records? Doctors' visits? Anything?"

"Negative. She's a ghost."

"Is it possible her parents sold her?" Emerson questioned.

"Strong possibility. Good catch, Emmy. Let me dig into the parents and I'll call you back. How's the drive?"

"Long," I muttered.

"Now you sound like Tatiana. She vowed never to take another road trip with the team."

"She's a smart woman."

"Right. Out."

Garrett disconnected and Emerson turned back to me. She looked troubled.

"How do you wanna handle her?"

I thought about her question for a moment before I answered. "We go in soft. Open up to her and see if she responds. I think she needs to see us as women who understand what she's been through. If we don't get the right reactions from her, we can change tactics. But if she is a trafficking victim and we go in hard, treating her like Landry's partner and we're wrong, we'll never gain her trust. Not to mention, we'll damage her more."

"I agree. And I've been around enough women who've lived through that hell to know what they look like. If we're right and her parents did sell her, she's a victim no matter what. Even if Harry did turn her and she then willingly helped him. Bottom line—Monica would've done what she needed to do to survive."

Emerson was right and the thought churned my stomach. There was only so much a person could take before mentally they checked out and survival mode took over.

* * *

IT WOULD BE another two hours before Garrett called us back. I was staring out the window watching the New York Stewart airport go by when Emerson answered her phone.

"Find anything?" Emerson asked.

"Gold mine," Garrett stated. "Dale Tremblay worked as a programmer until the company he worked for went bankrupt and he found himself unemployed. His wife, Beatrice, worked a low-paying job as an assistant."

"Wait, worked? She doesn't now?" I cut in.

"Both deceased. Suicide."

Shit. That didn't sound good. At all.

"Nothing screams guilt like a double suicide," Emerson whispered.

"And you'd be right. The Tremblays were struggling. Beatrice was the only one working, they'd lost their house, and were living out of a motel."

"Fallin' on hard times and being homeless doesn't equal selling your kid," Myles put in.

"It doesn't, but the two-hundred thousand dollars that appeared in their bank account does."

"A transfer that large doesn't set off red flags?" I asked.

"Not when it comes from your employer as an on-the-job injury settlement."

"Employer?" I breathed. "What the hell?"

"Still working my way down the rabbit hole, but I thought you'd want to know what I'd found so far."

"What's your gut telling you, Garrett?" Myles queried.

"Can't find it yet, but I bet Icon Fashion has ties to Omni. That's where Beatrice worked."

"Icon? That's owned by Madeleine Strotherby," I said in disbelief.

Madeleine had to be in her eighties now. She was a fashion model, turned actress, turned fashion designer. She also had a line of perfumes and makeup. The world viewed the woman as a saint with all of her charitable work.

"Anaya, it pains me to burst your rosy perception," Garrett started. "But it is my experience those who look the best on paper, those who try to show the world how good they are, are usually hiding something. And what they're hiding is dark and heinous. Not saying I'm right about Icon, but when something stinks, it's rotten. And the whole fucking thing surrounding the Tremblays stinks."

"If you're right, that'll suck," I mumbled. "Madeleine has given almost half her fortune away."

"Maybe I am," Garrett conceded, though he didn't sound like he meant it. "I'll be in touch."

"What's your opinion, Myles?" Emerson asked.

"Seen a lot in my life," Myles started. "And I have to agree with Garrett. Wealth and power go hand-in-hand. Once someone acquires those, they don't want to lose either."

"And Omni? What about them?" I asked. "It sounds like all the people involved are wealthy business owners. Legit businesses. Why traffic women?"

"Not just women. Drugs, arms, antiques, you name it, they deal it. The answer is simple. Money. More power. And I'm sure for men like Harry Landry and Jefferson Baldwin they get off on buying and selling women. They're pigs and they think they can buy anything, own anything. What does a man who literally has the world at his fingertips buy? A person. The ultimate rush of power for scum like them. They have no morals, no soul, and the screams of their victims feeds their perverse egos. The man my team is tracking deals

in weapons. He's known to discount his loads if the buyers will allow him to watch."

"Watch what?" I asked.

"The first raid."

"The man likes to watch a raid?"

"Miguel Lopez gets his rocks off on watching innocent people die by the weapons he provides," Myles explained.

"That's...that's..." I couldn't finish my sentence because I didn't even know what that was. Disgusting? Horrible?

"Fucked," Myles provided. "That's what it is. The man needs to be put to ground. And hopefully in the next forty-eight hours that's where he'll be."

I sat back in my seat and thought about what Myles had said and the manner in which he said it. Nonchalant. Flippant. Like it was no skin off his back that he was telling me without actually telling me he was going to kill the man.

Then I realized I didn't much care if a man like Miguel Lopez was going to die.

The world would be a better place for it.

Maybe I should've felt differently, and maybe a few months ago I would've, but I'd had quite the education since Kalee had died. Since I'd huddled in a closet praying the rebels wouldn't find me as I heard them senselessly torture and kill the villagers. Since the rebels had killed innocent children in an orphanage. Since I'd been taken and for the second time in my life chained to a wall.

Now I felt no pity.

CHAPTER 26

"TOTAL SHITSTORM," Leo muttered.

He was not wrong.

The two of us had taken patrol on the south end of the compound where the girls were being held and what we found wasn't what'd been reported.

It looked like a tent-city in the middle of an unused pasture.

"I counted seventeen being hosed off," I told him—something he already knew. I was sure he'd counted the girls as they were dragged from the tents, forced to undress, then hosed off like animals.

The women had flinched and cried out as the undoubtedly ice-cold water had pelted their flesh, making my trigger finger itchy. Dropping a few of the men as they laughed at the women would do the soul so good. Yet I remained still and watched.

Seventeen women we could see. Maybe more in the tents. More than had been reported.

Ten guards. Again, that we could see.

There were nine of us, we could easily take out ten men. But the issue was, the property was in the middle of a small town. The sound of automatic gunfire would draw attention, and lots of it.

The other issue was, the compound wasn't exactly hidden.

"There has to be more. The guard ratio is too high. And I don't like how we can't see into the house."

"Panther, what's your six?" Linc came over the radio asking our position.

"Southeast corner," Leo returned.

"We're headed your way."

Lincoln and Colin had taken the north end of the property. Jasmin, Declan, Max, Thad, and Brooks had paired off to scout the town.

Leo and I went back to silently watching when two men and a girl exited the house, a man on each side of her holding her by the arms. They dragged her limp body through the yard toward the tents. Anger and bile rose fast and furious.

"Easy," Leo growled from beside me.

He may've mumbled more words in an attempt to calm me down but my focus was on the girl's bare feet as they towed behind her.

The depravity never failed to boil my insides.

"Two more guards," Leo noted.

Two more dead men walking was more like it.

Two more motherfuckers I'd feel no remorse for when my bullet hit them square between the eyes.

* * *

LEO, Colin, Linc, and I made it back to the safehouse and were waiting for the rest of the team to get back from checking out the town.

The other three men were lounging on the couch but I couldn't get my racing thoughts to settle. That girl being hauled out of the house loose and limp kept playing in a loop. Over and fucking over.

That could've been Anaya.

My gut clenched and chest ached.

"I'm gonna report in," Linc said. "If Dec has anything else to add, he can call when he gets back."

With my thoughts on Anaya I barely registered the phone ringing and Zane answering.

"We got problems," Linc started.

"When the fuck don't we got problems?" Zane barked.

"South end, at least eighteen girls and twelve guards. North end, we had visual on five girls, but there are three tents, could be more we didn't see and three guards."

"Fuck."

"'Bout sums it up. Fifteen guards is a cakewalk, but as you know the property is five miles outside of town. We start a shootout at the O.K. Corral people are gonna hear. They hear, they're gonna come

investigate. Don't need a bunch of civilians running around but we really don't need the authorities. Any suggestions, brother?"

"You think Landry's got the locals on his payroll?" Zane asked.

"Has to. The camp doesn't have a neon sign flashing girls girls girls, but it's not hidden. If you get close, you can see the tents the girls are housed in," Leo added.

"Let the transaction take place," Zane instructed.

"Come again?" I entered the conversation.

"Let the buyer take possession of the girls and track 'em. Hopefully the girls will be split up. There will be fewer guards during transport. I'll leave it to you when you engage."

"That's what I was thinking," Colin said. "No way they're gonna try to move all those girls together."

"Side note, Garrett followed Emerson's lead on Monica's disappearance. Shit's clicking into place and I'm not liking where it's going but it's making sense. We're closer to getting to the top. Tex is handling some of the low-level players. Fuckin' amazed at what that man can do from the comfort of his living room."

"No shit," Leo agreed. "Tex scares the fuck out of me."

John "Tex" Keegan was a damn superhero without the stupid cape and tights. The former SEAL could and did rule all things cyber.

Our IT guy, Garrett, was a badass, but Tex could still outperform. And much to Garrett's annoyance, Tex did not share his secrets.

"What else did Garrett find?" I asked.

"The Tremblays were paid off. He's still working on how that arrangement came to be. Nothing in their background suggests they personally had any ties to Omni or any other trafficking ring. Other than Beatrice working for Icon. Garrett's resolute Icon has involvement with the group but so far he can't prove his theory. Tex is taking a look, too."

"Landry tied to Icon?" Linc asked.

"Harry Landry owns stock. Not a lot and that by itself doesn't mean shit. You've seen his portfolio, he owns stock in damn near everything from tech giants to small startups. It would take us a decade to dig into them. And those are the ones we know about. What's more concerning is he was able to hide his ownership of Corella. We don't have time to look into surface shit. I called Tom

and he confirmed he knew about Corella. That was one of the reasons we have the stand-down order. He wants Landry alive."

"Tom thinks Landry will flip?" I surmised and my blood boiled.

I wasn't sure what was worse for a man like Harry Landry, living out his life in a prison cell or six feet under. But what I did know was Thad was gonna hit the roof. Landry was behind Emerson's kidnapping. Something that was still fresh in everyone's mind but the burn was scorching in Thad's gut.

"That's what he thinks," Zane confirmed. "But I doubt it."

I glanced to the three men sitting on the couch and they all had matching looks of disbelief. Landry would not turn. It was going to be a waste of time but no one would question the president. If Tom Anderson wanted Landry breathin' he'd be left breathin', and that was that.

"Myles checked in," Zane said. All thoughts of Landry and the case flew out of my head. "He confirmed the house was secure, Jeremy had everything under control, so he left."

Before we'd gone out to patrol, Zane had called to tell me Anaya and Emerson had arrived safely in Connecticut, but news that Myles had taken off so quickly didn't sit well. I knew he had a time-sensitive mission but I'd hoped he'd at least stay the night.

"And the girl?" Linc asked. "Did he say anything about Monica?"

"Said she looked like a caged animal. As soon as they entered the house, she'd retreated to a corner, curled into a ball, and had refused to look at any of them."

Goddamn. That alone would kill Emerson and Anaya.

And not for the first or even the fiftieth time I wished I was with Anaya. Emotionally this was gonna gut her. And even though she hadn't had another nightmare, if they returned, I wouldn't be there. My arms ached to hold her.

"They'll break her," I told the room. "I have no doubt Anaya and Emmy can get her to talk."

"I agree." I was momentarily taken aback by the pride I could hear in Zane's voice. "Anything else or can I get back to my wife?"

"Fucker," Leo mumbled.

"Being the boss has its perks," Zane returned.
Asshole.

He was in his bed with his pretty wife and newborn and we were sitting hundreds of miles away from our women.

"You know, there is such a thing as a resignation, asshole," Colin told him.

"Right. I won't hold my breath."

Zane disconnected and Linc chuckled.

I didn't. There wasn't a damn thing worth laughing about while Anaya was off doing her thing and I was stuck in Canada.

CHAPTER 27

THERE WAS no such thing as a good night's rest when there was a screaming girl in the next room. It was a good thing Zane's safe-house was in the middle of nowhere.

The cabin was beautiful and had a stunning view of Riga Lake from the front porch. It was actually the perfect place for a woman who'd been battered and beaten down to recuperate. In a word, the area was tranquil. Not that Monica was paying any attention to her peaceful surroundings.

After seeing the woman and how she reacted to our presence, and then hearing her moaning and screaming all night, I was seriously doubting our ability to get her to speak with us.

I was happy to see she wasn't restrained when we entered, even if she had to be locked in a bedroom at night. It sucked, but I understood. Jeremy needed to sleep and Monica needed to be kept from hurting herself. Or him.

Last night Jeremy had gone over security and safety protocols with Myles, wherein I'd learned the windows didn't open. And they were fitted with a polycarbonate pane that was unbreakable. So Monica was able to roam freely during the day.

After dinner, something that broke my heart was when I saw Monica crouched in a corner, which meant Jeremy had to place her plate on the floor and slide it in her direction because if he got too close she would attack. So we all ate at the table and Monica sat on the floor. Jeremy had explained he only fed her food she could pick up with her hands and kept all cutlery locked up.

That was when the gravity of the situation had fully sunk in. Monica didn't just look broken, she was.

Whatever had been left of her when she was on the street trying to survive had snapped.

Myles had done a thorough walkthrough and had spoken to Jeremy in private then he'd taken off. It had been on the tip of my tongue to beg him to stay, or for him to take me with him. It wasn't that I was worried about Jeremy's ability to protect us, it was because I wasn't sure I could handle what was going to happen. I didn't think I was strong enough to do this, even with Emerson by my side.

"Well, last night sucked," Emerson said from the twin-sized bed next to the one I'd slept in.

"That's an understatement," I grumbled.

"You ready for today?"

"Not even a little bit."

"We'll get through," Emerson vowed.

I couldn't understand how she could be so optimistic. Had she not seen what I had?

"This is gonna suck," Emerson sighed. "And now that it's just us, I can admit I'm not sure if I'm ready to think about everything that happened to me. All the feelings and fear I've worked hard to overcome are going to surface. And without Thad here to catch me, I'm scared."

"So am I," I admitted. "I know I said I needed to do this and fought so I could be here, but now, what if I can't? What if the memories of what happened to me take over and I break down?"

"Then you break down. Hell, we'll break down together. We have each other."

"We absolutely do," I confirmed.

"We got this."

I smiled at Emerson and could totally understand why Thad was ass over tea kettle in love with his wife. She was brave and badass. We were both scared but she made me believe we could push through.

And together we could.

* * *

I LEARNED two things sitting next to Emerson as she tried to get Monica to talk.

The first was, Emerson Bench was by and far the strongest, bravest, most badass woman I had ever met. The second was, I wanted her as a friend. A real friend, a friend I opened up to and had for a lifetime.

I also was learning there was so much more to the story about her and Thad, and about her and her sister Autumn than she'd told me.

And I desperately wanted to meet Autumn. She wasn't a badass, she was the baddest of badasses.

"Monica," Emerson whispered. "We can make you safe. You *are* safe."

The tattered woman was looking at her lap and shaking her head.

"I was thirteen, too," I told Monica. Her head stopped shaking but the rest of her started. "I was sold."

Monica's whimper spurred me on.

"I was taken to a warehouse and stripped to my bra and underwear. After that they made me walk in front of a room full of men and I listened in disbelief as the men called out their bids. I wasn't even scared, not then, because I couldn't understand what was going on. It was like it wasn't real, but it couldn't be, I was a person. How was it possible for someone to buy me? I was in such a shock, I hadn't realized the bidding was over until a man came up and grabbed my arm. I didn't fight when he put leather cuffs on my wrists. I just stood there like an idiot. It wasn't until he started to pull me behind him that I came out of my daze and started fighting. But of course, there was no fighting it. Not then. Not when I was being auctioned. I was no longer a person, I was a thing. I was a nothing."

I stopped and watched Monica's body quake and wondered how much she'd gone through. How much worse it was for her.

"Were you auctioned off, too?" I asked.

She shook her head no but didn't say anything else.

"Will you tell us what happened?" Emerson pressed.

Monica continued to shake her head.

"We want to help you," I started. "We want to take you somewhere where no one will ever hurt you again. A place where they

can't ever find you again."

"They'll always find me," Monica croaked. Her voice hoarse and scratchy.

"No, they won't—"

"You can't stop them. No one can. No one. You don't understand."

"Then tell us," I gently demanded. "Tell us so we can help you."

"You can't help," she snarled. "They're coming for me. They always do. And when they get here it's gonna be bad. Worse than all the times before."

"No one's—"

"Yes. They. Are," she cut me off. "And if you don't think they are, then you're stupid. They're gonna take you, too. And no one will ever find you again."

Fear slithered down my throat and filled my belly.

"We found you," Emerson declared.

Monica scowled at Emmy, every feature twisted in a nasty grimace.

"No one *found* me," she sneered and hugged her knees close to her body before she lowered her head on her knees, cutting off any further conversation.

Emerson looked at me and motioned for me to stand.

That didn't go well.

We met Jeremy in the kitchen and he, too, had a scowl on his face.

"She's gonna be tough to crack," he whispered. "She doesn't respond to kindness. As a matter of fact, it has the opposite reaction than you want. The only way I can get her to eat or go to her room is if I demand it. And I can't be nice about it either."

That didn't sound good.

"Makes sense." Emerson shrugged. "For ten years she's been abused, she doesn't know how to respond to kindness. She probably doesn't even remember what it is."

"We'll try again after lunch?" I asked.

"Yep. Next time we talk to her, we'll go about it differently. Brace yourself, Anaya; it's gonna get ugly but we have to get her mad."

* * *

I HADN'T FULLY UNDERSTOOD what Emerson had been saying until a few hours later when we were sitting in front of Monica again.

"How many women do you think you brought to the stable?" Emerson inquired. "That's what you did, right? You recruited."

Monica's body jerked with the new line of questioning.

"How hard was it for you to get those innocent women to join you?" I took over. "Bet it was hard to convince them that being a prostitute was easy. Was it the money? Is that what—"

"Innocent?" Monica growled. "They were already whores walking the street."

"Right. So that made it easier?"

"Easier than you think. At least we had protection. At least they wouldn't be walking the streets."

"So, what? You did them a favor?" Emerson spit out. "Is that what you've convinced yourself you were doing? Helping them?"

"They went for sucking dick in alleyways to fifteen-hundred thread count sheets. So you tell me, was it a step up?"

"Is there a difference?" I grumbled.

"One way you walk away with scabbed-over knees and the other you get luxury," Monica informed me.

"And again, is that better? You're still sucking a man you don't like's dick."

Monica sat back and uncurled her legs, now sitting Indian style. "Didn't take either of you for naïve bitches. You know the way this works."

"No," I told her. "Tell me how does it work?"

"He owns me. I do what he says when he says. I'm his to loan out, rent out, sell, fuck, slap around, whatever he feels like he gets to do because I am nothing."

"And who does he loan you out to?" Emerson asked.

"Anyone he wants. And I get that while I'm getting fucked, at least it's on luxury."

I was speechless. Seriously, I had nothing to say because what was there to say? Monica had spent ten years being treated like a walking, talking sex doll.

"So you recruited others so they'd get luxury, too?" Emerson inquired.

"No. I did it because I was told to do it. And I learned not to be stupid and just do what I was told."

"You're just as bad as he is," Emerson blurted out. "You sold those girls out to save your own ass. No, you're worse because you're a woman and you knew what was going to happen to them."

"Fuck you. Fuck you both. You have no idea. Both of you think because you got a small taste of what it's like you know what it feels like to have to swallow shit every day. You don't. But you will. He's gonna find you and when he does, he'll mark you and rent you out, too. So talk to me after you suck a few hundred dicks in an alley. Then and only then can you tell me that luxury resorts and private jets don't make it bearable. After you're torn apart because you're fightin' the inevitable, you come talk to me and tell me you wouldn't do what I've done if it means you never feel that pain again. Until then, shut the fuck up and leave me alone."

"Speaking of marks," I started, proud of myself that my voice was strong and steady when I was really freaking the fuck out inside. I really didn't ever want to know what it was like to suck a few hundred dicks—ever—but most certainly not to be forced to. "Your QR code, is that the only one you have?"

Monica smiled a broad scary smile and shook her head. "I'm his favorite. I have a special one."

"Mind if we see it?" I asked.

"Thought you'd never ask." Monica stood and her entire demeanor changed, and chills raced up my spine.

Emerson and I quickly got to our feet as Monica pulled her shirt over her head and turned her back to us.

A beautiful peacock feather was inked from her tailbone to her shoulder. I didn't get the chance to fully admire the work that had gone into the artwork when Jeremy's loud curse filled the space and Monica turned to face us.

Emerson looked like she was in a trance and Monica took full advantage. The woman rushed Emerson. She lowered her shoulder to hit Emerson in the stomach and they both hit the floor with a sickening thud.

What the hell?

Without thinking, I got behind Monica and tried to yank her off Emerson but she wouldn't budge, her hands were around her throat, her grip so tight Emmy was turning red. I slid my arm around Monica's neck, pulled her into a headlock, and squeezed as hard as I

could. There was no time to think about what I was doing. I just needed to get Monica off Emerson.

Jeremy was shouting from beside me as I attempted to suffocate Monica while she was trying to kill Emerson. Finally, Emmy pried Monica's hands free and she started coughing. But I couldn't let go of Monica. The whole thing seemed to go on forever.

I could see Emmy's lips moving but nothing was penetrating through the buzzing in my ears and fear flowing in my veins.

Jeremy's hands went under my pits and he hauled me off Emerson. But I still hadn't released Monica. I felt something pop, the feeling so disturbing I snapped out of my daze and released Monica. Her limp body crumpled to the floor.

"It's done, Anaya," Jeremy spoke softly in my ear. "Everything's fine."

What was done?

"She's gone. Emerson's safe," he continued.

Gone?

I glanced down at Monica's prone body, her wide, open eyes blank. Lifeless.

"Oh my god," I whispered.

Emerson scrambled to her feet, then Jeremy was shoving me in her arms.

"What did I do?"

"You saved my life," Emmy whispered back. "That's what you did."

Emerson turned and started to shuffle us away from Monica's dead body but I stopped her. I needed one more look at the woman I'd killed. A woman who'd suffered for ten long years. A woman who should've had a better life.

Guilt washed over me.

"Get this now," Jeremy barked. "You did what was necessary to save your friend's life. And if you hadn't have done it, I would've. The moment she touched Emerson she was as good as dead."

"Thank you," Emmy said and hugged me tight. "Thank you so much. I couldn't breathe, Anaya. She was going to kill me."

Shame and guilt were all I could feel.

How would I ever be able to face Kyle again?

CHAPTER 28

"THEY'RE LOADING OUT," Jasmin's voice crackled in my earpiece.

"Copy that. How many trucks?" Declan asked.

"Four. Twenty-eight girls so far," she returned.

Fuck. We were gonna lose a truck.

"How much time we got?" Colin asked.

"Looks like a while. They're in no hurry."

"Mission shift, boys and girls," Lincoln came over the comms.

"Colin and Brooks, get your asses to town and find a vehicle to borrow and stay put. You're team one. We'll radio when your truck pulls out."

"Copy," Brooks answered.

"Double-time that," Linc instructed. "Jas and Max, team two. Thad, Kyle, Dec, team three. Me and Leo, team four. We'll take up the rear."

After a round of acknowledgements, the others started to move into position. Since the three of us were sticking together, none of us moved from our location and waited.

"Something's jacked," I announced. "Fuckin' feel it in my gut."

"Not the first time we've had to regroup in the middle of a maneuver," Dec reminded me.

"It's not the mission. But something's fucked. And I don't like that we have zero goddamn communication with HQ."

"Zane's aware of the problem. You know he's working on fixing it," Thad said, sounding just as irritated as I did.

"Not the first time we've been dark, either. So start explaining what feels fucked. Do we need to scrap the mission?"

Declan was a smart man, and listened to his team. We'd all been in this line of work long enough we knew not to ignore our gut. And if I told him we needed to pull back, he'd make the call. No more questions asked.

"Don't fuckin' know, Dec. Never felt like this. I just know down to my soul something is jacked up."

"Nut to butt," Dec said into his mic, instructing the team without actually saying it to stick close to their teammate and watch their backs.

"Fuck me. Who?" Leo asked, knowing one of us had a bad feeling.

"Kyle."

"Sheee-it," Leo mumbled. "I was hoping for an easy op."

"Not today, brother," Dec returned.

He killed his mic and turned back to me. "I need honesty. You think this has more to do with you knowing Anaya is questioning Monica?"

"Maybe," I answered. "But, Dec, you know my gut's never wrong. We need to check in as soon as we can."

"We will. Hang tight."

Hang tight? I had no option, but if I had, I would've taken it. I glanced at Thad and knew he felt it, too, he was just better at hiding it than me.

There was damn well something wrong.

* * *

TWO HOURS LATER, we were finally on the road following a truck with seven girls in the cargo hold. Two men to each truck.

"We have forty minutes before we hit Lake Memphremagog," Thad said from the back seat.

"Have you found a good location for a takedown?" I asked, turning slightly in my seat to see the map spread out over Thad's lap.

"Still looking. Fucking sucks with no GPS and satellite images."

"You having issues with your map reading skills?" Dec joked.

If I hadn't had a sinking feeling in my gut and an ache in my chest, I would've joined in.

"Fuck no. But without satellite I don't know where houses are. I'll narrow it to three locations but we're gonna have to wing it. From what I remember, eastbound on this road is mostly farmland, but there are houses scattered."

"Yep," I agreed. "But there are a few long stretches that would be good."

"The first one in about seven clicks just after the vineyard," Thad announced.

Just under four and a half miles. Normally Dec could travel that small distance in under two minutes but the truck in front of us was taking its sweet-ass time, forcing Dec to drive like a normal human being.

"Christ. Can he speed up?" There it was. Dec hated slow drivers. "Geared up."

I glanced down at my AR between my legs, tapped my hip to confirm my sidearm was in place, then pulled my rifle up but kept it below the window opening.

Without having to look behind me, I knew Thad was doing the same. The sign for the vineyard came into view and a long, deserted stretch of road lay in front of us.

"We're taking it," Dec said before he slammed on the gas.

The distance between us and the car was narrowing and I hefted myself through the window to sit on the frame and lowered my rifle.

"Ready?" I called out to Thad.

"On my count," he returned, and counted us down.

Watching the back right rear tire spinning, I waited for his signal. I heard the word 'two' and pulled the trigger. Both rear tires blew out. The truck careened right, then left, then back right as the driver lost control.

With the truck up on two wheels heading for open field, I prayed we didn't just kill all the women locked in the back. Thankfully, the universe had something else in mind when the truck tilted back down and came to a stop, still upright.

Dec didn't have the vehicle fully stopped before I jumped out and headed to the back, while Thad was already making his way to the driver.

Two pops sounded and Declan and Thad were both at my side.

"Done," Thad unnecessarily announced.

Not wasting a second standing behind the enclosed truck, with an armed man inside who could open fire at will, we moved.

There was always a pucker factor when you breached a structure of any sort. One with no visual, pucker factor times ten. We had no idea what the guard was doing inside or where he was.

Declan was ready with his hand on the latch to unlock the door. I was on the other, and Thad was at my nine o'clock ready to take a shot if one presented itself. We'd done this so many times it was like a well-choreographed dance. But with my unease, it felt wooden and unpracticed.

Declan gave me a nod and I shoved all thoughts out of my mind and concentrated on his movements. As soon as his door opened a sliver, I quickly unlatched my side and simultaneously we threw both doors open.

Terrified screams filled the otherwise quiet countryside, but no one made a run for it. My eyes adjusted, taking in the dark corners of the box truck, and found the women huddled together. The guard stood close to them with one woman pulled tight to his front, using her as a human shield, his weapon pointed at Thad.

"Get back!" the asshole yelled.

"Drop your gun and let her go," Declan returned.

"Get back or I start shooting them." He swung his rifle in the direction of the girls, exposing himself.

That was a grave error, one that cost him his life.

Before I could take the clear shot he'd provided me, Declan beat me to it.

A close range .223 round to the head was never pretty. The white metal wall behind where the man once stood was now painted with red.

Women screamed. Then as if the shock of the event had waned, they ran for the open door.

"Whoa." Declan stepped forward, putting his hands up. "Everyone is safe. But you have to stay inside."

One woman did a flying leap out of the truck. Her feet barely touched the pavement before I grabbed her around the waist, turned her in my arms so her back was to my front, and held her there. I had to swallow back a gag as the smell of piss and bad body odor overwhelmed me. Her legs thrashed, her bare feet barely registering as they made contact with my shins.

"You're safe now," I told her. "We're gonna get you home."

She had no verbal response but she fought harder, wiggling and digging her fingers into my arm. I had no choice but to let the girl wear herself out, and by the energy she was putting into escaping my hold, she'd be exhausted within minutes.

She felt like a malnourished feather. The only danger her exertion posed was her hurting herself.

Declan was explaining to the others what was going to happen next, but none were listening. All eyes were on the girl struggling.

This had to end. We couldn't stand on the side of the road for much longer.

"Enough!" I barked, but didn't tighten my hold. "We don't have time for this. We need to get all of you to safety and we can't do that until you calm down."

Her movements started to slow but her whimpers did not. Low, guttural, soul-shattering sounds that conveyed all she'd been through.

"Come on, honey. Slow down and breathe. You're safe now. No one is gonna hurt you, but I need you to go back with your friends."

"Don't put me back in there. Please." Her request broke my heart but I had no choice.

"You're not going back in. All of you are getting in the van with us."

"Come on, Scarlett," one of the older girls called as Declan helped her down. "Please come over here so we can leave."

The young woman in my arms nodded. With my arm still around her, I walked her to her friends. Scarlett was immediately engulfed into the huddle.

"In less than an hour this will all be over for you," Dec told the girls.

None of them looked like they believed him. All of them looked broken and defeated.

Fuck Harry Landry and his band of pissants on his payroll.

"Come on, the rest of you come down." Then to Thad, "Check the guard."

Thad moved slowly, making sure he entered into the back of the truck as far away from the girls as he could.

"Easy," Declan gently told the girls. "No one's gonna hurt you."

Scarlett's eyes came to mine, wild and full of fear. But in that moment, all I could see was the way Anaya had looked at me when I found her chained in the hull of the boat. Same stare—haunted, scared, alone.

My gut soured and heart throbbed.

I needed to get to Anaya. I could feel it.

CHAPTER 29

"SNAP OUT OF IT," Jeremy demanded.

"I can't."

He'd pulled Monica's dead body into the room she'd been using and shut the door but I was still staring at the spot on the floor where she'd laid.

"You can," he coaxed. "And you didn't kill her, I did."

No, he didn't. It had been my arm that had pressed against her throat.

"All you did was choke her out," he started. "But when I pulled you up with her still in your headlock, I knew what I was doing. I knew the force would crack her neck. I did it, Anaya, not you."

I shook my head in denial.

"No—"

"Something you need to reconcile in your own head. But think on this while you're figuring it out. Monica was going to kill your friend. It was Monica or Emerson. So you think on whose life is more important to you."

Jeremy stalked away and I didn't need to think; Emerson was more important. All day, every day, I'd pick Emerson.

"Hey," Emerson whispered. "He's right, though maybe he could've been a little nicer about it. But he's still right. We'll get through this together. That's what we said. You and me. We're gonna be fine."

I focused on the angry red welts around Emerson's neck. Perfect imprints of Monica's hands around her throat. Anger welled up.

I did what I had to do. Kyle would understand. I had no choice.

"Okay," I agreed. "I've just never...I didn't know what to do...I just reacted."

"And you did the right thing. Thank you."

"Get in your room," Jeremy barked. "Now. And do not come out no matter what."

Emerson moved first, gripping my hand and yanking me toward the hall.

"What's happening?" I asked as we passed the kitchen.

"We have company. Do. Not. Come. Out."

Company? Were the guys here already to get us?

Emerson shoved me through the door and turned to lock it.

"Whatever happens, we stick together," she told me.

"You think—"

"Yes. Monica said he was coming for us. I don't think that was a threat, I think that was a warning. She knew."

I thought back to the conversations we had and everything started clicking into place. "She said no one *found* her."

"Shit!" Emerson growled. "It was a setup. All of it."

She pulled her phone out of her pocket and swiped it to unlock. A few seconds later with an angry huff she tucked it into the bra and looked at me. "No service. Try yours."

I pulled out mine and repeated the process. No reception.

"No."

"Shit. The windows don't open, and Jeremy has cleared the house of anything that can be used as a weapon."

I glanced around the room, noting there was nothing on the dresser that was near the door, nothing on the nightstands, not even a coat hanger in the closet. The room was empty. We had nothing.

"Do you have a belt or anything in your bag?" I asked.

"No. Nothing, just clothes."

There was a loud bang, right before two unmistakable gun shots.

"This is happening," Emerson warned. "As soon as the door opens, we both have to attack. We'll only have a few seconds to surprise whoever's here to take us. We can't let that happen."

My heart was pounding in my throat and so much adrenaline was coursing through me my hands were trembling.

"We can do this," Emmy assured me.

"I know we can. No one is ever taking us again. Not ever."

Fear was transforming into fury. This time, the daunting thought of being held against my will wasn't riddled with regret. Instead there was a far greater emotion, one that would fuel my determination.

Kyle.

He was not going to lose me. I was not going to be taken alive. No matter what, I was going home to him, or I would die trying. I wasn't going to live the rest of my life like Monica. That was not my destiny.

Emerson gave me a wobbly smile. "That's right. Kick, bite, scratch, whatever you have to do."

The bedroom door rattled and Emerson looked like she was preparing to run the hundred-yard dash. All we needed was the whistle to blow and we'd be off running. I hoped to God we weren't running headlong to our deaths.

No. I wasn't going to think that.

Fuck that. We were gonna live.

The door swung open and there was a flash of recognition. But it was not Jeremy who'd entered. I took off, not waiting for Emerson. Not waiting to see if he had a gun. All I cared about was bashing his head in.

With no thought, working on instinct alone I moved, my legs wrapped around the man's waist, he stumbled back, and my head conked his. His curse was gruff and menacing, and he struggled to get me off. I punched, clawed, and scratched. Until he yanked my legs off him and threw me to the floor. Emerson leaped over me. I heard a grunt and wrapped both my arms around his ankles. Suddenly he was falling backward. Emerson tripped over my prone body but I was holding on for dear life.

The man's fall happened in slow motion, it seemed to take forever for him to tumble, but when he did, there was a loud crack before he hit the carpet.

Blood pooled around the man's head and his eyes were closed.

The only sounds that filled the room were mine and Emerson's panting.

She crawled over me, placed her finger on his neck, and moments later announced, "Still alive. Quick, find something to tie him up with. I'm gonna check the house." She scrambled to get the man's gun, now feet from where he'd landed, and she was out the door.

Tie him up? There was nothing.

Sheets. I could tear the sheets. Maybe.

After a few minutes of trying to rip the quality bed clothes, I knew I needed scissors or a knife.

Glancing at Harry Landry, I knew he wasn't going anywhere. But if he did wake up, Emerson had a gun. I ran out of the room and down the hall and skidded to a stop.

Jeremy was on the floor, blood everywhere. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I'd known he was dead. He had to be; there was no way Harry would've made it to us in the bedroom if he'd been alive. But knowing it and seeing it were two different things.

"We need the keys to his bedroom. I need something to cut the sheets," I told Emerson when she walked back into the house.

"I think Harry was alone. I only see his car out there," she said, and crouched next to Jeremy patting his pockets.

When she found what I needed, she tossed me the keys. "I'm gonna watch the door. Holler if you need me."

Jeremy's room proved to be a treasure trove. I wasn't sure what he'd been planning for, but I found rope and duct tape. After rummaging around, I also found a large hunting knife and scissors. I'd leave the knife for now, until Harry was secure.

I ran back to the room, and after three tries finally got Harry onto his stomach and his hands behind his back. I sat back on my heels and realized I'd never tied anyone up before and had no idea how to start.

What sounded like a slight groan came from Harry and I started wrapping the rope as tightly as I could around his wrists and made knots as I went. I cut the rope and pulled out the duct tape and wound that over the rope and up his forearms. The thought of the tape removing his thick arm hair thrilled me.

Emerson came to the door and looked down at Harry and nodded her approval.

"Good work. Now his feet. But leave a few feet between his ankles. Just enough for him to shuffle. We can't carry him."

"Carry him?"

"He's coming with us," Emerson declared.

"Are you nuts?"

Harry started groaning, leaving no time for us to debate whatever plan Emerson had come up with.

I tied the rope around one ankle, left a small length, then repeated tying the other side, and finished with the duct tape covering the rope.

The shrill of Harry's ringtone startled me and start to rouse him. More grumbling and twitching.

"We have to leave," Emerson told me. "And he has to come with us before someone comes looking for him."

Shit. Okay. That made sense.

Emerson bent down and pulled on the ropes, testing my efforts, and when they didn't budge, she smiled and shook Harry.

"Wake up, dickhead. Time to go."

"What the—"

"Come on, up you go," she cut him off.

"I'm gonna—" he started to growl, but Emerson spoke over him.

"Shut up, asshole, and get up."

The phone stopped ringing and his mean, hard eyes found mine. "Neither of you will live through this."

I shivered at his statement and glanced at Emerson.

I hoped like hell she knew what she was doing.

CHAPTER 30

IT HAD BEEN a struggle but we loaded Harry Landry into Jeremy's car. I had Harry's phone in my hand and was scrolling through his open apps.

"What are you looking at?" Emerson asked as she navigated down the narrow road from the cabin.

"He has some sort of navigation app open," I told her. "The blue dot is moving with us."

Harry chuckled from the back seat and I fought the urge to look at him. I wanted to know what he found amusing but there was something in his eyes that creeped me out so bad I couldn't look.

"Fuckin' amateurs," Harry sneered. "The great Zane Lewis thinks his shit is squared away but he forgets to scrub a phone. Classic."

What the hell did that mean? Scrub a phone?

"Here." Emerson tossed me her phone. "Turn that off."

I powered down her phone and the blue dot disappeared.

"Holy shit, he was tracking you," I whispered.

From the back seat came, "Ding. Ding. Ding. We have a winner! Maybe you're only half as stupid as I thought."

"Power off all the phones. Now."

I did what Emerson instructed and now we were flying blind with no navigation.

"We need to stop at a gas station and get a map."

Emerson nodded and Harry broke out into raucous laughter.

"You brought the duct tape, right?"

"Yeah."

"When we stop, tape his mouth shut. I don't want to listen to him."

Harry continued to snicker. I did my best to ignore him and come up with a plan to get us out of this mess.

* * *

TWENTY MINUTES later we pulled up at a gas station. Emerson had parked in the farthest corner, hoping not to draw attention. She'd waited until I returned with a map and a burner phone, hoping it got service in the mountains, then got out of the car so we could speak in private.

"Good thinking." She gestured to the phone.

"Hear me out," I started. "Maryland will be a seven hour drive if we take the back roads to avoid tolls and cameras. But we could go north and get to Lewis, New York, in three."

"What's in Lewis?"

"Zane owns property there. It's an old missile silo. Kyle and Declan told me about it."

"I don't know—"

"Listen, we need to get somewhere safe and we need to do it fast. If Harry tracked your phone, who knows what else he's done? What if he put some device on the car before he killed Jeremy? What if he has one on him and he has his people tracking him?"

"Shit, *shit*, shit. You're right. Do you know where the silo is? The address?"

"No. But how hard can it be to find a decommissioned missile silo? I know it's in Lewis, hundred percent because I thought it was funny the town was the same as his last name. Let's just get there and we can ask around. Someone will know."

"But you know Zane is crazy about security—it won't be left open. What if we get there and can't get in?"

Damn.

She was not wrong, Zane was a little over the top, but that was exactly what we needed.

I ripped open the package and pulled out the phone, hoping there was a partial charge. What felt like five hundred hours later,

the phone booted up and the screen displayed five percent battery life.

"Do you know the office number?"

"We have to turn my phone on for a second to get the number. Or should we call four-one-one?"

"Is that still a thing?" Emerson's face scrunched up.

"Fuck if I know."

"Power up your phone. It will be faster."

After waiting another five hundred hours, my phone was on and I scrolled to the number I needed, punched it into the burner, and handed Emerson my phone.

One ring, then to voicemail. Damn.

It took five calls back-to-back before a very angry voice answered.

"I know the IRS isn't after me, dickweed, and I'm not a dumbass so I'm not—"

"Zane," I snapped.

"Who is this?"

"Anaya. Listen—"

"What number is this?"

"Shut up and listen," I growled. "There's no time to explain. We ran into trouble. Jeremy's...shit...Jeremy's dead."

"Motherfucker! Garrett!" Zane roared.

"Monica's dead, too."

"Where's Emerson?"

"With me," I rushed out. "We're fine. But...umm...we have Harry Landry tied up in the back of the car."

"Cut his motherfucking ass loose and—"

"God. Shut up. The battery's almost dead."

Thank God the man was not standing in front of me. I could be a telephone tough guy all day long but Zane's six-foot-plus frame standing in front of me would make me cower.

"We're not headed home. We're going to your silo."

"What?"

"Your silo. It's closer. Only three hours. Harry tracked Emerson's phone. We have all of them turned off but if he has a tracker, we need to go somewhere..."

I felt the phone vibrate before it chimed and powered down.

"Dead," I told Emerson. "Let's head north. He knows where we're going."

"Okay, if you're sure."

"I'm sure."

"Then let's do this."

"Let's do it."

Emerson smiled and scrunched her nose before she leaned in.

"Do you kinda feel like Thelma and Louise?"

"Yeah. But let's just hope this doesn't end with us flying off a cliff."

"You and me, Anaya. We're gonna be fine."

"I know we are."

At least, I hoped we were.

We broke apart, Emerson going to the driver's side and me the passenger. But before I got in, I grabbed the duct tape, tore a piece off, and opened the back door.

"Taping my mouth shut won't save your life," Harry sneered.

"Maybe not. But at least it will make what's left of it more enjoyable if I don't have to hear your voice, you disgusting bastard."

He opened his mouth to say something but I slammed the tape down and smiled when he grunted.

* * *

Garrett

IN THE LAST FORTY MINUTES, Zane's mood was quickly deteriorating.

We had seconds before he went thermonuclear and all of us in his wake of destruction would feel the ramifications.

"Here." Tatiana shoved Zane's go-bag at his chest. Hers was already strapped over her shoulder.

Ivy and Violet were in the nursery that Zane had had the foresight to enlarge, considering the team was reproducing with the same speed as rabbits.

Jaxon came into the control room with his gear and announced, "There will be a helo upstairs in thirty minutes."

Zane remained silent.

Silence and Zane did not mean good things. When a normal man was quiet, he was thinking. When Zane was, he was plotting murder and mayhem.

"Did you call Tom?" I asked.

Nothing.

"Zane!" Tatiana shouted.

"Fuck!" The single word he roared sounded painful. It bore the burden of his family being in danger.

It didn't matter Anaya and Emerson were new and had only been with us a short time. They were family. They were a part of the team. Zane's team. The one he fought fiercely to protect, and two of his flock were in danger.

Grave danger from what little information Zane had gathered before the line had gone dead.

"Knew better. Goddamn it, I knew better. Kyle didn't want it. Thad didn't want it. I fucking rushed it because I'm tired of this shit hanging over our heads."

"Zane," Jaxon started.

"You know it's my fault. Fucking *know* it, Jax, so don't bullshit—"

"It doesn't matter whose goddamn fault it is, brother. Call Tom, find out what to do with the asshole, and let's fucking roll."

"Should I call Kyle and Thad?" Tatiana asked.

And three resounding 'no's' echoed in the room.

"Not until we have more intel," Jax said.

"But—"

"We'll call from the air. We call now, both will flip their shit and Declan will be fucked with no backup to lock them down. We call from the air, they can head south and join us. Not a word, until we know more."

"Okay."

"Get me a secure line," Zane barked.

After all the years I worked for the man, Zane's attitude didn't faze me. I knew he felt this and he felt it deep. Straight down to his soul. If something happened to either woman, he'd never forgive himself. But more than that, Kyle and Thad would be wrecked, and he knew that, too.

Two women may've been in danger, but it was four lives that would forever be lost.

"Color of the day?" a monotone voice came over the line.

"Pink," Zane answered.

"Word?"

"Zebra."

"Number?"

"Six."

"Name?"

"Viper."

After Zane answered all the questions correctly, the operator announced. "Please hold."

A moment later, President Tom Anderson came on the line.

"Zane?"

"We have a problem. Landry tracked my team to Connecticut. One man is down. Two captured and fled the scene with Landry. I need direction."

"Bring him in alive," Tom grunted.

"Tom—"

"I know what you're feeling. But we need him alive. There are people higher up in the food chain and we need him."

"Respect, Tom, but you do not know how I'm feeling."

"Zane, I do. And if you weren't so far gone, you'd remember I do. I need you to trust me. Bring him to me alive."

"I can't promise you—"

"Trust me, goddamn it!" Tom roared. "Trust me to have your back the way you have had mine."

Zane's long and colorful string of curse words, most of which I'd never heard strung together in that manner, bounced off the walls of the office.

"Call me when you pick him up and I'll give you a drop-off location," Tom continued after Zane finished his tirade.

"Copy that," Zane sneered.

"What's their twenty?" Jaxon asked for the team's location.

I clicked a few buttons on my keyboard and Declan, Kyle, and Thad's location was displayed on one of the wall-mounted screens.

"Just north of Bakersfield, Vermont," I answered. "Roughly two hours from Lewis. But Dec's driving, so make that one hour."

Zane's phone rang and he fumbled it a moment before he settled it in his hand and answered.

"Lewis," he clipped.

"It's me," Anaya's calm voice came over the line. "Sorry, I had to let the phone charge and we had no service."

"Where are you?"

I had to give it to my boss; he sounded almost normal but the vein pounding on the side of his neck gave him away.

"We're making good time. We're in New York and just passed Route 13. I'm looking at alternate routes since there are tolls."

"Don't worry about that. Fastest route. We'll be there before you."

"Really?"

"How are you two holding up? Either of you hurt?"

"No. We're both fine. But, Zane. We had to leave Jeremy behind. I'm so sorry, but we couldn't—"

"You did the right thing. I'll send someone to pick him up."

"He tried, Zane. He tried to protect us."

"I know he did."

Zane's eyes drifted closed and his head bowed.

Yeah, he was feeling that, too. Another man's death he'd unnecessarily take responsibility for. Jeremy didn't work for Z Corps but he'd died while protecting our own. That would never go unappreciated or unnoticed.

So Zane would take that mark to his soul.

"Keep the phone plugged into the charger and on. I'm giving Garrett the number before we leave."

"Okay. One more thing."

"What's that?"

"Emmy and I were talkin', we don't want you telling the guys."

"Anaya—"

"No, please listen. Please, Zane. They'll worry. And someone could get hurt if they don't...you know...have their heads in the game or whatever it's called. Them coming home is more important. Everyone coming home is. So don't tell them. We're fine. Me and Emmy can do this."

"Kyle, Thad, and Dec are back in the US after a successful mission. They'll be notified when we end this call. I appreciate the both of you having their backs, but I was only waiting to hear from you again until I called them in."

"Do you think—"

"I don't have the right to think. This isn't about me, it's about them. And I would burn someone to the ground if they withheld info about Ivy from me. I'm callin' them in. You two stay the course, drive careful, and we'll see you soon."

"Thanks, Zane. Appreciate your help."

Anaya disconnected and Zane's body turned to granite.

"You heard her," I told my boss. "She sounded strong and capable. Do not fuck this for Tom and smoke Landry. He's never given you reason to doubt him."

"I'd like to gut the motherfucker. But it ain't me Tom needs to be worried about. Thad and or Kyle may not be able to be contained."

"You're wrong. Once they clap eyes on their women safe and unharmed, I think you'll be surprised. Amazing what a good woman by your side does. Goes a long way helping a man keep his shit in check."

Not that I'd know about that. It had been a long time since I'd had a woman by my side. Good or otherwise.

CHAPTER 31

"ANY WORD FROM ANAYA?" Thad asked. "I've texted and called Emmy but she's not responding."

"Same."

"The cabin's remote," Dec reminded us. "Doubt they have service."

Just a little while longer, I kept repeating to myself, happy for once that Dec didn't understand the meaning of a speed limit. It was more of a suggestion to him, one he chose to ignore.

It had been hours since we'd passed our group of girls off to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and checked in with Lincoln. He and Leo had run into some issues and two girls had been injured during their rescue. No one else had any issues and the RCMP had called in the Canadian Security Intelligence Service to handle the compound the girls had been held in.

In other words, our job was done and the team was making their way back to Maryland. Everyone but us—we were headed to Connecticut to pick up our women.

I hadn't spoken to Anaya in days, and even now after the mission was complete, the ball in my gut hadn't unraveled.

Dec's phone rang and he tossed it to me. "Check that, would ya?"

I glanced down at the display. "It's Zane."

And it was about fucking time. Comms had gone down while we were in Canada and they'd never come back online. Linc had relayed he'd been able to call and get through to Garrett to give him a SITREP but Zane had been otherwise occupied and he hadn't spoken directly with his brother.

Dec rattled off his code to unlock his phone and I swiped the screen to answer.

"Mission shift," Zane barked.

Instantly and immediately my body coiled.

"What's that noise?" Thad asked from behind me. He was now sitting forward, his big body angling between the two front seats.

"Head straight to Lewis." Zane ignored Thad's question about the whooshing and rumbling.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say it sounded like helicopter blades.

"Lewis—"

"To the silo," Zane cut off Declan. "Anaya and Emerson ran into some trouble..."

Every atom, every cell, every molecule in my body felt those words. I fucking knew it. Knew it down to my bones there was a problem.

I cut him off. "Say again?"

The question had come from me but I didn't recognize my own voice. I couldn't feel my limbs. I didn't even register the pounding in my chest. All I could feel was an ache so powerful it threatened to shatter me.

"Both are unhurt but Jeremy's dead. So is Monica. Anaya and Emerson captured Landry and they're taking him to the silo."

Nothing Zane had said was making sense. "Captured? How in the fuck did that happen?"

"What in the actual fuck?" Thad roared and I jerked my head to the side, my left eardrum ringing.

"I don't have details beyond that. Last I spoke to Anaya, she said they were unhurt, and an hour and a half out. You're an hour forty-five from the silo, and I expect we'll land the same time you get there."

Declan had already changed lanes, the speedometer pushing a hundred instead of the normal eighty-five he drove.

"We'll be there before the women," Dec announced. "Have Garrett send the fastest route."

"One more thing," Zane started. "Landry is to be brought in alive."

Hell to the motherfucking no. Just no. Absolutely fucking *no*.

"I gave my word to Tom. Didn't promise what shape he'd be delivered in, and just to say, if he makes a move that makes you twitch, you do what you need to do. That promise was one I made personally, me. I didn't promise I could keep my team in-check."

How the hell had this happened? I had so many thoughts swirling in my head I couldn't keep one train of thought straight long enough to begin to form a scenario where Anaya and Emerson could overpower and capture Landry.

"I want to talk to my wife," Thad demanded.

"You'll see her in an hour."

"Not fucking good enough, Zane. She—"

"She's holding strong. Her and Anaya both. Fucking so strong, Thaddeus, they're solid. They played it smart. Did all the right things. You talk to her now, she starts to crumble, then what? Let her do her thing, and you'll be there when the adrenaline dwindles and the gravity of the situation hits. You do not want that to happen now, while she's driving and the fucktard is tied up in the back seat."

"How the fuck did this happen?" Thad asked the million-dollar question.

"I don't have the details. Anaya called it in, gave me the basics, it was her idea to go the silo, I didn't question how she knew about it, but it was a good play. Lewis is closer and they wanted the asshole locked up and away from them as soon as possible."

"Neither are answering their phones," Dec put in.

"That's because they're damn smart. Turned them off and stopped to buy a burner. Anaya mentioned they were afraid Emerson's phone had been tracked but didn't elaborate as to why and I wasn't going to question it. Garrett is in contact and they're reporting in to him."

"Zane—"

"Just get your asses to the silo. I know you're both pissed as shit at me, and you should be. This is my fault. All of it is on me. But right now, I'm asking you both to check it. There will be time for it later and I'm fully prepared. All I care about right now is getting to Anaya and Emerson."

The line went dead and I felt Thad's body move, then heard him slam against the back seat.

They played it smart.

Did all the right things.

They're solid.

Those three sentences were all I had to hold on to as Dec sped down the highway.

Empty words spoken while my woman was in danger.

If one hair was hurt...

No. I couldn't go there. I couldn't even think about Anaya being hurt.

I was fighting to keep my rage contained. There would be a time and a place to unleash it. Unfortunately, sitting in the goddamn car was not the time.

"I was fucking right. I felt it," I growled.

Declan didn't speak.

Thad didn't speak.

And in the silence as the miles passed, I dwelled on the knowledge that once again, I didn't listen to my gut and stop Anaya. Never fucking again would that happen. I'd tried. I had tried not to be the type of man who would put his foot down and forbid his woman from doing something.

Lesson learned.

Loud and motherfucking clear.

Never again.

CHAPTER 32

"HOW MUCH LONGER?" Emerson asked.

"Fifteen miles."

I went back to looking out the window. The closer we got to the silo the more nervous I'd become. As time had gone by, I could see Emerson tightening her grip on the steering wheel in an effort to make her hands stop shaking.

After we'd exited the highway the road became a narrow two-lane street with tiny houses dotting the way. The area was certainly rural and the farther we drove the more I thought it was the perfect place for a missile silo. There was nothing around, sometimes not for miles, between the houses.

"You're making a right up here at the stop sign."

Emerson made the turn and I went back to staring out the window. When the car behind us caught my attention, I could feel the hair on the back of my neck start to tingle.

I picked up the burner out of the cupholder and dialed Garrett's number, but I paused before I hit send.

"Emmy, no matter what you stay calm," I told her.

"What?"

"I think we're being followed. The car behind us exited the freeway when we did, followed us down Route 12. Now it just made the same right we did. I could be wrong, but there doesn't seem to be much around here."

I tapped the call button and Garrett answered immediately.
"Where are you?"

"Just turned onto Route 9 but I think we're being followed. What do we do?"

"What kind of car?"

"Black Lexus. And just to say, I don't see anyone who lives in this area driving a Lexus. This is more of a pickup kinda place."

"Plate?"

"It's too far behind us."

"Alright. Just head to the silo."

"But—"

"Trust me. Get to the silo. No matter what, do not stop until you get there."

"The car's speeding up."

"Tell Emerson to speed up, too."

"Drive faster, Emmy," I told her.

With every inch the speedometer ticked up, my pulse did, too. It was like they were magically connected, and the harder Emmy pressed the gas pedal, the harder my heart pounded.

"He's getting closer," I warned.

"Everything's fine. I'm not hanging up, but I need to do something."

"Hale Hill Road. You need to make a left up here," I told Emmy.

"Then I have to slow down."

She was going fifty-five, she'd definitely have to slow. Shit.

"Okay, just wait. Slam on the brakes, make the turn, then hit the gas again."

"Are you crazy? He'll rear-end us."

I glanced over my shoulder, unfortunately getting a good look at Harry. I couldn't see his lips because thankfully they were covered with tape, but I could see the creases around his eyes. Creases that told me the asshole was smiling.

He knew what was happening.

The Lexus was so close, Emerson was right—he would rear-end us if she slammed the brakes.

"Let him hit us. Just hold on to the wheel tight and brace."

"I can't—"

"Do it, Emmy!" I shouted. "Now. The turn is now."

Emerson eased on the brakes before she hit them harder. We lurched forward, Emmy squealed, then she finally jerked the wheel

to the left. She missed the road just barely and we were on the shoulder. Gravel sprayed as Emerson hit the gas and shot us forward.

"Oh, God," she panted.

"Told you, you could do it. One more turn. First left. Same thing."

"Yeah, right, okay."

"When you get there," Garrett came back on the line. "Drive past the silo pad."

"What's that?" Then to Emmy. "Any second."

"You'll know it when you see it. It's a big, round concrete slab. Pass it, do not stop until you get to the outbuilding."

"Now, Emerson!" I yelled.

There was no street sign, no mailbox. The break in the thick trees was the only indication there was a driveway. This time, she didn't hesitate. The Lexus slammed into us and Emmy turned too soon. The car fishtailed, Emerson fought to keep control, and thankfully righted us before she slammed us into a very large tree trunk that had been in front of us.

I didn't have time to think about how I wished we hadn't buckled Harry up in the back. Listening to him bounce around and hit his head on the back windows would've been satisfying.

"They're coming in hot." I heard Garrett announce, not knowing who he was talking to. "Do not stop." I knew that was for us.

"Don't stop, Emmy. Straight past the concrete pad to the building in the back."

"Oh my God. They're gonna hit us again."

She was not wrong and a second later, we jerked forward and Emmy gunned it, putting distance between the cars.

"I see it, Garrett. Stay straight, Emerson. You're doing great."

We flew by the silo pad and the world behind us exploded in a hail of gunfire. The sound so loud, so shocking, I ducked. And unfortunately, Emmy ducked, too.

"Brake!" I screamed as the building in front of us came into view.

"Goddamn—" The rest of Emerson's statement was cut off by screeching tires.

I braced for impact and prayed this car had airbags, or we were dead.

Seriously dead.

The car slammed into the side of the building. Metal crunched and mangled around us as the car crashed through the tin and finally came to a stop.

"Holy fuck," I breathed.

Emmy did it. We made it.

"You okay?" she whispered.

"Yeah."

"Now what?"

That was a good question, one I didn't have an answer for. And sometime during the crash I'd lost the phone.

"I hear someone," she whispered. "What now?"

"Now, we fight some more, Emmy."

There was no way we'd made it this far only to be taken.

My door was thrown open at the same time Emerson's was. And I wasn't ready. I didn't even have my seat belt off but I wasn't giving up. Not now. Not when we were so close.

I blindly swung as a man dressed in black leaned into the car. His head jerked back on a grunt and I prepared to scratch his eyes out when his hands grabbed mine.

"Sweetheart! Stop, it's me."

I didn't stop. I couldn't. I had to fight.

There was commotion to my left and an ear-piercing scream rang out, then someone was in my face.

"Anaya, sweetheart. Calm down." I froze. Everything froze. Time. My lungs. My arms. Just everything. "There you go. Everything's fine."

No, everything was not fine. Everything that had happened in the last few days made me not fine. But the last few hours had wrecked me.

My body slumped.

The seat belt was undone, and suddenly I was out of the car and in Kyle's arms. I glanced over the top of the car and much like me, Emmy was in Thad's arms. Only, he had his mouth to her ear and his lips were moving. I couldn't hear what he was saying but Emerson was nodding.

They came.

And just in time.

How stupid was I to think Emerson and I could take Harry Landry on the run and get away with it?

Declan passed us on his way to the car but he said nothing. He didn't have to, his eyes said it all. His hard features and angry gait said the rest. Declan was going to lose his shit and Harry deserved every bit of ire. He killed Jeremy. He bought and sold women. He'd broken something in Monica that had turned her into a walking, talking, soulless human. No, I would not feel any sorrow over Harry Landry.

"Anaya, sweetheart—"

The rest of Kyle's words were cut off as the chopping of helicopter blades filled the air and I scrambled to get out of his arms.

Oh, God. What now?

"That's just Zane." His warm breath fanned over my neck as he spoke close to my ear.

I wanted to soak him up. His strength. His magnetism. His courage.

But I couldn't.

And now it was time to face what'd I done.

CHAPTER 33

SHE WAS IN MY ARMS.

Thank fuck.

I was doing my best ignoring her trembling and shuddering in my arms as I walked us down three flights of steep stairs.

When I heard the squealing of tires my heart had stopped. All I could picture was Emerson losing control and slamming into one of the many trees that lined the road and driveway. The car had finally come into view and the three of us had waited until it sped past before we unloaded our magazines into the second car.

Four men.

Four fucking men had been following them. No way in hell they would've been able to fight their way out of that.

If we had been five minutes later, Anaya and Emerson would've been gone. If we'd run into traffic on the highway—gone. If Dec hadn't driven like a maniac—gone.

The thought made me want to wage violence and at the same time fall to my knees.

I had her. She was here. Safe. In my arms. But she was quaking like a leaf. And she'd said nothing.

Thad pushed open the door in front of us. With his arms full of Emerson, he held it open with his foot.

I got it.

A hundred percent understood the fear and rage I'd seen in Thad's eyes when Emerson had been kidnapped and taken to Mexico. I understood why after we'd rescued her he'd refused to allow her to walk on her own. Hell, he'd even towed her to the awaiting

boat, not allowing her to swim herself. And when we'd gotten back to the hotel, she'd remained in his arms. I got it—all of it.

We were barely through the door when I heard boots tromping down the stairs at a fast clip.

Zane caught the door Thad had been holding before he slammed it closed behind him.

"Jesus fuck," he clipped. "Goddamn!"

Anaya jerked in my arms and my stomach churned.

"Zane—" Emerson started.

"Goddamn!" he roared.

"We're fine," Emerson told him.

Thad's angry growl echoed throughout the cavernous space.

I made my way across the room to a chair and plopped my ass in it and settled Anaya in my lap.

"This isn't fine. This is far from fine."

"I'm sorry." Anaya's voice wobbled and she cleared her throat.

"This is my fault. All of it."

"Anaya. Don't—" Emerson started.

"I killed her. It's my fault," Anaya announced.

The room went static and a chill washed over me.

"Come again?" I asked.

"I killed her, that's what started it. If I hadn't killed Monica, Jeremy wouldn't be dead."

Anaya's body shook and a tearless sob tore through her body.

"You killed Monica?" I whispered.

Anaya buried her face in my chest and nodded.

I glanced across the room at Emerson. Her brows were furrowed and her eyes were on Anaya.

"What happened, sweetheart?"

Anaya shook her head against my chest, and after a few moments of silence, Emerson answered.

"She didn't kill her. Anaya saved my life. I pushed Monica and she attacked me. I couldn't breathe and Anaya saved my life. None of this is her fault. None of it. You hear me, Anaya. You. Saved. My. Life." Emerson's fierce statement hung in the air so thick I struggled to draw in oxygen.

There was a crash across the room, but I didn't spare my boss a glance as he tore apart his living room. Shit was breaking, glass shat-

tering, but I couldn't see a damn thing. Even though my eyes were open and Zane's fit of rage was playing out feet away from me.

I couldn't see a goddamn thing but Emerson's intense gaze. My eyes moved to Thad, and his gaze was not intense, it was furious. His dark brown eyes I'd once heard Emerson call soulful had caught fire.

"Emmy, baby," Thad croaked.

Emerson went on to tell us the story. My insides were paralyzed. Fear, anger, pride, they swirled together, and every few sentences I had to squeeze Anaya just to remind myself she was safe. She was here.

Zane was wisely holding himself off to the side. Intellectually I knew what had happened wasn't his fault. But my emotions were too raw, too bitter.

"He said what?" Zane cut into Emerson's story.

"I'm paraphrasing of course, but it was something like the great Zane Lewis forgot to scrub your phone," Emerson repeated.

Zane was vibrating with anger as he pulled his phone out and put it to his ear. A moment later he barked, "Garrett. Everyone's phones are to be cleaned. ASAP." He paused, then finished. "Jax and Dec are on their way with Landry."

Smart man, not allowing Thad or me to lay eyes on the mother-fucker. Though Dec would handle business before Landry was turned over. He would be left breathing, but the man would never forget Declan, that was for damn sure.

"Monica said no one found her?" I asked.

"Emmy and I talked about that," Anaya said, but didn't pick her head up off my chest. "At first we didn't think anything of it. But after everything that happened, I think it's safe to say that was a setup."

"No shit," Zane snapped. Then he sighed and scrubbed both hands over his face.

"What about Monica?" Anaya asked.

"What about her, sweetheart?"

"I killed her." Anaya pulled away and sat up in my lap and stared at me through a haze of regret and pain.

Shit, goddamn, she was feeling this deep. Taking the woman's life was going to mark her. I waited until Anaya focused on me and

decided it was up to me to make sure that cut wasn't deep, that it would heal.

"Shits me to have to say this to you, but I need you to listen. What happened to Monica isn't on you, it's on her. She made the choice to attack Emerson. We sent you in not knowing if she was a victim or an accomplice. And now you bear the brunt of that decision. And I'm so fuckin' sorry for that, sweetheart. Her life—not the way she lived it and not how it ended—is not on you. Other people made those choices for her. Whether she attacked Emmy with the hopes of killing Emerson or that one of you would kill her we'll never know. What I do know is you two are still breathin' and that is all that matters. You did what you had to do to keep Emerson alive and yourself safe and I'm damn proud of you."

"But... what happens now?"

"Now we go home."

"No. With the police. Won't I be in trouble?"

"Fuck no," Zane cut in. "First, you acted in self-defense."

"But—"

"Darlin', none of this will blow back on you. Monica's been taken care of. That's all you need to know. Now you go home, lean on your man, let him help you work this out. All the shit that's fucking with your head, you give to him. You do not bottle it up. You do not keep it to yourself. You do not dwell. You give it all to Kyle and let him help you move on. That's it. End of. There's nothing else to worry about."

"And Harry?"

"He'll never see the light of day again."

"But—"

"Harry fucking Landry does not exist for you. He doesn't exist for Emerson. He is gone in a way that is forever." Zane stopped and looked from Anaya to Emerson. "Sorry doesn't fuckin' cut it, so I won't insult you by apologizing, but I hope you both know I wouldn't ever knowingly put either of you in danger, but I did it all the same. This is my fault. Not yours. My men are pissed as shit at me as well they should be. We'll work that out in private and I suspect it will be ugly, but that's on me. But I want you both to know you did everything right. You both are warriors. Strong, smart, and resourceful. From start to finish you made all the right plays. Damn proud of you both."

"Can we get the hell out of here? I want to take my wife home."
Thad stood to punctuate his demand.

I remained sitting, not sure if my legs would be steady enough to stand. My relief was palpable, making my body limp with it.

Anaya was safe.

Thank fuck.

* * *

THE SEVEN-HOUR DRIVE BACK to Maryland was interesting.

Zane drove, Thad sat in the front seat only after Emmy had pleaded her case that she wanted to sit with Anaya. That left me and the two women in the back seat with Anaya in the middle.

The two women had held on to each other, something I didn't fight even though I wanted Anaya pressed close to me. The two of them had forged an unbreakable bond, one born from battle and survival. A bond I fully understood.

The farther we drove away from the silo, the more relaxed Anaya became and the chattier the women were. It twisted my gut listening to them talk about what had happened, but I knew they needed it. Some of it sliced me deep. Some of it made me smile. All of it impressed me.

Their quick thinking had saved their lives. Not that I was happy either of them was in a position to have to do so, but they had been, and when shit went sideways, they'd stuck together and kicked ass.

Proud didn't begin to cut it. Anaya Baker was steel—strong and tough under all that beauty.

And she was mine.

I vowed right then as the light of dawn peaked over the horizon, I would do whatever I needed to do to make sure Anaya healed. The blow wouldn't be permanent. It would bleed and fester. Tomorrow I'd set about making sure it scabbed over, and the scar would be so microscopic you'd need a magnifying glass to find it.

"Was that Thelma and Louise enough for you?" Anaya giggled.

"Yeah. Let's never do that again," Emerson returned.

"At least we didn't go over a cliff."

"No. We just slammed through a building."

Both women dissolved into a fit of giggles and I clenched my jaw. I didn't find a damn thing funny about watching the car my woman was in crash through a pole barn. They'd gotten damn lucky.

"Can we not fuckin' joke about that?" Thad growled.

"I think it's too soon for him," Emerson whispered.

"It will never not be too soon, Emerson. I watched my wife... fuck...never joke about it."

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Emerson pinch her lips together and look at her lap.

Anaya's hand found mine and she threaded our fingers together like I had done that very first plane ride.

A plane ride that seemed like a lifetime ago.

One that had irrevocably changed my life.

CHAPTER 34

STILL GROGGY WITH SLEEP, it took me a moment to get my bearings.

My head was resting on a warm hard wall of muscle, not the lumpy pillow I'd used the last few nights.

Kyle.

I was home. We both were. Safe and sound.

I relaxed into him and my hand moved over his heart. Feeling his strong, steady heartbeat grounded me, kept the demons at bay.

"Mornin', sweetheart."

He sounded wide awake.

"Did I have a nightmare?" I asked.

"Nope. You didn't move a muscle."

"Then why are you so awake?"

Kyle stiffened before he eased the tension out of his body and covered my hand with his.

"No reason. Just lying here."

That was bullshit.

"Tell me, what's wrong?"

"Nothing—"

"Kyle, please don't lie to me. We haven't talked about your mission. Did everything go okay?"

"As well as it could go."

Okay, that was a little cryptic, but he didn't sound like he was upset about that. And I knew the rest of the team had all made it back to Maryland and there were no injuries. So I figured he was telling me the truth even if he wasn't giving it to me straight.

"Then what's keeping you awake, honey?"

Kyle remained silent as his thumb rubbed over the back of my hand still over his heart.

"Please talk to me."

Still nothing.

"I was scared," I admitted. "After what happened with Monica, I was scared you'd be mad. Or maybe not mad but I didn't know if you'd be able to get over what I'd done."

"What you did was save Emerson's life."

"I know. But at the time, I wasn't thinking straight. I was scared and I didn't want you to look at me like I'd done something wrong."

Sometime during the drive some of the guilt and shame had lessened. I'd been protecting my friend and if it hadn't been me who'd pulled her off, it would've been Jeremy. And he'd flat out said, he'd had no intention of showing her mercy. Either way, Monica had signed her own death warrant the second she'd touched Emerson.

Of course I wished it hadn't been me who'd done it, but I'd choose Emmy any day of the week. Therefore, I had to let it go. The alternative would've meant I'd stood by and watched my friend get strangled and that was not an option.

"It pisses me right the fuck off you had to do it, but I'm happy you did. We all are, Thad more than the rest."

"In a way I guess it's good everything happened so fast, there wasn't enough time to freak out or panic. There was no time to think, not from the time Jeremy told us to get into the bedroom to the moment we crashed. If there had been, I don't think things would've ended as well as they did."

"Wouldn't have mattered. You and Emerson are smart. You both kept control—"

"There's a lesson in all of this," I cut him off. "More than, life's short and I have to stop living with regrets. More than me understanding with great clarity where I want my life to go. But I also learned I'm stronger than I thought I was. Even if everything that happened didn't end with me right now in your arms, I wouldn't have stopped fighting to get back to you. I know that now, I know I have more fight in me, I know I'm strong even if I was scared. And I knew, you would've never stopped looking. So in a way, that was freeing. No matter what happened—if Harry's men had caught up to us—you would've found us."

"Damn right I would've."

The vehemence in his declaration made me smile.

"Please don't be mad at Zane."

"Anaya—"

"No, listen. He had no way of knowing. You had no way of knowing. None of us did."

"We damn well knew we didn't have enough information on the woman. The suggestion never should've been made to send you and Emerson in."

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Baby me."

"That is *not* me babying you. That's me loving you and protecting you. Something I promised to do. Something I told myself after you were taken in Timor-Leste I'd never stop doing. And what did I do? I fucking ignored my gut *again*. Swear to Christ that will never, I mean *never*, happen again. It might make me sound like a bossy prick but if I feel like a situation is too dangerous, the answer is no. Just no. No discussion. No agreement."

"You can't do that, Kyle," I whispered.

"Straight up I can and I will." My eyes drifted closed, not liking where this conversation was headed. "Wanna know what I was thinking about while I was in Canada?" I nodded my head against his chest. "I was thinking something wasn't right. I could feel it. Not in my gut, not in an abstract way. Down to my soul I knew something was wrong. It wasn't the same nag I get while on an operation before shit goes sideways. It was a bone-deep ache. My chest physically hurt. Then when Zane called to inform us that you and Emerson were on the run with fucking Landry tied up in the back seat, I had never been so scared in my life.

"Not even when you were texting me that you thought there was something wrong with your driver. Not when I knew your kidnapping was imminent. Not when Dec and I were searching and then had to fucking wait until that boat crossed into Australian water. At the time, I'd thought that was the most scared I'd ever been. And maybe until yesterday it had been. But knowing the woman I loved was breathing the same air as Landry had me terrified. Thinking about how that came to be, I was even more so. Knowing that if one thing went wrong, you'd be lost to me forever. And I'm not saying I wouldn't have found you, but what I would've found would not

have been you. Not this you. Not the woman who I've watched heal, who's opened up, who's funny and smiles, the woman I love more than anything else in this world. The things...fuck...I can't. I can't even think about it."

"Then don't think about them."

"I don't think you get it. When you were kidnapped, I knew we had a connection. I could feel it. It was burrowing in. I knew I'd give my life to get you back. But now I'm drowning in it. I'm in so deep with you, I can't breathe without you. If something—"

"But it didn't. I'm here. I'm safe. And in the end, you made that so."

"If we'd been—"

"But you weren't. You were there. But now you can't baby me."

"Did you pay attention, Anaya? There is no me and you. There's only an us. I will not stand for you ever being in danger."

This was going to be an issue and somewhere in the back of my mind I was wondering if I should let it go for now. Emotions were high, the situation still raw. But I couldn't. I knew he'd crush me if he treated me like I was incapable of being his equal.

"Yes, Kyle, I paid attention. And you have to know I feel the same. And I love that you want to protect me, but you can't suffocate me and keep me locked away because you think there's danger everywhere."

"You think I'd do that to you?"

He started to sit up and I gave him all my weight to keep him where he was.

"Honestly? Right now, I don't know. We're both scared. Yesterday was super shitty and I'm just afraid—"

"Super shitty?" he barked. "Yesterday I thought my life was over."

I froze.

"I failed you. Again. Don't you get that? But never fucking again."

"Okay," I whispered. "I get it."

His body sagged and he turned his face away from me.

"I am so damn sorry, sweetheart."

"I get how you're feeling. But there's nothing for you to be sorry for. You didn't do—"

"I did."

"We're not doing this!" I screeched. "If I was one of your teammates you wouldn't be saying sorry. You wouldn't be taking this on."

"But—"

"No buts. You can't treat me like I'm helpless."

I barely got out the word helpless before I was flipped to my back and Kyle was looming over me looking pissed.

"The last damn thing you are is helpless. You are so fucking strong you amaze me. The last thing you are is weak, and I would never treat you like you are."

"I'm fearless," I told him.

"Yeah, baby, you are."

"And it's because of you. You taught me to be that. You gave me that. Please don't take it away now."

His eyes went soft and his features gentled.

No other words were spoken, he lowered his lips to mine and in a single kiss he conveyed everything he needed to say.

Finally.

Last night he hadn't kissed me. Not like this. Not with passion and fervor. Not like I was the air he breathed.

But he was now.

And it was great. It was everything I needed it to be.

His lips left mine but they traveled to my neck and his hands roamed.

Yes.

About time.

I needed this.

CHAPTER 35

THE TEE ANAYA had slept in last night was long gone. I'd nearly ripped it off her in my quest to get her naked. Her panties had been tossed aside along with my shorts.

The taste of her was fresh on my tongue, the sound of her moans still ringing in my ears.

Damn, she was beautiful.

From her soft brown hair down to her pretty toes, she was stunning.

My lips were lingering on her hip and I was enjoying taking my time. But Anaya had other thoughts, her hand in my hair was tugging and pulling me higher.

"Slow," I murmured against her skin and continued to lick and taste my way across her belly, then higher, and I swiped my tongue across her pebbled nipples and teased her opening. She was slick from her orgasm.

"Can't wait," Anaya mumbled, and I smiled before I slowly fucked two fingers inside her.

Once her hips were bucking and her breath was coming out in pants, I reached down and guided the tip of my cock until it nudged her opening and I gritted my teeth as I notched the head in.

Christ.

"Tip your hips up for me, sweetheart." My hand went under her ass, and with our combined movements, I slipped in a little more.

"Kiss me, baby." She righted her head and offered her mouth.

I didn't delay, not with the kiss, not with slamming into her. Her legs curled around my thighs and she tore her mouth from mine. I

drove in harder, our eyes locked, and I watched the need catch fire and burn into hunger. Her breathing was erratic as she took my cock and begged for me.

We were connected.

And just like all the times before, each and every time I filled her, she didn't hold back. Not a single thing. Pure Anaya—she gave me everything. She was a part of me. Her arms wrapped tighter around me, her hands moved to my ass, and her nails dug into the muscle.

Fucking hot.

"Harder, Kyle."

I pulled out and she whimpered as I flipped her on her stomach and slammed home.

"Harder?" I grunted.

"Yes."

Anaya's hips bucked and she fucked herself back onto my cock as I thrust forward. Beautiful. She clawed at the sheets and her pussy started to pulse. I bent forward, one hand going between her legs to toy with her clit, the other to roll and pinch her nipple.

"You gonna come for me, sweetheart?"

"Yeah."

"You wanna ride me before or after?"

"Both."

Goddamn perfect.

"Then come now, Anaya."

I pinched her nipple and her clit, at the same time giving both a small twist. Her pussy spasmed and contracted and damn near took me with her. Before she was done coming, but needing her off my cock before I couldn't give my girl what she wanted, I pulled out, flipped us over, then slammed her back down on my pulsing cock praying I could hold off.

"Ride me," I demanded, and started moving her hips for her.

With her head bowed, a sheet of shiny brown hair covering her face, she started to rock and my hands went to her tits. Big, heavy, tipped with pretty rosy nipples that tasted even sweeter than they looked. I'd never taken myself for a boob man, but then I'd never seen a pair that were as spectacular as hers.

Anaya's hands landed on my chest and her hips moved faster. I removed my hands from her breasts just so I could watch them bounce and sway.

"Goddamn, you're fucking sexy, baby. You think you can give me one more?"

"No," she groaned. "Your turn."

Her gaze met mine, eyes on fire, neck and chest flushed with desire. Oh, yeah, she had one more in her and I wanted it. I wanted everything Anaya could give and then some.

I knifed up, wrapped my arms around her, trapping her tight, and whispered, "I want one more from you. Either you take it like this, Anaya, or I flip you over and I'll take it. But either way, I'm not coming until I feel your wet, tight pussy suck me dry. Which is it gonna be?"

She didn't answer. Instead she ground down into me and I had to grit my teeth. So I guess that was her answer—she was taking it.

"Fuck, Anaya." I slid my hand into her hair, yanked it back putting space between us, and lowered my head and took one nipple into my mouth. I was beyond being gentle, beyond thought, but lucky for me so was Anaya. I pulled my mouth off one nipple and bit and licked my way to the other side. "Out of control," I mumbled against her chest. "You catch, and you're not wild, you're fucking uncontrollable. So fucking hot, so sexy, I'm trying everything I can not to blow. Everything's perfect about you, Anaya. Everything. Can't live without you." Her pussy quivered and I couldn't stop the groan. "Can't ever live without you. Promise me you'll never leave me, Anaya."

"Promise," she panted. "I'm..."

She didn't finish. Her face went to my throat, her tongue tasted my skin, then she bit down.

"Fuck!" I roared. Unable to hold back, I slammed her down on my cock and held her still as my cock pulsed and my eyes rolled.

Connected.

"I can feel it," she whispered.

"What can you feel, sweetheart?"

"My soul healing."

I froze, every muscle seized, my blood heated.

Letting Anaya go had never been an option—I'd claimed her, she was mine. But there in our bed, my cock buried deep, me holding her close, and her holding me tighter, she'd irrevocably tied herself to me. There was no going back. Not now, not ever.

"That's good, baby," I whispered.

"Thank you, Kyle."

I forced my body to relax and pulled her face out of my neck.

"Fearless. My girl is absolutely fearless."

I got her soft lazy eyes, I got her smile, and I got her dimples.

Good God, there was nothing prettier.

My hands went from her hips to her back and I started stroking. Anaya melted into me and I thought there was nothing better than the feel of her on top of me. She snuggled in, giving me her weight. Trusting me. Loving me. Her warm skin pressed against mine, still breathing heavy from riding me.

"We need to talk, sweetheart."

"Uh huh," she mumbled and I smiled against her hair.

She was sleepy but this couldn't wait. Not even until morning. I'd been rolling it around in my head for days—weeks actually—and the time had definitely come to lay all my cards on the table.

"I want you to move here to Maryland."

"You do?"

Anaya sat up so fast I had to jerk my head to the side to avoid a collision.

"Yeah, baby, I do. If you wanna stay in San Diego, we can go there. Though I have to say that would suck because now that the team's not on a long-term contract, we'll be home more and I want to be close to my team and I want you close to Emerson and Tatiana. But if you're committed to SD that's where we'll go."

Anaya stared down at me with wide shocked eyes and asked, "You'd move to California with me?"

"Sweetheart, I'd move anywhere as long as it meant I get you."

"I wanna live here."

Thank fuck.

"Now we gotta talk about one more thing. I don't want you taking another contract with the Peace Corps that will take you from me for two years. I'm not trying to be a dick but I want you in our bed every night. I know there will be nights I'm deployed and won't be in it with you, but I wanna know you're in it. Home safe in our house with our friends close by."

Anaya didn't take her eyes off me. She also hadn't said a word, she was simply gazing down at me, her face unreadable. The Peace Corps wasn't a deal breaker for me; I'd take her any way I could

have her, but it would suck trying to navigate a long-distance relationship.

"Are you asking me to quit because you think it's dangerous and you don't think I can handle it?"

"Fuck no. Anaya, I think you've proven you can handle any situation you're put in. You have more inner strength than anyone I know. From what happened to you when you were a teenager to Timor-Leste to this latest drama. You are strong and brave and smart. Do I like knowing you'll possibly be unsafe? Fuck no, the thought makes my skin crawl. But I also know the team has your back. Do I want to wrap you up in a cocoon so nothing can ever touch you again? Yes. But I know I can't do that. I know you need to be free to be you and I need to stand next to you while you do it. I will always do what I need to do to protect you. But what I won't do is suffocate you in the process."

"Then why are you asking me to quit?"

"I'm asking you to quit because I cannot imagine a day without you. Not only can't I imagine it, the thought causes a physical ache in my chest. I know it's a lot to ask, I know it probably makes me a dick, but it is what it is. I'm selfish when it comes to you and your time. I want it all. But I promise you, you give this me you won't regret it. I'll make each day worth it. I swear it, Anaya, I'll bust my ass to make you happy."

"You don't have to bust your ass, Kyle, unless that's what you're doing now, because you already make me happy. And I don't want to go back to the Peace Corps. I've been thinking about it and I don't want to go back to a life where I live out of a backpack. It's lonely. And I don't want to be away from you or my friends. You've given me more than you'll ever understand. And it's more than just friends and a home. It's more than you giving yourself to me. You've given me—me. And I can't even say you've given me *back*, because there was nothing there. I was adrift, just skating by, not really livin' but breathing and floating. Now I'm living. I'm feeling. I know what it feels like to love and be loved and be open and know I can be scared and strong at the same time. And I have all of that because of you."

"So, yes, I want to move here. Yes, I want to live with you. And yes, I'll quit the Peace Corps."

"Mouth, Anaya."

"What?"

"Give me your mouth, baby."

I didn't wait for her to lean down, I knifed up and took what I needed.

"Again?" Her lips tipped up and my cock twitched.

"You cannot for one second think you can give me what you just gave me and not think I'm not gonna give you something else."

"What are you gonna give me, Kyle?" she whispered against my lips.

Damn, I loved when she did that.

"Everything, sweetheart."

CHAPTER 36

"YOU'RE REALLY STAYING?" Emerson asked.

"Yeah." I smiled at my friend. "We talked about it last night."

"Thank God. Tatiana and I were worried."

God, that felt good. So good in fact, I felt wetness hit my eyes. I'd never had this, not ever. Though it was my fault because I knew Evie and Kalee had tried to give it to me but I'd just pushed it away. And that sucked. What was worse, I'd never get to make it right with Kalee. But I could and needed to with Evie. She had to know how sorry I was.

"So, I guess we'll be roommates for a while."

"Guess what?" Emmy greeted Tatiana as she came into the kitchen.

"What?" Tatiana grumbled, looking a little pale.

"What's the matter? You look sick," I asked.

Tatiana looked between Emerson and me and shook her head.

"You first. Why do you both look so excited?"

"Anaya's staying. She's moving in." Emerson completed her announcement with a fist bump in the air and her silliness made me giggle. I'd never seen Emerson so excited.

"That is good news. I figured with the way the guys were behaving last night you'd both be grumpy this morning."

"Yeah, Thaddeus was a little bent outta shape. But, you know... I have ways to turn his frown upside down." Emerson smiled and winked.

"Yeah, I bet you do." Tatiana smiled. "Happy you're staying."

"Thanks. Now why do you look like you're gonna be sick?"

"Are we alone?" Tatiana whispered.

"Yeah. All the guys went into the office. The Emilio guy went into witness protection and he spilled his guts. Thaddeus told me they probably wouldn't be back until dinner."

Kyle had told me the same thing. He also told me this was good news and possibly the break they needed to move things along. Everyone wanted Omni dismantled. I'd shared my skepticism with Kyle that I didn't see how it would be possible with all the fingers branching out. It seemed like there were so many people involved it would be impossible. But he assured me that when the top players were taken out the rest would crumble.

If Kyle said the team could do it, I believed him. I was learning there was nothing these men couldn't do. Especially when those they loved were in the mix. He'd also explained Monica's tattoo to me, the peacock feather on her back that had sent Emerson over the edge. All the top players in the group had the same tattoo. It was kind of freaky and left me with more questions about Monica, ones that I'd never get the answers to because she was gone.

Garrett was positive the Tremblays had sold their daughter. If not directly, then they'd received compensation after the kidnapping. Something that wouldn't be answered either, considering all of them were now dead. I had to admit the double suicide made them look guilty as sin but I couldn't wrap my head around parents selling their child. And it was something I hoped I never could.

The mysterious computer genius John "Tex" Keegan, a man whom I'd never met and Kyle had said I likely never would, had agreed with Garrett. Which was totally sad because that meant Monica had been a victim and had spent ten years in hell doing whatever she had to do to survive. I still didn't harbor any guilt. Sadness, yes. But seeing the bruising around Emerson's throat reminded me I'd done the right thing.

"Okay, so..." Tatiana stopped and licked her lips. "I'm not sure. I mean, I think I know, I'm late, I don't feel—"

"Ohmigod!" Emerson's eyes were round in shock. "Are you pregnant?"

"I think so," Tatiana whispered.

"Holy shit. Holy shit. Holy...shit," Emmy chanted. "Brooks is gonna flip his shit."

"Ya' think?" Tatiana deadpanned.

"Shut up, you know he'll be over the moon," Emmy returned.

"Will he? We weren't exactly trying."

Holy cow, Tatiana was pregnant. It didn't take long for my excitement to turn into envy. What the hell was wrong with me? I'd gone from never thinking about wanting kids to twice now thinking about wanting a family. Something I had no business wondering about for a variety of reasons, the first being I didn't think I'd be a good mother considering I'd never had one of those. Never even had a good female role model for any length of time.

The other, arguably just as big of a reason, was I'd known Kyle a hot minute and while I was certain how I felt about him, and where we were going. That was in a healthy direction and we were doing it together. We'd never talked about kids or marriage. Now was not the time with everything so new to bring it up, so I wouldn't—even though I was now very curious about his thoughts on the subject.

"But obviously you weren't doing much to prevent it," Emmy shot back and Tatiana's cheeks turned pink and a hint of a smile formed.

"We weren't," she confirmed.

"How late are you?" I asked.

"A month?" Tatiana laughed. "I might've been in denial."

"Girl, that's not denial, that's straight-up crazy." Emerson shook her head. "You get yourself sorted and Anaya and I are going to the store to get you a pregnancy test."

"No way!"

"What do you mean no way?"

"Because if I take it and it's positive, I'll have to tell Brooks. Right now, I don't know so I'm not lying or keeping a secret."

I couldn't stop staring at Tatiana, a woman I admired greatly for her strength and determination, and there was she was freaked the hell out. Bold-as-brass Tatiana Miller. It was then it truly hit me—even the bravest of women still had moments of insecurity and it didn't make them any less brave.

"Are you happy?" I asked.

Tatiana's body rocked back and she scrunched her face. "Of course I am."

"Then stop freaking out, take the test to confirm you're pregnant, then give Brooks the good news so he can be happy, too."

"You're right." Tatiana nodded. "I don't know what I'd do without the two of you."

Shit, I felt that. It seared a golden path from my chest to my stomach and made me feel funny. I'd never had that either, gratitude from a friend.

"So? Can we go get you a test?" Emerson impatiently asked.

"Yeah and hurry. Oh, and while you're at the store, please grab me Doritos. You know how the guys feel about, 'my body is my temple, no junk food shall pass my lips' and I'm dying for a bag."

She was right about that. I'd never seen a fridge so full of healthy food in my life. Not that I ate a bunch of junk, but if I had to eat broccoli one more night I was considering forming a picket line in front of the kitchen.

"Okay. Pregnancy test and Doritos. Anything else?" Emerson asked. "Pickles? Ice cream? Ketchup?"

"Ketchup?" Tatiana laughed.

"What? I don't know, I've never been pregnant. I thought you're supposed to have weird cravings or something."

"And ketchup is weird?"

"It is if you put it on your ice cream."

No. Just no. That was so gross I wasn't going to give ketchup and ice cream another thought.

"Let's go, weirdo," I told Emmy.

"I can't wait to find out if we're gonna be aunties." Emerson tugged my hand but I was too light-headed to move.

"Aunties?" I breathed.

"Well, if she's popping a kid out, we get to be aunts," Emerson explained.

"I've never... I mean... an aunt."

"Hey," Tatiana whispered, now standing close. "You know you're family."

"Family," I repeated. "I don't—"

I didn't get the rest of my words out before a sob broke free—torn from my soul—and what came with it was dark and ugly. Demons I'd hidden for so long. There had been so much that Kyle had freed, so much weight he'd taken, it had allowed me to start to heal. To love and be loved by a great man.

But this? The last of what I'd been holding onto, only the deep bond of friendship could break.

A sisterhood.
A family.
And I was going to be an auntie.

* * *

"WHAT IS it with the three of you?" Max asked over dinner.

Which I'm happy to report did not include broccoli but instead asparagus. That I could handle as long as the guys didn't insist on it the next five days in a row.

"Nothing." Emerson tried but very poorly executed her denial.

"No, there's something up. Spit it out," he continued.

"So, is everyone okay with me moving in?" I tried, and again poorly, to change the subject. I knew this when five men turned to stare at me.

"Don't be dumb," Max returned.

"Don't call me dumb, asshole."

"Right. Well, don't ask dumb questions. Where else would you stay?"

"At a hotel? Get my own apartment? Sleep in my car?"

"Now you're just being stupid, which confirms that the three of you are up to something. So again, spit it out."

"I'm not stupid."

"Sweetheart, give it up. You three are so transparent it's not even funny. And considering Tatiana used to be CIA, I have to say it's surprising she's the one that looks like she's getting ready to bust at the seams. Emerson's sitting over there with a shit eating grin like she knows the secret, which means it would take Thad very little effort to make her spill. And you're over there talking about sleeping in your car, which just to point out, you don't even own one, or in a hotel, which is never gonna happen."

"I'm not gonna spill the secret no matter what Thaddeus tries to do," Emerson said.

Five men chuckled and Tatiana looked like she wanted to smack Emmy for admitting there was a secret to be had.

"Right," Max said through his hilarity.

"Oops." Emerson's hand went over her mouth and Brooks' eyes cut to his wife.

"You got something you wanna share, Doll?"

"Nope." Tatiana popped her P and I couldn't hold back my laugh.

"Tatiana," he warned.

My beautiful, pregnant friend looked at me before she glanced at Emerson with a raised brow. And Emmy and I both nodded.

"Oh, fuck, they're talking, whole conversation with eyebrows and chin lifts. We're fucked. Totally and completely," Max muttered.

"This is not something new," Thad reminded him.

Brooks was starting to look annoyed and Kyle was shaking his head smiling.

"You really wanna know?" Tatiana teased.

"Stop fucking around," Brooks grouched.

I sat back in my seat and my gaze sliced back to Kyle. Damn, he was hot. I didn't think I'd ever get over how good-looking he was. And he was all mine. He'd told me so. And he'd shown me with his actions so many times he'd made me believe in ways that I'd never forget. Not ever.

And because he gave to me so completely, I'd given him all of me. All the good, the bad, the ugly, all my love. I'd laid myself bare and he liked what he saw so much that he claimed it all for himself.

I couldn't have gotten any luckier.

He'd given me his time, his attention, his heart, his friends, his family. Therefore, he'd given me the world, and I'd make sure he wouldn't regret it, not even for a second.

Tatiana huffed. "Okay, fine, if you're sure you wanna know, Daddy."

A mystified silence descended and I wasn't entirely sure there was a man sitting around the table who was breathing.

"The two of you trying your hand at Daddy/baby girl kink?" Max snarked.

My lips quirked and I bit back a laugh. Okay, that was funny, but not what Tatiana was going for.

"You serious?" Brooks growled.

I tore my eyes from Kyle's beaming smile; he totally understood what Tatiana was saying to Brooks.

Right there in front of us all his face showed a thousand emotions, all of them good, all of them happy. Then just as suddenly as his smile appeared, it was gone. He was up out of his chair and he

was stalking toward his wife. Her chair was pulled out, she was scooped up with a surprised yelp, and off they went.

"No one come upstairs!" Brooks shouted as he rounded the corner, and Emerson and I exploded in fits of laughter.

"What the fuck just happened?" Max asked, and Emmy and I bust out into another round.

"Got shit to do," Declan announced and stood. "Be back later."

Before I could get myself under control, the door slammed and Thad and Kyle exchanged an unhappy look.

"Seriously?" Max asked. "They playing some kinky game I should know about? We share a wall, I need to know. If he's up there tying her ass up making it red, I wanna different room. I can't sleep through that shit. It's bad enough I can hear the rest of you fucking like rabbits. Literally fucking... like rabbits. Someone's sporting for some headphones so I can sleep."

"Are you dumb?" I repeated Max's earlier question back to him.

"What? I'm telling the truth. All of you are loud."

"They're not playing a sex game, jackass." Thad chuckled.

"She's pregnant," I announced.

"No shit?" Max smiled.

"No shit," I confirmed.

"Damn. That's good news. Maybe I'll get some sleep after all."

"At least for the next few months," Kyle added.

Kyle looked back at me with eyes dancing with humor and something else I couldn't quite put my finger on. Something that looked like the same longing I had when I was holding baby Eric. My stomach pitched and my heart thundered in my chest.

A dream I never thought I'd dream formed, one that included little boys that had light brown hair and green-flecked eyes. And maybe a little girl to teach to be strong and brave.

But mostly I was dreaming about the bright future I never thought I'd have.

CHAPTER 37

"ALL DONE," Anaya said and taped the last box closed.

There was something to be said about a thirty-two-year-old woman who had an apartment with nice furniture, nice sheets and towels, even nicer stoneware, but had not a damn thing that could be considered personal, save the hundreds of paperback books. All of which Anaya had wrapped like they were priceless treasures.

No pictures on the walls, no framed photos, no picture albums.

And what it said was nothing good.

It served as a reminder Anaya's life had been bleak and lonely. Two things it never should've been. Two things it would never be again.

We hadn't discussed it, but for now we'd stay in the house Zane was renting for the team, and that was fine in the short-term. But as soon as things settled, I was getting my woman a house, and after I planted her ass in it, I was taking it upon myself to give her everything she never had, and that included pictures on the walls—framed photos of us, her with the girls, me with the team, our friends' kids.

And one day, our own.

I wanted her surrounded with family. Every day I wanted her to wake up and before she drank her first cup of coffee, to look around her house and know she was loved.

And that was happening soon.

"You want kids?"

Anaya jerked back and looked at me like I was crazy and I suppose the way I blurted out my question made me a little nuts. But

what the hell? I had to go with it.

"Um...I think so. You?"

"I never wanted kids." Anaya's shock faded and sadness started to creep in. "I always thought they were cute but someone else's cute, not mine. Thought they'd be a burden and I like my freedom. But that was also based on the assumption I'd never have a wife. So things change."

"You never thought you'd have a wife?"

Damn, she was cute when her face contorted in disbelief.

"Nope. Never thought I'd want to be tied down. But that was before I met you. Never felt an inkling of what my friends had described as love—until I met you. Never had a burning desire to be close to a woman—until you. Never pictured myself with a family—until you came into my life. So, no, I never wanted kids—until I fell in love with you. But now, I have to tell you, I want them. I'm not saying tomorrow or even this year, but yes, Anaya, I want children. So I need to know if that's something you want, too."

"I never had a mom," she whispered, and the sadness I heard nearly brought me to my knees.

"Know that, sweetheart."

"What if I'm not a good one?"

Damn, that was a direct hit center mass and the bitter it left in my mouth tasted like shit. There was no reason for as sweet and strong as Anaya was to doubt herself. About anything—ever.

"Come here, sweetheart."

Anaya remained frozen, and when I stepped closer, she put her hand up. "I'm being serious."

"I know you are. And I can understand why you'd ask." I reached out, grabbed her hand, and tugged her to my chest. "You're gonna be a great mom."

"How can you say that? Not only did I not have a mom, I didn't even have an aunt or a grandmother to show me. Like you, I never considered kids. I mean, what if I can't connect with them?"

"Sweetheart, I get it. I really do, but straight up, you have nothing to worry about. When the time comes, you're gonna be a great mom."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

"That's not good enough," she huffed.

I didn't want to bring her past up, I really didn't want to talk about it while we were talking about our future. I wanted Anaya to move on and not dwell on everything that had happened to her. In the two weeks since she'd agreed to move to Maryland with me, she'd opened herself up to the team and had reached out to all of the women—not just Tatiana and Emerson.

Olivia, Violet, Ivy, Erin, and Jasmin had pulled Anaya into their tight group as well. All eight of the women got together to do whatever women did when they were together on more than one occasion. I didn't give the first fuck what they did when they went out, what I cared about was every time Anaya came home or stopped by the office, she was smiling and happy. She laughed a lot, she hugged them goodbye, she played with Jasmin and Linc's twins, she rocked and cooed Eric and Mason. My woman was happy, she had connected, and she was free.

What I didn't want to do, was bring up the fucked-up shit that had been done to her in an effort to convince her she'd be a good mom.

"Anaya, sweetheart, the life you had tells me you're gonna be a good one."

"But—"

"Didn't want to bring this up, didn't wanna remind you or talk about it, and after this we're going back to moving forward and leaving the past where it belongs—in the fucking past. If anyone understands the importance of the role a mother plays in a child's life, it's you. If anyone knows what it feels like to be uncared for, it's you. If anyone knows what it is like not to have a mama to love them, cuddle them, kiss them goodnight, it is you. You knowing all of that, living the life you did, going through what you did, and you being the type of woman I know you are—and I know it down to my bones—you'll bust your ass to make sure your child never feels a moment of what you did. That's how I know."

Tears had formed in Anaya's eyes and I felt each one as they rolled down her cheek and ricocheted through my chest—another direct hit. This one straight to my heart.

"Anaya, you are strong and brave and can do anything you put your mind to. Any damn thing. Believe that. You may've missed it, but you're tight with your girls. You've connected with them and with my team. They all love and care about you and that has nothing

to do with you being my woman and everything to do with you just being you. You have a heart of gold and one day, you're gonna pass all of that, all of who you are, on to our kids."

"Thank you."

"For what? Telling you the truth."

"Well, yes, but also for always reassuring me and reminding me when I forget I'm supposed to be fearless."

"It is no hardship standing by your side. It is an honor and there's no place I'd rather be. I'll remind you every day until you remember on your own. And, sweetheart, you aren't 'supposed' to be fearless—you just are. When I say you can do anything, Anaya, I mean anything. It's taken you only a month, a fuckin' month, to shed your armor and shine. One goddamn month. I'm beyond awestruck. Beyond words to tell you how proud I am of you."

"Do you think everything is moving too fast?"

"Fuck no. Honest to God, swear I'm telling you the truth, I knew when you walked into the lobby of The Del, you were going to change my life. I knew the second my eyes landed on you and my skin tingled with awareness that something big was gonna happen. I knew it. And when we were in Australia and you stood tall and fierce in front of me telling me to stop treating you like you were broken, I knew I was falling in love with you. Right then, with that steely look of determination, I knew with every fiber of my being that you were the woman I was going to spend my life with. So, no, this isn't moving too fast. As far as I'm concerned, we're moving at a snail's pace. If I had my way, you'd have my ring on your finger and planning a wedding. But I know you need time to adjust and—"

"I don't need time."

And there was that fierceness I loved so much.

The resolve and honesty.

"Then when we get home, I'll set about making it so you have a wedding to plan. And just so you know, I don't want to wait. I don't want some long engagement. I also don't care when and where. Rally your girls, set it up, and tell me where I'm supposed to show up."

"You don't care when and where?"

There was that cute scrunch of her nose again. The one that never failed to make me want to kiss the ever-loving hell out of her.

"Okay, I'll amend. I don't care when, as long as it's soon. I don't care where as long as it is exactly what you want. You've given me

something I never dreamed I'd have because I didn't know to dream for it. I didn't know you were out there wandering around. And I sure as fuck didn't know that all this time, I was waiting for you. But I was, and now that I know, I don't want to wait any longer because I've already waited thirty-two years for you." Anaya nodded, streams of tears now flowing. "Baby, you're killing me."

My hands moved from her waist to her cheeks and I swiped the wetness away.

"They're happy tears, Kyle," she whispered, her eyes still brimming with tears. "And just so you know, I was thinking the same thing. Only I was thinking how lucky I was. How I never thought about the future or what it would look like because there was nothing worth looking forward to. Then I met you. Then I fell in love with you. And now, I want things I never dared to think about, and one of those things is kids. Because for me to have a family it would mean I'd have to find a man, and I never thought that would happen. I wasn't looking for you, Kyle. I wasn't looking for a future or love or even friends. I was content living behind the walls I'd reinforced and I stopped noticing the loneliness. Then you made me see myself differently and suddenly and it happened quickly. I didn't want to live like I was. I wanted to invite you in, I wanted you to want to stay awhile, I wanted everything I never thought I'd have and I only want it with you."

"You said it took me a month to shed my armor but you're wrong, I didn't shed it, honey, you demolished it. You tore it to shreds and you did it on an airplane by just holding my hand."

My chest expanded, not with air, even though I was breathing heavy, but from something so big building up, I thought I'd shatter.

"Fuck, baby, you cannot say shit like that to me when the movers are gonna be here in five minutes, your bed's already disassembled, and your couch is covered in suitcases."

"What does that have to do with anything?" She smiled and tilted her head in a way that left me no option but to lean down and take her mouth.

And like always, my girl didn't mess around, her tongue came out to meet mine and she swept me away into another world. One where only she and I existed. One that was so fucking bright and beautiful it didn't just fill me with hope—it filled me with pure joy.

The knock at the door ended our kiss far too soon.

"Tonight when we get back to our hotel room, I'm gonna show you just how much your words mean to me. I'm gonna take my time, I'm gonna do it thoroughly, and I'm gonna do it in a way that you'll never forget. I love you, Anaya. So damn much I can't begin to tell you. But I promise you, even though I can't find the words, you'll always know. And you'll feel it from top to toe, you'll feel it in your heart, you'll feel it in your soul. I swear it, sweetheart, your days of living behind walls are over. You tore those down and built yourself a home. And knowing I'm the one that gets to fill it with family and happiness is the best feeling in the world."

Anaya did a face plant into my chest, my arms went around her as her body shook. I knew she was crying, her tears were soaking my tee, but these I'd let seep into my skin knowing she liked what I said and she was feeling my promise deep.

The pounding on the door sounded again and I didn't move. Fuck it. The movers could wait.

* * *

"PIPER!"

Anaya immediately stood from her seat to greet Ace and Piper as they approached our table. Shock registered on Piper's face and Ace broke out into a wide smile. Yeah, he saw it. There was no way to miss the change in Anaya. It wasn't that she hadn't been friendly with them when we'd met at The Del the day we'd left for Timor-Leste, she had been. But now Anaya was a different kind of friendly and Ace understood. I was sure he saw the same smile on his wife's face every day.

"Hey," Piper returned. "You look...great."

Anaya's cheeks tinged pink but she didn't shy away.

"Thanks. I feel great. How are the girls?"

"Perfect," Ace answered, and Piper looked over at her husband, her face soft and her mouth curved into a smile.

Ace was a lucky man, having all that directed at him, though I was, too. Anaya was not selfish with her smiles or her laughter. She gave me both daily. And I'd work my ass off making sure that never stopped.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" A very pretty, tall woman stopped at our table and it took me a moment to recognize her.

The one and only Jessyka Sawyer, owner of Ace's Bar and Grill.

"Long time, Jessyka. How's Benny?" I asked.

"He's great. You should've called Kason. He would've loved to come and catch up."

"Sorry, we didn't think of it. Jessyka, this is Anaya Baker. Anaya, this is a friend of ours. Benny's wife," I introduced.

"Nice to meet you." Anaya offered her hand. "But I'm confused, is your husband Benny or Kason?"

"Both," Jessyka answered and giggled when Anaya's eyes went round. "No." Jess shook her head and smiled. "I'm not married to two men, Benny and Kason are the same person. I mean, Benny is Kason's nickname. Like Ace is Beckett's."

"Oh. Sorry, I was thinking you were one busy woman with two men."

"God, no. Kason and three kids are enough for me." Jess laughed.

Ace took the opportunity to scoot by the now-chatting women and quietly asked, "Amisha?"

"Taken care of."

He nodded and continued. "As bad as Anaya thought?"

"Worse, brother. You know we had to rush the op because we needed to get to Cambodia, but after being in that shithole and walking into what I did, I'm still struggling with the knowledge we were there the night before for recon and we left knowing those girls were inside. Can't say I ever take pleasure ending a life, but there was a sense of satisfaction when my blade passed across the bitch's throat. And I'm not losing sleep over her, that's for damn sure."

Ace winced before his jaw went tight.

"Don't go there, Ace. You had no idea what was going down next door. When Anaya approached, you helped her, and that's what matters."

"My daughters—"

"Don't, Ace. You got your daughters home with you. You and Piper are giving them a life they never would've had. They'll grow up knowing nothing but love. Stay focused on that, yeah."

"You're right. They're home, they're thriving, and they're surrounded by love."

"Yeah, they are."

"So." Ace smiled. "You and Anaya."

"Told you over the phone."

"You did," he confirmed. "And I was happy to hear it, but I'm happier to see it. She's different."

"That she is."

"She's lucky—"

"No, brother, she is not. Anaya's never seen luck, not a day in her life. Everything she's become she's worked her ass off to accomplish. Which makes me the luckiest son of bitch in the world because she wants to share all that she is with me."

"I hear that."

Anaya's giggle drew my attention to her, Jessyka, and Piper.

I saw her smile, I heard her laughter, and when both of those hit me, I was filled with her happiness.

It was another hit straight to my heart and it felt damn good.

CHAPTER 38

"THANKS FOR DOING THIS," I told Kyle.

"No problem."

"And thanks for lunch. Piper and Ace seem happy."

"That's because they are."

I glanced at Kyle, and since he was driving, I had him in profile. Strong square jaw, covered with a day's worth of stubble, and I shivered in my seat remembering his promise and what those whiskers felt like between my legs.

Funny how I'd gone from the thought of someone touching me being nearly revolting to craving Kyle's and desperate for it. I'd gone from having nothing to having it all and I still wanted more. I wasn't worried I'd screw this up between us, because Kyle wouldn't let me. I trusted him to guide me where we needed to be. I knew he'd take care of me, I knew he'd protect me, I knew he'd continue to be patient as I worked out all the poison that churned in my stomach. That there wasn't much left, he'd made sure of that, too. But whatever remained, we would work it out of me together.

He was proving it to me once again by parking in front of Evie's apartment complex.

"Everything's gonna be fine," he told me as he pulled into a spot.

"I know."

"You know?" He chuckled. "Then why do you look so nervous?"

I wasn't nervous, not really. I knew what I needed to say to Evie and I wasn't worried about that. I'd learned it wasn't as hard as I thought it was to share my past, not with those who loved and cared about me. I was anxious about her response. Only because I was

afraid when Evie found out all that I was holding back over the years, she'd be disappointed in me, or hurt.

"She's gonna know what a shitty friend I've been."

"Sweetheart, that is not true."

"It is, honey. And she'll be right. I knew every time I changed the subject or glossed over a question she asked, I was hurting her feelings, yet I still did it."

"Anaya—"

"And you know how that feels," I cut him off. "Every time Declan does it to you, I see the hurt on your face. I hate that for you. I hate that you're hurting for a friend who refuses to open up and share his burdens. Even if there's nothing you can do to ease the pain, you still want him to know he can unload his demons and you'll have his back. So you know the hurt I've caused Evie."

"You're right about some of that, but not all. I also know the kind of pain that's inside of Declan is so deep he cannot just unload. He gives us what he can when he can. So with that, we all know we have to give him time. Something I'm sure Evette understands she had to give you. That does not make you a shitty friend. And if she cares about you the way you know she does, then she'll really understand that and be happy you've taken the time you needed, and now you're ready to open up."

God, I loved this man. I loved he knew what I needed to hear. I loved he was so patient with me and those around him. He was a good friend, something else I loved. He treated the people he cared about with understanding. He was honest and held nothing back, something that made you want to return the favor ten-fold. All around, he was a good man.

"You make me really happy," I blurted out.

"Would suck if I didn't." He smiled. "Ready to go up?"

"Yeah."

Before he opened the car door, he reached out, wrapped his hand around the back of my neck, and pulled me to him and laid a scorching hot kiss on me that made me forget all my worries. It also dampened my panties and made my girly parts tingle.

"You're a really good kisser," I told him when he broke the kiss.

"Now that would seriously suck if you didn't think that," he murmured.

"Lucky for me you're really good at other things, too."

"Yeah?"

"Oh, yeah. But you know you are."

"I don't think I do, maybe you should tell me."

"Maybe tonight I'll give you the list."

"There's a list?"

"A long one."

"Jesus," Kyle muttered. "She's being cute *and* making me hard."

I giggled as his hand went to his crotch to adjust the hard-on he was complaining about having.

"Now she thinks it's funny."

What could I say? It was amusing he was talking to himself. But mostly it made me feel something else—powerful, sexy, strong that little old me could arouse Kyle with nothing more than my words. That felt great.

* * *

EVIE'S pale blue eyes were filled with unshed tears and her lids were rimmed with red from the ones that had been falling over the last hour. I'd told her everything. All the horrors of my past summed up in one hour and a few odd minutes.

Wasn't that a kick in the gut? I could recite all of my trauma in sixty-plus minutes, but it had taken me years to process and move past it.

"I knew," she whispered.

"What?"

"Not all of it, obviously. I didn't know how you felt, but I'd known the facts," she admitted.

Evie looked destroyed and Kyle must've seen it, too, because his hand holding mine squeezed.

"At first it was an accident," she rushed out. "The paper was doing a huge story on the modeling agency that was really a front for a trafficking ring. I was researching similar incidents and I found the article about when you were rescued. Of course, your name wasn't mentioned because you were a minor, but there was a picture. Even though the FBI agent was trying to shield you, I knew it was you."

I stared at my friend, not knowing what to say. She'd known for years what had happened to me, but hadn't pushed, hadn't told me

she knew, and I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

"Why—"

"Please don't be mad at me. I didn't say anything because I knew you weren't ready to talk about it. Any time Kalee or I brought up something that resembled being personal you shut down. I was afraid if I told you I knew, you'd stop being my friend and I didn't want to lose you."

Shit, she was right. I would've exited stage right and I would've done it in a way that ended our friendship forever. My eyes closed trying to block out the shame. I was a horrible friend.

"Did Kalee know?"

"God, no. I would never share your secrets. I wanted you to tell me when you were ready. And, honey, I wish you would've told me sooner but I understand why you didn't. I understood why you'd closed yourself off and I couldn't blame you. The only reason why I wanted you to tell me was so I could tell you how proud I am of you."

My eyes opened and I focused on the tears that now streamed down Evie's pretty pale cheeks.

"What?"

"But I get to tell you now. Anaya, I always thought you were the bravest, strongest, smartest woman I know. But now that I know the rest, I know I was wrong—you're not just strong, you are resilient. You're not only brave but you're tough. You're made of something so fierce and formidable that nothing can stop you. When I tell you I am proud of you, I mean it. Everything you've overcome is astounding."

I waited for more shame of being a shit friend to hit but it never did. Instead, more of the acid and poison in my belly neutralized. More of the toxic venom I'd allowed to overtake my life was gone. Just like that.

"Thank you for always being such a great friend, even when I wasn't a good one."

"Say what? Girl, you're crazy. You've always been a good friend. Always. When my mom died, who was the first one to rush to my side and hold me together when I was falling apart? You. And when Tommy Bradshaw broke my heart into a million pieces, who offered to go key his car and kick him in the balls? You. I can go on and on. Story after story. You always being the first person to lend an ear, a

hand, your support. So shut up with the 'I'm not a good friend' shit."

"Tommy was a dick," I reminded her, then turned to Kyle. "He was married. Married with kids and lied to Evie for six months. She had no clue. He worked hard to make her fall in love with him. He even had an apartment. Can you believe that shit?"

"No, sweetheart, I can't." Kyle's lips tipped up. "I'm thinking it's a shame you didn't get to kick him in the balls. A man who would set out to cheat on his woman, then go about getting his hooks in a good woman while he was tied to another isn't just a dick—he's no kind of man. I'm thinking a kick to the balls would've been sweet to start but he deserved a hell of a lot more than that."

"Right? That's why I wanted to key his car, too. But Evie wouldn't let me."

"That's a shame." He chuckled.

"See?" I turned to Evie. "He gets it. You should've let me do it. The pompous asshole loved that stupid Mercedes. He would've pitched a fit if I'd scratched it to hell."

"And she thinks she was never a good friend." That came from Evie but she wasn't talking to me, she was talking to Kyle.

"She knows better now," he told her.

"Thank you," Evie whispered.

"No need to thank me."

The two of them were talking like I wasn't in the room, but instead of being annoyed, I was grateful.

"You're right. I shouldn't be thanking you, because now I'm gonna have to get on a plane to go see my best friend and I hate flying."

"I wish I could say I was sorry, but that'd be a lie."

Evie laughed and turned her blinding smile to me. "I think I like him."

"That's good, because I love him and it would suck if my best friend didn't like my boyfriend."

"Not your boyfriend, Anaya."

"What?"

"I'm not your boyfriend, first because I'm not a boy, I'm a man." I shivered at his declaration thinking he was correct, he was a man—all man—nothing boy about him. "That would mean I'm your man, but more than that, I'm the man that's gonna make you my wife."

The shiver turned into a full body earthquake and I tried my best to stop the quaking. But I must've failed because Evie's peal of laughter filled the room.

"I love it," she said through her hilarity. "So worth the stupid plane ride. I'll take a thousand of them if it means my girl gets this kind of happiness."

Kyle and I stayed a while longer, the three of us laughed a lot, Kyle and Evie got to know each other, and when we got up to say our goodbyes, Evie promised to fly out to Maryland soon and I knew she meant it, she'd brave flying to come and see me. Evette London was the best and I couldn't wait for her to meet Tatiana, Emerson, and the rest of the women. She was going to love them, and they'd love her.

When we walked down to the car I felt lighter, freer, better than I had in forever—save when Kyle told me he loved me, or when he was holding me, or when he made love to me, or when he was being sweet, or bossy, or protecting me, or healing me. Those were the best of times and nothing could compare to how he made me feel. But knowing I'd given Evie what she needed—which was all of me—was definitely a close second.

The second the hotel room door closed behind us, Kyle pressed against my back. His hand swept my hair from my shoulder and he gathered it in one hand, the other went around and pressed to my belly. Then it was moving down.

"Before I get you naked, I got something I wanna say," Kyle said conversationally. "Your friend is right."

"About what?" I asked even though he'd unsnapped the button of my shorts and his hand disappeared into my panties, which meant I was close to not being able to comprehend his answer.

"About everything." His finger dipped inside of me and he continued. "Made from steel."

"Kyle," I panted as he continued to tease me, coating his finger with my excitement.

My head hit his shoulder, his lips went to my jaw first for a kiss, then to whisper against my skin.

"So fucking proud of my girl. So strong." He added a second finger and his thrusts become harder. "So beautiful."

"Honey," I whispered because really, he was doing great things between my legs and I was beyond words.

“Naked, Anaya. I want to taste you before I fuck you.” A shiver ran through me and my pussy clenched around his fingers. “You like when I’m hungry, baby?”

“Yes.”

“Good, because I’m gonna take my time eating before I flip you over and take the rest of you.”

Kyle did indeed take his time eating me and after he’d brought me to a screaming orgasm, he took more time licking and tasting the rest of me. And by the time he’d finished with me riding on top of him giving him a show, because, well, he’d given me a second orgasm that was arguably better than the first, he deserved it. And when he groaned his pleasure, I continued to ride him harder, until he exploded with a shout, yanking me down so he could kiss me through it.

It was everything Kyle had promised it would be. It was thorough, it was rough, it was sweet. And through it all, I felt it in my heart, in my soul, from top to toe, and all the places in between. All the cracks and voids that once had dominated my life were now filled. Each and every one of them. And he was right about more—he’d cemented over them in a way I’d never forget. I was invincible because that was how he made me. And I was fearless because I was strong.

CHAPTER 39

Max

UN-FUCKING-BELIEVABLE.

I'd watched Declan stroll up to the front door of a small but well-kept house in a nice and quiet neighborhood and knock on the door. I'd also watched a very beautiful blonde open the door. In her defense she did scowl at him before she allowed him in.

Un-fucking-real.

I should've felt like a dick for following my teammate and invading his privacy, and I had, right up until I saw who'd opened the door. Now I was fucking pissed. Declan wasn't stirring the pot, he was shaking a hornet's nest and it wasn't just him who was gonna get stung.

At least I now knew where he'd been sneaking off to when he said he had shit to do the last month and a half. He didn't have shit to do, he had *someone* to do. Jesus Christ.

I hadn't stopped staring at the door he'd entered thirty minutes ago and I was debating whether or not I should go knock, then knock some sense into him. This was a disaster waiting to happen. No, fuck that—this would be an atomic bomb that when detonated would wipe us all off the map.

Goddamn it.

My phone vibrated, clattering in the cupholder, and I angrily picked it up. But when I saw the caller ID, my anger slid to worry.

"Tex," I greeted. "Everything okay?"

It was late and even though the man worked all hours of the day, his evenings were normally dedicated to his gorgeous wife Melody and their two daughters.

"I need a favor."

"Anything," I agreed immediately.

"I need you to go to Florida and grab a woman. You got two choices, bring her up here and Mel and I will figure out what to do with her, or you keep her until I work something else out."

"Is there a reason you're coming to me about this and not Zane? You know I'll have to clear it with him first."

"Zane's my next call, but I wanted to talk to you first, see if you'd be willing to go."

"Of course I'll do it, but who is she?"

"She's...just someone who got herself wrapped up in something she had no choice but to get involved with. She did something she's not proud of, something she had to do, and believe me, I wouldn't have helped her out of it unless I didn't believe she was sorry for what she had to do."

Well, that was cryptic as fuck, but I also knew Tex had a moral compass that pointed north. There was no bending it, so if he said he believed her, I'd trust him, even if that trust wouldn't be extended to the mysterious woman. I didn't share the same compass as Tex. Mine tended to lean into the gray and I sure as fuck didn't trust people.

Particularly women.

Especially women who got themselves wrapped up in situations that forced them to fuck over those they'd once said they loved.

Learned my lesson and I learned it well.

"When do you need me to go?" I asked.

"She has two kids."

Fuck!

"Right."

"As soon as you can. The longer she's there, the more danger she'll be in."

"Does she know she's in danger?"

"No."

Fucking hell. Great, so now I needed to go to Florida, nab a woman and her kids, and convince her it was for her own good. A

woman who'd already gotten herself into enough shit that Tex had to bail her out. Perfect. Fantastic. Should be a walk in the park—not.

"But I'll call Zane, explain the situation, then I'll call her and tell her to expect you."

"Don't tell her when I'm coming, just to expect me."

"You're gonna investigate her." It wasn't a question, Tex knew me well enough to know that was exactly what I was going to do.

"Respect, Tex. I trust you. But if she got her shit jacked once, I wanna make sure she's not playing you."

"She's not." His answer was firm.

"Then me watchin' her a few days won't be a problem. Bonus is, she'll have protection while I'm doing it."

"Appreciate it. I owe you—"

"Shut the hell up with that nonsense. You owe me nothing, you always have our back."

"Can you leave tomorrow?"

I looked back at the door Declan had disappeared into and figured the damage had been done. What was a few more days?

"Sure can."

"I'll be in touch with the details."

"Great. Later."

I rang off with Tex, started my Jeep, and drove home, to the house I shared with Brooks, Thad, Kyle, and their women. Declan lived there, too, when he wasn't off doing shit he wasn't supposed to be doing.

Goddamn clusterfuck.

Now we'd have a woman and her two kids to deal with. Perfect. What's three more people to contend with when we were still at war with Omni?

Easy day.

** TO FIND out who the mystery woman Tex needs help with is, read Susan Stoker's [Securing Zoey](#).

AND THEN PICK up the next book in the Gold Team series, [Maximus](#) and find out all about what happens in the next installment!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Riley Edwards is a bestselling multi-genre author, wife, and military mom. Riley was born and raised in Los Angeles but now resides on the east coast with her fantastic husband and children.

Riley writes heart-stopping romance with sexy alpha heroes and even stronger heroines. Riley's favorite genres to write are romantic suspense and military romance.

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New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author Susan Stoker has a heart as big as the state of Tennessee where she lives, but this all American girl has also spent the last fourteen years living in Missouri, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas. She's married to a retired Army man who now gets to follow *her* around the country.

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