

RILEY EDWARDS



GOLD TEAM  BOOK FOUR

MAXIMUS

MAXIMUS (SPECIAL FORCES:
OPERATION ALPHA)

GOLD TEAM BOOK 4

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

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Thank you for purchasing Maximus. 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 Maximus, 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 Zoey*. You can certainly read Maximus as a standalone but I recommend reading *Securing Zoey* 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.
And a very special Thank You to Dana Smith our resident Texpert. I hope I
did your beloved justice.*

ABOUT THE BOOK

What happens when a woman who's done the unthinkable needs protection—can a man who's lost his belief in humanity keep her safe?

Max Brown doesn't trust anyone but his team. The former SEAL learned early in life that people let you down—they lie, they steal, and they lie some more. Love is a word that is used to manipulate. Family is meaningless. Max is an island and he prefers it that way.

A woman who needs a safe harbor—but is undeserving.

Cyber genius, John "Tex" Keegan rescued Eva Dawson, a single mother who was forced to do something inconceivable to save her children. Tex somehow sees the good in her when no one else does. She is redeemable. Now, just when she's getting her life back together someone wants her dead. Tex calls in the Gold Team to help—specifically Max Brown, the man with a past that mirrors that of Eva's.

A past that clouds the present.

Tex has a plan—he always does. But neither the protector nor woman who's been marked for death make it easy. Neither of them trust and both will fight to stay in control. If Tex can keep them both alive long enough, he knows the duo is the perfect pair—each of them will be what the other needs to heal the sins of the past.

PROLOGUE

There she was.

Eva Dawson.

Also known as Eva Dawkins. Or, as Mark “Bubba” Wright and Zoey Knight knew her—Eve Dane the pilot from hell. The woman who’d faked engine trouble, dumped them in a remote part of Alaska, and left them for dead.

That was who Tex had sent me down to Florida to grab. Actually, the man wanted me to protect her.

What the fuck?

I’d read the reports, I knew Eva had a shit life but as far as I was concerned what she’d done was inexcusable. The woman had nearly killed Bubba and Zoey. Why Tex was helping her was beyond me, and why Zoey and Bubba had let her off the hook, I couldn’t understand.

Everyone had trauma in their past, didn’t mean they got a free pass.

I watched as the woman in question came out of the grocery store where she worked as a checkout girl. A job Tex had gotten her. He’d also given her a fresh start, relocated her and her two sons, and given them new identities.

Something she didn’t deserve.

She wore her long, mousy brown hair in a ponytail and from a distance she looked like your average, everyday woman. But when you got close and caught sight of her incredible yellow-green eyes, there was nothing average about her. The eyes made all the differ-

ence—they looked fake, and for a moment as I stared at her from the checkout line, I wondered if they were contacts.

The uniform she wore did her no favors. Her pants hung on her like they were two sizes too big, and the oxford shirt looked like a child's small. Though I doubted the ugly, green top was made for a child the way her breasts filled it out.

My first order of business when I finally spoke to her was to have a come-to-Jesus talk with the woman. After going through her line, I stood by my SUV in the parking lot and waited for her shift to end. When it did, she walked out of the store looking down at the ground instead of paying attention to her surroundings.

I could snatch her up and have her in my SUV before she even realizes what's happening.

Stupid.

A blonde woman juggling one of those infant carriers caught my attention. She stumbled, nearly losing her grip on the three bags dangling from her fingers while trying to negotiate her keys. In the meantime, she dropped her wallet on the way to her car without even knowing it. Christ, what was wrong with people? Didn't anyone pay attention? Bad shit happened in parking lots.

I was getting ready to step forward to quietly tell the mother she'd dropped her wallet, when Eva picked it up.

With no option other than giving away my presence, which I wasn't ready to do, I clenched my jaw in an attempt to remain silent.

Fucking hell! Eva was going to steal the poor...

"Hey! Wait!" Eva's voice rang out. The mother's head jerked in Eva's direction. "Here, you dropped this."

"Crap. Thank you so much." The mom tried to reach out to take her wallet from Eva and the bags started to slip again.

"I got it." Eva eased a bag from the other woman and smiled. "I have two." Eva nodded toward the infant. "I remember what that's like."

"First one. Still trying to get the hang of it."

"It'll get easier. Let me help you to your car."

"Thanks." The haggard new mom blew out a breath.

Jesus. Neither woman had noticed him. And the mother was far too trusting—Eva could've been a psycho murderer for all she knew, out to kidnap her child.

Situational awareness.

Both women were severely lacking in that department.

* * *

"YOU'VE BEEN DOWN THERE WATCHING HER FOR THREE DAYS. I NEED YOU to make contact." I could hear Tex's irritation, hell, I practically felt it rolling off him over the phone as I sat in my SUV.

And there she was, the woman in question—Eva.

And once fucking again, she wasn't paying attention as she came out of work. Christ, the need to shake some sense into her became harder and harder to control the more I watched her.

"She has tomorrow off," I told him something he knew—after all, it was Tex who'd given me her schedule. "Call her tonight and tell her I'll be at her place tomorrow at ten."

Tex's exaggerated sigh came over the phone. "Fine."

My attention went back to Eva as she loaded some groceries into the trunk of her car. Nothing fancy, an older model sedan, likely courtesy of Tex.

"While you've been watching, have you seen any sign of a—"

"Threat? No. Are you ready to explain why you want me playing bodyguard to a woman who nearly killed Bubba and Zoey?"

"Nope."

"Do Zoey and Bubba know you bankrolled the woman—"

"Yes," he huffed. "They were given the option to press charges. Both declined and they understand why I helped her."

"She's on the move. Call her and I'll check in after I meet with her."

"Keep her safe."

My grip on the steering wheel tightened. Tex sounded almost... desperate. Very unlike the man. He didn't get anxious—he was cool, calm, calculating. He saw the problem and solved it.

What the fuck is going on?

Five minutes later, Eva pulled in front of a crappy house that was not hers and parked. I sat in my SUV and watched. The more I followed her without her knowledge—something else we would be discussing because Eva should've seen me, I wasn't trying to hide—the more I felt like a stalker.

Hunting and watching my prey was something I was used to, something I was good at. But Eva wasn't my prey, she was my... fuck, I didn't know what she was because Tex was being vague.

I had no clue who or what the threat was and I was beginning to think the cyber genius didn't, either. Which might've been the reason he was so worried.

Eva knocked on the door with the grocery bags looped over her forearms. She was not looking around. If she had, she would've seen me sitting across the street, watching.

Goddammit. The woman had a death wish.

An older woman answered the door and smiled brightly. She said something before Eva leaned forward, kissed her cheek, and then both women went inside.

Thirty minutes later, Eva came out sans the bags and tromped to her car.

You guessed it, not paying a lick of fucking attention.

Shoulders hunched, sadness burned her features, sorrow clear as day.

And for the briefest moment, I felt sorry for Eva.

CHAPTER 1

"Tex, I appreciate everything you've done for us. More than you know."

He couldn't know, and not because I hadn't thanked him a hundred times, not because I hadn't broken down and poured my heart out to him, but because there *were* no words strong enough to express what his help meant to me.

Tex had saved me. What's more, he saved my boys.

He rescued them from a vile, evil man—my ex-husband.

Jay Dawkins—liar, abuser, drug-dealer extraordinaire. The devil himself.

"Eva—"

"But I think you're overreacting. We're fine. You made sure of it."

Tex made sure of it, all right. One day I was desperate, destitute, and out of options. Jay had taken my boys, hidden them from me, and threatened to do heinous things to them—some of which he carried out.

Then Tex happened.

I'd never seen him, didn't know his last name, where he lived, who he was, but he was my savior. I was forever indebted to him even if he didn't see it that way.

"No debt. You're free and clear. Take care of your kids and don't look back." That was what Tex had told me when two men dressed in black delivered my kids to me in a shitty pay-by-the-night motel room. Then he'd explained just what he'd done, all the ways he'd truly saved me.

Now we were living in a small two-bedroom bungalow in Florida. We had new identities, and we lived simple. I had the perfect life. Me and my boys, an honest day's work, clean. We were finally clean. Out from under the filth and scum that had surrounded our lives, thanks to Jay.

No, that wasn't right—thanks to me. Everything that had happened was my fault, I take responsibility. I chose Jay. I was so stupid—again—I didn't see him for who he truly was until it was too late. And, boy, did I pay. All three of us did.

Tex's voice brought me back to the present. "I sent a friend of mine, Max Brown, down to check on you. He's a former SEAL who now works in the private sector. He's the best of the best. He's coming this morning to have a word. I'd like you to go up to Maryland with him. There's a safehouse—"

"No! My job. I can't lose it."

The first splinter on my façade cracked. I'd worked so damn hard to give my boys stability. They were happy, I couldn't rip it all away from them. Not again.

"You're in danger."

"What kind of danger? Jay is—"

"You are in danger." Tex enunciated each word as ice infused my veins.

No! Not again.

Before I could ask him to explain, there was a knock at the door.

"Make sure you ask who it is before you answer."

"Right. I don't know what this guy even looks like."

"Blond. Blue eyes. Six-foot two. He'll be wearing a frown."

"A frown?"

"Max is... unreadable. He'll also protect you with his life."

"Why would he do that? He doesn't know me."

"Because I've asked him to. Because while he doesn't know you, and just to note, he doesn't trust you, he knows me."

Welp, my day off just took a turn to Shitsville.

"Who is it?" I called out once I made it to the door.

"Max Brown."

Deep, rough, rumbly.

Nice.

"How do I know it's really you?"

"Good girl." Tex chuckled.

"Tex sent me."

"What do you look like?"

"You trying to piss me off?" Max returned.

"No, of course not. I don't know you. A girl can never be too safe."

"Right. Is that why you leave work with your head bent looking at the pavement instead of your surroundings? Is that why you help mothers load groceries into their cars, uncaring it could be a ploy to kidnap you? Or, maybe you're being safe when you don't notice a man following you to an old woman's house and he sits across the street and waits for you to leave for thirty minutes, and you still don't notice. Yeah, Eva, you can never be too safe."

"Forgot to tell you, he's been in town a few days shadowing you."

"What? Why didn't you tell me?"

A chill ran down my spine. Tex wouldn't go through all this trouble unless he was seriously worried.

"You on the phone with Tex?" Max asked from behind the still-closed door.

"Yes."

"He tell you why I'm here?"

"Yes."

"Then open up."

"I don't think I want to. You don't sound very nice and you kinda scare me."

"Lady, this is me being nice. I'm here to protect you, not play fucking games. Open the damn door."

"Now I really don't want to."

"Eva, open the door. Max doesn't have a lot of patience," Tex said in my ear.

"Great," I hissed.

I unhappily unbolted the door and opened it.

Then my breath caught, my body tingled, and awareness seared through me.

Fire and ice. That's what Max was. Ice-cold blue eyes that still somehow glittered with fire. And there wasn't a damn thing friendly about the way he looked. Which was odd because if he hadn't been frowning at me with narrowed eyes, he would've looked like a Southern California surfer boy. Not that I'd ever been to California,

and there certainly hadn't been any surfers in Alaska where I'd grown up. But, I'd seen enough movies to know that Max Brown looked like he should be on the cover of a DVD case for a surf movie.

Did people even buy DVDs anymore, or Blu-rays for that matter? Weren't all movies just streamed—

"Eva?"

"Shit. Sorry. I was...um..."

"Daydreaming."

Now it was my turn to narrow my eyes on him. "No, I wasn't," I snapped.

"Right," he drawled. "Is Tex still on the line?"

"Shit," I muttered, the phone still up to my ear. "Sorry, Tex. Max is here."

"Gathered that, Eva. Please let him in. Talk to him and I'll call you back within the hour."

"Fine." *God, I sound like an ungrateful bitch.* "Sorry. Thank you for your help. I'll wait for your call."

I disconnected and squared my shoulders. "Would you like to come in?"

"That'd be good." Max stepped inside and suddenly my small house felt smaller, stifling.

"So, what now?"

Max looked around my house, scrutinizing my space. It wasn't much, but I was damn proud of what I'd been able to provide for my boys.

Yes, I'd needed Tex's help and he was the one to get me here and set me up, but after that, I'd refused all other help. There was no way I could take anymore money from the stranger than I already had.

I worked. I made money. I paid my rent. I put food on the table.

No more handouts—never again.

"Where are your children?"

"Why?" My question felt like an accusation but I wasn't sure what I was accusing him of.

What I did know was that I didn't know this man, and I learned the hard way never to trust. Tex was an anomaly. But, then the man had proven himself worthy when he found my boys and returned them to me.

"Whoa there, Eva. I was just asking."

"I don't like people asking about my kids. They're none of your business."

"They are, when I've been tasked to protect them."

Well, he kind of had me there, but I still wasn't going to offer my boys' location. Tex knew where they were every second of every day. They both wore watches that had some sort of high-tech tracking device he himself had invented. It made me feel somewhat better they could be tracked, but I didn't think I'd ever feel a hundred percent safe when they were out of my sight.

"Listen, Eva. I was asking because I wanted to know if they were home or if they're still at daycare."

His question didn't make me feel any better. As a matter of fact, my fists clenched.

"Why? Have we met before?"

Max's gaze dropped to my hands before his eyes came back up to meet mine. "Why? Because I want to know if I need to watch what I say if they're within earshot. Met? No, but I did go through your checkout line, and I've been following you for four days."

"Following me?" I screeched.

I was trying my best to slow my breathing, stop my heart from pounding in my chest, but I couldn't. Memories started to flood. Someone else used to follow me, but I hadn't felt him, either.

"Breathe, Eva," he commanded.

"I am!" I exhaled.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Tex sent me to protect you."

"Yet, instead of making yourself known, you stalked me."

"Sure, if that's what you wanna call it."

What the hell?

"Well, what would *you* call following me without my knowledge?"

"Recon. You didn't know I was around so you behaved as you normally would. That means *if* there's someone else out there watching you, I would've seen them."

"You don't sound convinced," I noted.

Max shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not sure if Tex is even sure. He's being cautious, and I understand that. But until I have more intel, I don't know what I'm looking for. What I do know is, no one other than me has been following you for the last four days."

My body sagged with relief. That was good news. No, *great* news. Tex was being over-protective and Max would be on his way.

"Then I don't need protection."

"I didn't say that. I said no one was following you, not that someone wasn't planning on hurting you."

Well, that was just peachy.

"You don't beat around the bush, do you?"

His cold blue eyes narrowed and I fought the urge to shrink away.

Never again will I cower to a man.

"Would you rather I blew smoke up your ass and let you go on your merry way, continuing to walk around with your head down, completely oblivious to what's going on around you? So if there is a threat you don't see it coming? Because I gotta tell you, you're an easy mark. I could've snatched your ass from work fifty different ways and you would've never seen me coming. Which, after reading the report I have on you, surprises the shit out of me. You're no stranger to trouble. I'd think someone like you would have more sense than to walk around in a haze."

Acid burned in my veins. Shame and guilt.

He knew about my past. Knew what I'd done and what I allowed myself to get pulled into. That's why he was looking at me with disgust when I opened the door. Of course he'd think I was an easy mark because I had been one my whole miserable life.

But not anymore. Never fucking again would someone make me weak.

CHAPTER 2

Whatever was going through Eva's mind looked painful. Not that I understood why she looked like what I said gutted her. Everything had been the truth.

She needed to pay attention. And someone with her past should know better than to let her guard down.

"And another thing," I continued. "When you drop the boys off at daycare—"

"Say again?"

"Daycare, Eva. You need to park in the lot. Not on the street."

The change in her was immediate. Steel infused her spine, her yellow-green eyes fired to life, and she took a step closer to me.

"You were watching my kids?" she growled. The sound guttural, feral, enraged.

Holy fuck, this little slip of a woman was going head-to-head with *me*.

She looked poised to attack, which was laughable, considering I could not only contain her, but take her out without effort. But there she was, in full-on mama bear battle mode.

Christ. I wasn't sure what to think. I didn't trust this woman, didn't know her—and what I did know I didn't like—but damn, I was impressed.

"I was watching *you*, which one could deduce means I saw you with your children. But my intent was to—"

"Follow me. Right, I know. To recon. But what that really means is, you wanted to make sure I was keeping on the straight and narrow. You didn't trust I wasn't up to my old tricks."

Well, for someone who sucked at personal safety, she wasn't stupid.

"Yeah, that was part of why," I answered.

There was no point in lying to her, and as a general rule, I didn't lie. Certainly not to save the feelings of an attempted murderer.

"And did I pass?"

"I don't know, did you?"

Eva stepped closer, and the sweet, fruity scent of her perfume wafted across the distance. *Not at all what I thought she'd smell like.*

"You're the one that was watching me."

"I watched you for four days, Eva. I don't know what the fuck you've gotten yourself into down here. I know that Tex bailed you out of some serious shit. I know that Bubba and Zoey both felt sorry for you and didn't press charges. I know you have a criminal record and you tried to kill a man I respect. So, while I might not have seen you do anything illegal in the past four days, doesn't mean you've passed jack shit."

Eva's wounded eyes slowly closed and I felt like a complete fucking prick.

Fucking hell.

"Eva—"

"I did do all that." Her eyes snapped open and her lips flattened and twisted. "I did it. And I didn't ask Mark and Zoey to pardon me. I didn't ask them to forgive me because what I did was unforgivable. I didn't ask Tex for help, but I will be grateful until my last breath on this earth. You can stand there and judge me, think I'm a low-life, look down on me, hate me, but you know what? I don't fucking care. I understand what I did is...indefensible."

"I know, because every day I have to live with it. I know what I did. From the moment I wake up until the moment I fall asleep, I remember. I'll never forget the horror on their faces when I left them. The confusion in Zoey's eyes. The anger on Mark's face."

"But you know what else I can't forget? My son begging me to help him. My six-year-old telling me that the man who was supposed to love him, the only man he'd ever known as his daddy, had burned him. I listened helplessly as my baby cried in pain. So I will not apologize for what I did. You can take your trust, your judgment, your assessment of me, and shove them all straight up your ass. The only thing you need to know about me is, I would do it

again if it meant saving my children. I would sink a knife in your back if it meant my boys would be safe."

Rage and fury built into a wild inferno.

"That motherfucker did what?" Eva jumped at my outburst, some of the bravado waning, as her gaze roamed my face. Confusion marred her features. "Repeat that, Eva. What did Jay Dawkins do to Liam?"

"He put his cigarette out on his arm while I was on the phone with him. He hurt Liam so I would hear and it would tear me apart. He used my son to get me to agree to do the job. I wasn't gonna do it. I had a plan, I was speaking to the police, but then he started burning my son, and I had no choice. No time. I needed that money so I could pay Jay and he'd give me back my kids."

I had no idea what Tex had done to the bastard, but I hoped he hadn't had him killed.

I wanted that honor.

"Fuck," I snarled, and ran my hands through my hair.

Tex had left that out of the report and I knew exactly why.

Too close to home.

"Let's start over," I suggested.

"Why? It's not like it's gonna make a damn bit of difference. Tex is going to call back, tell us that he overreacted, and you'll be on your way."

Tex didn't overreact—not ever.

Shit.

"Before he calls back, let's sit and talk."

"About what?"

"About what's been goin' on since you moved here."

"I haven't done anything wrong. I work and come home. I talk to nobody. I pick up and drop off my kids at daycare and that's it."

"Eva, please." I tried to gentle my tone as much as I could, but with all the hate that had taken root I didn't think I accomplished it.

Eva sighed and made her way to an armchair facing the couch with a coffee table between them. She wanted distance between us and I didn't blame her. I'd been a dick, but then that was me. It was no secret within my team that I was the asshole.

I waited until she was seated before I sat on the couch and continued. "That's not exactly true. I saw you talking to the woman who

dropped her wallet. And yesterday, you went to an elderly lady's house to deliver groceries."

"Mrs. Wyman? She just had knee surgery and can't get to the store. Her son comes over to take care of her but he works. She's a kind woman. Since I work at the grocery store, I offered to make deliveries."

Why did I have the feeling that Eva would've offered even if she hadn't worked at the store?

"So, you do talk to people—"

"I thought you were talking about..." Eva trailed off and I could imagine what she thought I was talking about, since I'd pretty much accused her of doing something illegal.

"This is not an interrogation." She didn't look convinced, and instead of playing twenty questions I figured I'd just lay it out. "I'm trying to find out if the threat is recent or if it followed you here. In order for me to do that, I need to know who you've come in contact with. Even the woman in the parking lot, she could've been planted there to talk to you. Do you deliver groceries to anyone else? Has anyone been overly friendly? Has anyone asked you out on a date? A mom or dad asked the boys over? I need to know everything."

"No one's asked me out." Her cheeks dotted pink and something that felt like relief swept over me. "Not that I'd say yes, if anyone did. I think it's safe to say, I will be alone for the rest of my life. And don't you want to know if anyone has been mad at me or something like that?"

"Right now I'm more interested in anyone who's been over-the-top nice. But has anyone threatened you? Been mean or pissed?"

"No," she sighed. "No one's been mad at me. And no one's been overly nice, either. Mrs. Wyman is grateful. She tries to give me money but I won't take it, so she bakes us cookies sometimes. I met her son while he was shopping with her before her surgery. He was pleasant but not overly so, and I saw him once at the house, but he paid no attention to me. The woman in the parking lot with the wallet, that was the first time anything like that ever happened. The daycare people are friendly, but they don't pay special attention to me or the boys."

I leaned back, warring with myself, wishing that there'd been something I could focus on but pleased no one had fucked with her or her boys since she'd moved.

"Anyone strange wandering outside the house? Following you?"

Her brow went up and her lips curved up into a smile.

Which was unfortunate, because she had a beautiful smile.

"You mean any other strange men besides you? I don't think so. Though you did point out I tend to walk around with my head down minding my own business."

"You have to stop doing that." Eva's smile faded and I wanted to kick my own ass for being so abrupt. "What I mean to say is, it's dangerous. You need to keep your head up and your eyes scanning. You need to be aware of who is around and what they are doing."

She nodded but didn't commit.

Fucking hell, the thought of her wandering around not paying attention twisted my gut.

"Any phone calls? Hang ups?"

"No. Only Tex, the daycare, and my work has my cell number."

"No girlfriends or—"

"I don't have friends."

No inflection. No sadness. Matter-of-fact.

She had no friends.

Jesus Christ.

I swallowed down my anger and tried to think of what else I should ask.

"Why do you look mad?"

Hell, she was seriously asking me that.

"Tex wants me to bring you and your boys back with me to Maryland," I told her instead of answering.

"I told him no way!"

"If there's a threat, I can protect you better up there. My team can —"

"I'm *not* uprooting my boys. They just got settled. No freaking way, Max, they've been through enough. And Tex doesn't even know if we're in danger."

Why did my chest catch fire when the woman turned fierce protector?

And why, when she squared up—shoulders back, chin stubbornly jutted up, and eyes narrowed—did the crotch of my jeans get tight?

I didn't like this woman. She couldn't be trusted—most women couldn't be. My teammates had hit the jackpot with their women,

but I knew that shit was rare. Women were after one thing and they used and schemed to get it.

Besides, Eva admitted she'd sink a knife into my back if I made the wrong move.

And I believed her.

CHAPTER 3

Tex needed to hurry up and call me back. Max had to leave.

His presence took up all the space in my small living room. He sucked all the oxygen out of the room and made it hard to breathe. The man was larger than life, and the way he stared at me made me nervous.

He didn't like me, that much was obvious. Not that I could blame him, I'd done some horrible things in the past, things I was trying to atone for, but I knew I'd never achieve salvation. There was no way to erase the black marks on my soul. Even knowing that, I didn't regret saving my boys. But I did regret having to hurt two innocent people in the process. I'd never forgive myself for that.

Zoey and Mark.

Thank God, they were alive.

But then, I figured they had a better chance than most. Mark Wright was a Navy SEAL.

Max's cell rang and I held my breath. *Please, let it be Tex.*

"Tex," Max greeted, and relief washed over me.

"Thank God," I mumbled, and Max cut his icy blue eyes to me.

Sweet Jesus, his stare was lethal.

Even as he listened intently to Tex, his gaze never left mine—alert, assessing. Full of condemnation.

In his mind, he'd already tried me, convicted me, and there'd be no changing the guilty verdict. Not that I cared, but I still felt the wrath of his censure.

"Right," Max spoke. "We already went through all of that. She's got nothing useful."

Of course I don't, because I'm useless.

"Sure." Max pulled the phone away from his ear, tapped the screen then continued. "You're on speaker."

"Eva?" Tex's voice boomed.

"Yeah."

"I want you to go up to Maryland with Max. His team has a safe-house—"

"No, Tex. The boys finally have stability—a routine. You know that. I can't just disrupt that. No one has been bothering me here."

"I get it. Why don't you come up to my place and stay with me and Melody?" he volleyed.

"Melody?"

"My wife."

"I didn't know you were married." Though the thought made me smile. Tex was a good man, very kind and giving. "I like that for you."

"Listen," he sighed. "I wouldn't be telling you to move your boys unless this was serious. I have two kids of my own. I know how important stability is." *Tex is a dad? Wow. That kind of explains some of why he helped my kids.* "Trust me."

His last two words hung in the air—*trust me*—I didn't trust anyone.

I'd blindly trusted two men in my life, both had fucked me over. One royally. The other had screwed me over in a way that I'd never forget—my boys would never forget.

"Tex, I hate to sound like a broken record, but—"

"There's a hit out on you, Eva."

Oh, fuck.

It was questionable which one of us, Max or me, tensed more. It looked like every muscle in his body had frozen, but every cell in mine burned.

"Wh-what?" I stammered.

"Who put out the hit?" Max inquired angrily.

"I'm still working on finding who put out the contract. The payout is low so there weren't that many bites. But someone finally put in a bid, it was accepted this morning. You have a hitman-for-hire now hunting Eva."

"Um... are you sure? You could be wrong, right?"

Dear God, I sounded like an idiot but my mind was buzzing. A hitman?

"Wish I were, Eva, but I'm not wrong."

"I haven't done anything," I blurted out. "I swear it."

Max's glacial stare was still watchful, but now there was a sliver of pity.

God. I didn't want his pity. I didn't want anyone's. I just wanted to be left alone me and my boys.

"The boys!"

"The contract is for one hit—you," Tex gently told me.

"But just like before, they'll use my boys, they'll hurt—"

"Calm down, Eva," Max snapped.

"Don't you tell me to calm down. My boys are in danger—again. Because of me."

I was up for the worst mother of the year. Fuck that, worst mother in history. Guilt flowed through my body and fear pounded in my chest.

Not my boys—not again. They'd been through enough because of me.

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you or them," Max vowed. "Tex, how much time do you think we have?"

"You know I can't tell you that. I tracked the IP to Idaho, but that means nothing. Though with the low payout, I doubt we're dealing with a professional."

Low payout, oh my God. I'm not even worth the cost of a professional.

"Keep digging and call us back," Max told Tex.

"Stay safe."

Tex disconnected and Max set his phone down and studied me. Not that he hadn't been focusing on me through the conversation, but now he seemed to be working something out in his mind.

"You're gonna take a vacation."

"What?"

"That's how we're gonna play this with the boys."

My boys!

"I need to go get them from daycare—"

"We will. But first, we need to have a plan."

"I can't go on vacation. My job."

My eyes drifted closed, I sounded like a nitwit, I knew it. But I'd just gotten my life back on track. Liam and Elijah were finally start-

ing to trust me again, they were relaxed, the nightmares were subsiding—now this.

On the run once more.

“Call your boss and tell her that one of the boys is sick. You’ll need to come up with something that will keep you out of work awhile. Tonsillitis. Chicken pox.”

Do kids even get chicken pox these days?

“Great. Back to lying,” I huffed. “Deceiving the people around me who trust me. Of course. That’s what I do, right? What I’m good at. Lying and running. Putting my kids in danger. Making stupid decisions.”

“Eva, you can stand here feeling sorry for yourself or you can help come up with a way to introduce me to your kids in a way that won’t hurt them when this is over and I disappear. I’m guessing you don’t want to tell them the truth, which means we need a plan. Lying to your boss is necessary if you want to keep the job. Or you can call her and quit. That choice is yours.”

Pain sliced like a thousand tiny blades. Was that what I was doing, feeling sorry for myself? Being the selfish bitch I’ve always been?

I just wanted to be a good person. My whole life had been a series of uncontrollable events. I left home at fifteen thinking I was saving myself and instead I found how naïve I really was. When I was free of that nightmare, I learned how one wrong choice could snowball until you were so buried you couldn’t dig your way out.

Nothing had ever been in my control.

“I’d prefer to quit,” I told Max.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I’ll call my boss and tell her I have an emergency and I need a week off. She’ll either approve the time or I’ll quit. I’m not lying and saying my kid’s sick. Lulu has been kind to me. She knows I’m a single mom and she’s worked my schedule around daycare. I’m not repaying that with lies. After what happened... never mind, it doesn’t matter. But I’m telling Lulu as much of the truth as I can. I have an emergency and I need time off.”

Max’s brow pinched and cold eyes took me in.

“Whatever you feel you need to do. What about your boys?”

“I don’t want them to see you.”

“Impossible. I need to be close.”

"They've—"

"Tonight I'll stay in my car, out front. I'll be able to keep an eye on you and they won't see me. You can tell them you're going on vacation. Tomorrow we leave, I'll follow you, and when we stop for the night, I'll get the room next to yours. But then we need to find a way to introduce me to them."

My frustration mounted. I'd have to lie to my kids again. Introduce Liam to another man, and have my son wonder if I'd brought another asshole criminal into our lives. If he'd be hurt again.

"And who should I say you are?"

"Fuck, Eva. I don't know. Tell them I'm your friend. I get it, you're trying to atone and make up for the past to your kids. But you don't have a choice. Either you tell your boys you're going on vacation and I'm a friend that you happened to run into and you let me into their lives, or you make my job harder running the risk of a fucking hitman taking you out. Then what? Where do your kids go then? Who will protect them if you're dead?"

"I never have a fucking choice," I whispered as my insides twisted. "Where are we going on vacation?"

Max picked up his phone. "What do Liam and Elijah like?"

"I don't get it."

"Do they like the beach? Amusement parks? Airplanes?"

"Liam is obsessed with trains, so Elijah is, too. But I still don't understand why you're asking."

"You don't want to lie to them but you cannot tell them the truth. So you *are* going on vacation, just with a bodyguard."

Max started tapping on his phone and tears pricked my eyes.

"Th-thank you," I sputtered.

"You're welcome. There's a museum in Tifton, Georgia. It looks like if we stay on 75 north, we'll run into others. We'll stay on the move, you and the boys will be safe, and Tex and my team can track down who put out the contract."

"And the hitman?"

"That's what I'm for—to protect you. But hopefully, he'll never get close. Like Tex said, the payout is low, a professional would pass. Which means we're dealing with an idiot with no formal training."

"Right."

"I can and will keep you safe," Max told me. "Tex likes you, he wouldn't have sent me if he didn't trust I was good at my job."

"Tex doesn't like me. I tried to kill his friend and Zoey. Tex feels sorry for me, but more than that, he wanted to save my boys. Which was confusing why he'd care, but now that I know he's a husband and father, it makes more sense."

"Tex would've done whatever he needed to do to help Liam and Elijah—father or not—that's just Tex."

I'd have to take Max's word for it, I didn't know Tex the way he did. The man was a mystery to me. My guardian angel—via cell phone.

"Thanks again for—"

"Don't mention it. My job is to keep you safe. But to do that, I need your cooperation. If stopping at some museums assuages some of your guilt and makes you compliant, then it's worth it. But I need you to understand, in the future we won't have time for compromise. When I tell you something, you need to follow directions. And for the love of Christ, pay attention to what's going on around you. Head up. Focused. Alert. I'll be there, but there are three of you and one of me. We have to work together to keep the boys safe."

Work together to keep the boys safe... the concept was foreign to me.

Liam didn't remember his father—the guy had taken off before he was born. But Liam and Elijah both remembered Jay. And my ex-husband certainly never did anything to keep them safe.

CHAPTER 4

“Seriously, brother, you slept in the car?” Brooks chuckled.

I hadn’t slept. I’d sat up all damn night and watched Eva’s house, where she and her boys *slept*. I’d done hourly patrols around the property making sure they were secure. And when I wasn’t doing that, I’d been thinking. Now we were driving up 75, me in my SUV following Eva’s car, her boys totally unaware of my presence.

“We’re headed to Tifton, Georgia,” I said instead of confirming what I’d just explained to him. “I need you to find us a hotel. Two rooms with an adjoining door.”

“Copy that.”

“And tonight when we get to the hotel, we’ll go over our route. I’m thinking of staying on 75. There are about five more museums we can hit.”

“Why the hell aren’t you just bringing her up here? Zane secured a safehouse.”

Now that was the million dollar question, the one I’d pondered for hours last night.

Because she’s trying her best to be a good mother.

A safehouse was the easiest and smartest choice, but I couldn’t force her to do it. I mean, physically I could, but the raw determination I saw when she told me she wasn’t going to lie to her boss or her boys, that hit me square in the gut. I’d expected the lies to roll off her tongue easily. I’d expected her to not care that she was being dishonest with her boss—people call out sick when they’re really not all of the time. But Eva had been adamant she wouldn’t do it.

"Because she has two boys. And I'm sure you've read the report from Tex so you know what they've been through. Eva doesn't want them scared again. This way, the kids get a vacation, and they'll have no clue they're really on the run."

"It's unlike you to care what the client thinks."

I remained silent because there was nothing to say. Brooks was correct. In the past, I'd never allowed a client to dictate how I was going to protect them. It was my way, period.

"Fine," Brooks sighed. "You've gone quiet, I know what that means. I'll look into hotels and get back to you."

"Thanks."

I disconnected the SUV's Bluetooth and music filled the cab.

But I wasn't paying attention to what was playing on the radio. All of my attention was on the car in front of me. I could see both Liam and Elijah sitting in the back seat. Watching Eva buckle little Elijah into his booster seat hadn't been the first time I'd witnessed her with her son, but it had been the first time I'd been close enough to see the boy smile at his mom.

Both kids had looked happy and were letting Eva know it. I couldn't make out the words, but Liam's mouth had been moving a mile a minute.

This was the right decision. I still didn't like what Eva had done to Bubba and Zoey, but her children shouldn't suffer for her crimes. They'd been victims, too.

My thoughts drifted to when I was Liam's age. That was right about the time I'd realized the hell I was living in wasn't normal. I understood what was going on around me.

I'd realized love meant pain.

No child should have to endure the horrors Liam and Elijah had.

The music cut off and ringing filled the SUV, pulling me from my morose memories.

"Tex," I answered. "Any news?"

"Yeah. The guy's a total tool. I easily tracked him. Chris Peters. He's from California, not Idaho. He's got some arrests, nothing major. And there's nothing in his past that makes him qualified to carry out a hit. Which is troubling."

Troubling didn't begin to cover it for a variety of reasons. Chris Peters accepted a contract kill either because he was in desperate need of twenty-K or he had a taste to carry out a murder.

"How'd someone get a lock on Eva?"

When Tex didn't want someone to be found, they weren't. It was that simple. Yet, someone knew where Eva and the boys were.

"Because I fucked up."

"Come again?"

"I thought because Jay Dawkins was taken care of, so was the danger. She didn't want to change the boys' names, she was adamant. It's not hard to track an Eva, Liam, and Elijah. She also wanted to be settled some place new so Elijah would be ready to start school on time. I shouldn't have let her talk me into it. I should've given them all new names and they should've been kept in a safehouse longer. But—"

"You don't have to explain it to me, Tex. I get it."

And boy did I. They were on a vacation instead of safely tucked away because Eva had talked *me* into it.

Shit.

"Is there any way she's playing you?" I asked.

"No. Eva wants those boys safe. But she allows her guilt to rule her emotions. She didn't want to explain to Liam and Elijah why they had new names, why her name was changed. She just wanted them to have a normal life. She's refused every bit of help I've offered since being in Florida. That little house she lives in, she pays for. She's tried to pay me back for the car I bought her. Five thousand dollars. She doesn't have that kind of money, not working in a grocery store supporting two kids on her own, but she's offered. Fuck, Max, five grand is nothing to me, but that's five months' worth of rent for her. Eva fucked up, she knows it, and I would've never helped her after what she did if I didn't know she had no other options."

"What aren't you telling me?"

"A lot."

Tex's honesty shocked the shit out of me. I continued to scan the road in front of me. Eva and the boys were one car length up ahead, cruising along.

"I can't protect her if you're keeping shit from me."

"You don't need to know what I'm not sharing for you to keep her safe."

"You're wrong. I need to know everything."

"Then ask her. I've given you what you need to know, what's important to the case. If you want to know more about her, ask her. She had no problem sharing everything with me. Spilled her guts with very little prompting. I think once you get her talking, you'll find you have a lot in common with her."

That's what I was afraid of.

"Did she tell you that motherfucker burned Liam?"

"Yep. He has six burn marks on his arm."

I couldn't think of that while driving. My anger was always too close to the surface, the past always simmering, making itself known.

"What happened to Jay?"

"He's not an issue," Tex replied curtly.

"That's not what I asked," I sighed.

"It's the only answer you're gonna get."

"Why are you being so sketchy? You deal with facts and solutions. Vague and elusive isn't your normal MO."

"I'm always elusive." Tex muttered a few curse words before he explained, "Jay is not a threat, mainly because he's not breathing. His operation was bullshit and easy to dismantle. The only person he was truly a threat to was Eva and those kids. He used the boys to control her. She was his ace, when he lost her, he was nothing. That's why he took the boys from her. He knew she'd do anything to get them back. Jay set up the meeting with Bubba's brother. Did you know she'd already contacted the police? Eva was prepared to work with them, but then Jay hurt Liam and Eva took matters into her own hands."

Tex wasn't telling me anything that I didn't already know from reading his report. Though I was pleased to know he had Jay taken out—it would save me the trouble of hunting down the asshole myself. Though I have to admit, it would have been satisfying.

Nothing that Tex had said eased the knot in my stomach. We needed more intel on who hired Chris Peters to kill Eva.

"Where are you tracking down Peters?"

"I have a team in place. They moved in when you and Eva left her house this morning."

"A team? Jesus. Are they *in* her house waiting?"

"Yes, three men are in her house, one is waiting at the airport. Peters took a flight to Florida this morning. I want to see what he does,

who he contacts, and lastly if he goes directly to her house or if it takes him a while to find her."

"Christ, Tex, that's her home. Her kids live there. She'd go through the fucking roof if she knew a team was in there."

"Then don't tell her. And you know they wouldn't be in there unless that's where I need them to be. All of this should be over in a few days, maybe less."

Thank God for that.

"Keep me informed. Brooks is lining up our hotel and I'll have the rest of our trip plotted out by this evening."

"Copy that."

Tex was gone, the music was back on, and my mind was racing. Christ, Tex and his secrets. Eva and her unwillingness to cooperate. Between the two of them, they were making this mission damn harder than it should've been. But the fuck of it was, I'd given in to Eva. She'd come up with the cover story, the one we were going to use when I just *happen* to see them at the museum. The truth would've been easier, however her need to keep the danger she was in a secret was tangible. I felt the desperation rolling off of her.

Damn, but the woman was trying her best to give her boys normal after all they'd been through. I couldn't tell her no. Just like I couldn't stop wondering what it would've been like if my mother, after all the ways she'd fucked up, had tried to make it right. If it would've made a difference. Would the outcome of my childhood been different? Would I have forgiven her?

There was no sense in going down that road. My mother hadn't changed, she didn't protect me, she forever altered my life and made me into the man I was.

* * *

"HEY, MAX!"

I turned and feigned surprise when Eva called my name from across the museum parking lot.

"Eva," I greeted, mostly annoyed we were playing this charade.

"Boys. This is my friend from work, Max Brown. Max, these are my boys, Liam and Elijah."

Eva gently placed her hand on each of the boys' shoulders when she mock-introduced them to me.

"Elijah." I tipped my head to the younger of the two, then slid my gaze to Liam.

I hid my flinch when I looked at Eva's older son.

Guarded. Untrusting. Angry.

For a moment, I wondered if that was what I'd looked like at his age. The time of my awakening, when I coldly discovered what kind of people I lived with. When I learned how cruel life really was.

The kid couldn't hide it. Not only did it break my heart, it pissed me right the fuck off.

"Liam. Nice to meet you."

He didn't answer, he just moved closer to Eva. A wholly protective maneuver.

Jesus Almighty — this kid!

CHAPTER 5

"If you work with my mom, why are you all the way here?" Liam asked suspiciously.

"Maybe he likes trains, too," I cut in.

"Do you?" Liam looked up at Max.

"Trains are okay." Max shrugged. "But that's not why I came here."

What was Max doing? He said he wouldn't tell the boys the truth. Liam shuffled his way closer to me, which was damn close, and his little body went on alert.

Fucking Max Brown was scaring my son.

"Then wh-why are you here?"

Max's glittery cold eyes came to mine—pure ice. Yet the burning fire was present. He was angry at something. *Oh, well, fuck him, I'm angry, too.*

"There's a veteran exhibit I came to see."

"What's that?" Liam asked.

"A veteran is someone who served in the military," Max quickly explained. "Here at the museum they don't only have trains, they also have a room with a military display."

"Oh."

"Maybe when you're done looking at the trains, you could have your mom take you in to see it. I've heard there's a cool motorcycle in there."

Liam glanced up at me, his question clear, so I answered. "If you'd like to see it, we'll go in."

My son nodded and Max just stared at him.

What the hell is that about?

"Eli, would you like to see a motorcycle?" I asked.

"Yeah."

My baby boy; shy and quiet. That had always been Eli. At four, he often deferred to his brother and I wondered if that was a byproduct of the trauma he'd endured, or if Eli simply had a case of big-brother hero worship. Liam had always been the protector, especially in my absence.

"All right. Maybe I'll see you in there."

Now, that had been part of the plan, Max agreed not to push the boys into spending time with him. We'd introduce them and wait for the boys to get comfortable. I knew Max wasn't going to leave to go inside. He'd said he was going to watch us, but do it at a distance so the boys—mainly Liam—couldn't see him.

"It was great seeing you, Max," I lied.

It wasn't great seeing the man, he was the reminder that someone was trying to kill me. An invisible threat that had me lying once again.

God, when does it end? When can I just be normal?

"You, too, Eva. Nice to meet both of you."

Max started to walk away—his long legs ate up the distance—and as I watched him leave, I wondered where he was going. The two-and-a-half hour drive had given me the opportunity to think about what was happening. Not that I didn't think about it last night as I lay in bed awake, but driving away from my home, it hit me hard.

Someone out there was hunting me, which meant someone wanted me dead. My first guess at who that someone could be was Jay. He was the most obvious choice, but Tex had told me Jay would never be an issue again—he'd promised. And for some reason, I trusted the mysterious man. I didn't think Tex made promises unless he knew without a doubt he could keep them.

So if it wasn't Jay, then who the hell had I made so angry they wanted me dead?

And knowing that there was someone gunning for me terrified me. I didn't want Max to disappear into the crowd. I wanted him next to me. He was huge—tall, broad, muscular, with the coldest eyes I'd ever seen. Someone would have to have a death wish to cross him.

Fire and ice.

"What do you want to see first?" I asked Liam.

"Is Max nice?"

Sweet Jesus, that question coming from Liam hurt. I knew what my son was asking and it wasn't whether or not Max was nice, he wanted to know if Max was a bad guy who might hurt him. Liam was inquiring about Max's character. I did that. I made my son afraid of men—of people. I brought Jay into his life and the man he'd once considered a father had turned on him.

"As far as I know. He seemed nice all of the times I've spoken with him."

That was the best answer I could give, which happened to be the truth. Anything beyond that, I didn't know, because I didn't really know Max.

"I want to see the motorcycle," Liam told me.

"Okay. Let's go check it out."

I scanned the area, looking for Max, but he'd blended into the background. There weren't hordes of people around but enough small groups gathered that I couldn't find him. Without warning, my heart started pounding in my chest.

What if we were followed? What if someone was pointing a gun at me right now?

"Mommy?"

"Yeah?"

"Who are you looking for?"

Shit, Liam was watching me, he always was. Since everything happened, he'd seemed unnaturally aware of what was going on around him. Max would likely be happy, considering he'd already told me I pretty much sucked at paying attention.

"No one, sweetheart. I'm just looking for the entrance." The lie casually rolled off my tongue and I silently cursed.

"This way."

Liam pulled me in the direction he wanted to go. Little Eli, happy to follow his brother anywhere, held my hand and trotted along.

For months, I'd been without my boys. Months I'd missed them until my body physically ached from the loss. I cried for them. I raged at their absence. At times, I could swear I felt their pleas stabbing me in the heart.

"Eva?" Max's voice boomed, pulling me back into the present.

He was frowning at me as if he knew I hadn't been paying attention. He was correct of course, since we were standing inside of an exhibit hall and I had no recollection of how I'd gotten there.

You have to do better than this if you want to stay alive.

"Hey. Liam wanted to see that motorcycle you told him about." I tried to interject as much enthusiasm into my voice as I could.

"It's right over there." Max pointed across the room to a green motorcycle on display. "Come on. I was just about to go over there. We can all go together."

Oh, boy, Max doesn't sound happy.

It didn't take us long to come to a stop in front of a Harley painted OD green with a big white Army star stenciled on the tank.

Max read aloud the plaque near the bike explaining that the Harley had been donated by a local Army veteran who'd served in Iraq. The bike that proudly displayed the 121st Infantry Regiment was meant to honor nine soldiers the vet had fought alongside who'd died in action. As Max continued to read, something funny happened to his voice—rougher, deeper, full of emotion.

"What does POW mean?" Liam asked.

"Prisoner of war. That means that someone was captured and held by the enemy until his or her friends could come rescue them," Max answered.

Liam's body went solid and he glanced over his shoulder at me. Shit, I *knew* what he was thinking.

"You know a lot about this," Liam mumbled.

"I was in the Navy."

That's right, Tex did say Max was in the Navy. A SEAL.

"You were?" That announcement piqued Liam's interest.

"I sure was. I joined when I was eighteen and served twelve years."

"So you're a veteran, too?"

"Yep."

Eli and I stood slightly to the side during Max and Liam's exchange, and I watched Liam visibly relax after he heard Max had been in the military. My son assumed that made Max a good guy.

"Which uniform did you wear?" Liam pointed to a group of mannequins wearing different uniforms.

Max moved to the exhibit, Liam hot on his heels ready to soak up any information Max imparted.

"This one." Max motioned to the typical white sailor uniform. "We called it our crackerjacks. But it's really the enlisted dress uniform. This one is white, but it also comes in a dark navy blue. The blues are so dark it looks black."

"What did you do in the Navy?"

Max blinked before he quickly covered his discomfort.

Interesting.

"I was an intelligence specialist. That's just a fancy way of saying I read reports, then I wrote reports about what I read."

Intelligence specialist? I thought he was a SEAL.

Liam nodded his head up and down like he understood what Max was talking about, even though it was very likely Liam had no clue.

We spent the next twenty minutes wandering around the room. Liam asked a thousand questions, Max patiently answered, and Eli and I just followed.

When Liam ran out of questions, he suggested we go outside to look at the trains. My son did this under the guise of his little brother wanting to see them. Which was interesting, because if I didn't know any better, I'd think that Liam was trying to act older than he was in front of Max.

During the tour, Liam stood a little taller, got closer to Max, and listened to every word he said with clear interest.

An hour later, I was starving and I'd learned more about trains, thanks to Max, than I ever wanted to know. I was also paranoid. The longer we were out in the open, the more worried I became.

"Stop worrying. Nothing's going to hurt you," Max whispered, standing close. "You and the boys are safe."

Safe?

I didn't think we'd ever truly be safe. Not that we'd ever been.

I nodded instead of speaking and Max sighed like he was annoyed at my noncommittal gesture.

"I'm serious, Eva. I won't let anyone hurt any of you."

"Thank you."

Max stepped away from me just as Liam turned to look at us.

"I'm hungry," Liam announced.

"Me, too," Eli agreed.

"Then let's go get some lunch."

I turned to invite Max but my son beat me to it.

"Max, would you like to come?"

"Where are you going?" Max asked teasingly.

Liam smiled, picking up on Max's tone. "Anywhere that has burgers. Right, Mom?"

"Right."

"Sounds good to me," Max approved.

"Eva?"

I heard Max call my name but I couldn't respond. I was too busy basking in the warmth of my kid's smile. A smile Max had put there. He was being kind to my boys. No, that wasn't right, Max was going out of his way to be thoughtful and gentle.

Why does that realization make my eyes sting and my nose tingle?

"I'm ready," I muttered and cleared my throat. "Max, if you know a place, we'll follow you."

"I know a place."

Of course he did. Max seemed to know everything.

CHAPTER 6

Halfway through lunch, my phone vibrated with a text from Brooks giving me the name and address of the hotel he'd booked for us and our room numbers.

Eva and I hadn't discussed how we were going to play this, but I hoped like hell she'd follow along.

"Are you guys staying in the area tonight?" I asked Eva and waited for her to look away from helping Elijah with his burger.

Her gaze met mine and I raised a brow in hopes she'd follow along.

"Yeah. What about you?"

Good girl.

"Yep, at the Tifton Suites."

"Really? That's where we're staying."

Perfect.

"We are? We're staying?" Liam asked hopefully.

I didn't miss the pain that crossed Eva's features.

"I told you we were going on vacation. An adventure, remember?" she gently reminded her son.

The soft tone Eva used when she spoke to her boys was like a kick in the gut. Every time I heard it, it was sweet agony. It was a tenor my mother had never used while speaking to me, nor had my aunt when I went to live with her and my uncle. As a matter of fact, no woman in my life had ever spoken to me with so much care and concern. Not even Pam, and she'd said she loved me.

"We've never had a vacation," Liam continued, and deep lines appeared on Eva's forehead.

"I know, honey. From now on, we'll try to have one cool adventure a year."

Fucking hell. The sadness in her voice was unmistakable, but so was the determination. Eva wanted to give her boys a better life. And for some unknown, crazy reason, I wished I could help her do that.

"Eli, honey, would you like another drink?" Eva asked, drawing my attention to the younger boy.

He was painfully shy and barely spoke. If he wanted or needed something, he tapped Eva and gestured. The times he did speak were quiet and meek.

The kid just turned four so I had no idea if that was normal or not. But I didn't think it was. I'd seen plenty of little kids in passing that were loud and boisterous.

The boy shook his head in the negative and I racked my brain for something to talk to him about.

"Did you like the trains, Elijah?"

He just stared at me with apprehension and fear. It was the fear that gutted me.

"Eli, Max asked you a question," Eva prompted.

"Yeah," Elijah muttered.

Damn. What now?

"What was your favorite part?" Eva smoothly interjected and I shot her a grateful smile.

She didn't return the gesture, but her lips did curve up ever so slightly.

I bet she's prettier when the worry isn't weighing her down.

"I liked the room with the toy trains the best. The one with the bridges," Elijah quietly responded.

"Yeah? I liked that one, too," I told him. "Do you remember how many cars were on the track?"

Elijah shook his head and Liam blurted out the answer, "There were five."

"There's another museum right up the road. Would you like to go look around?" I asked.

"Are you going there?" Liam inquired.

"Yep."

"Mommy, can we go, too?"

Eva glanced at me, her head tilted to the side, probably trying to figure out what I was up to.

Good luck with that, sweetheart. I didn't even understand what I was doing. Though in my mind, I did make the excuse that it was just past lunch and there was plenty of time before we went back to the hotel for her boys to get comfortable around me.

"Sure, honey, if you want to." Then Eva looked to Elijah. "Would that be okay with you?"

Elijah nodded, then cuddled into his mother's side. Eva's arm automatically went around the boy and she kissed the top of his head.

"I'm just gonna take the boys to the bathroom to clean up, then we'll be ready to leave."

Eva and the kids stood and made their way across the restaurant. Thankfully, the bathrooms were within eyesight because I wasn't sure how I'd explain to Liam if he saw me waiting outside the door. And the kid would notice. He watched everything, his eyes always busy, taking in his surroundings.

I pulled out my phone, sent a quick text back to Brooks, then tapped one out to Tex.

I shouldn't have been surprised when my phone vibrated with an incoming call.

"I only have a minute," I told Tex.

"We have a problem."

Of course we do.

"What kind of problem?" I asked, keeping my eyes on the door Eva and the boys had disappeared behind.

"The kind that goes *boom*."

"Come again?"

"My team got to Eva's place. Shit, they didn't even have to do a sweep—they smelled the gas as soon as they entered. The place was rigged. If she'd gone in..."

Tex didn't need to finish his explanation, I knew what would've happened if Eva had gone into her house and tripped the detonator.

"Where's Chris Peters?"

"In the air, on a flight to Florida."

"Shit. What's your take on this? Two people hired to take her out, or did Peters contract out the work?"

"My gut says two. But I cannot find a second hit."

Instinct was screaming at me to snatch the trio and head to Maryland immediately. But I knew Eva would fight me, and now that the boys were present, it would be even more difficult to talk to her.

"Your gut's never wrong so we'll assume there's more than one person in play. I was going to take Eva and the kids to another museum but now I don't want them out in the open."

"You need to check her car."

"I've been watching her for five days. Last night, I spent the night in front of her house. No one's been near her car."

"Right, in the last five days. That doesn't mean jack shit. I've been tracking this for over a month."

"A month?" I grunted. "Why the hell—"

"You don't think I would've sent a team down earlier if I could've connected the dots? I had disjointed chatter. A hit was put out to bid on a woman in Florida. Nothing else. So I waited, then more details came to light. Jacksonville area. Then finally a woman with two kids. Things were becoming clearer. I called you in as soon as the woman in question was said to be a pilot. I'm going back now to see if I missed a second request."

"Where the fuck do you find this shit?" I huffed.

"You don't wanna know."

"What, do you sit around scouring the dark web all night?"

"Something like that. Just check her damn car."

Christ, he did. Tex spent his time looking for people he could save.

"Tex—"

"Don't try to psychoanalyze me, Max. You of all people understand the type of men and women who lurk in the shadows. They prey on the weak. Hunt and terrorize. I may not be active duty anymore, but I'm still a SEAL."

"Damn right you are," I agreed. "Listen, Eva's coming back to the table with the boys. I've gotta go. I'll check her car and call you back."

"Copy that."

Liam approached with a smile, Elijah with a blank stare, and Eva with a slight upturn of her puffy, pink lips—wait, where the hell did that come from? Puffy pink lips? Why in the actual fuck was I paying attention to her mouth?

"Hey," she greeted. "You ready to go?"

"Let me take care of the check." I stood and tagged the bill off the table. "I'll be right back."

My conversation with Tex replayed in my mind as I headed outside to check Eva's car. Hunt and terrorize was a good way to describe what someone was doing to Eva. Only, she didn't know the extent of it. Had she gone home this afternoon, she'd be dead, and possibly her boys, too.

Instinct told me something was wrong—I'd been too complacent, allowing Eva to control the situation. The barb of a sharp quill I'd long ago stopped ignoring pricked my gut. I slowed my pace and glanced around the parking lot, and out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of a baseball cap before it dipped behind a car.

Fuck. Eva was in the restaurant unprotected.

Just as I turned to head back inside, a blast rocked the parking lot.

Heat kissed my back right before the concussion rippled, knocking me forward. Pain ricocheted through me, my palms burned with road rash, the side of my face slid on the pavement. Finally, when my body stopped skidding on the asphalt, I was up and running with the singular focus of getting to Eva and the boys.

Inside the restaurant was pandemonium. Patrons ran for the door, some hid under tables, mouths were moving but the pounding in my head made it damn near impossible to hear what they said.

Fucking shit, the booth where I left them was empty.

"Eva!" I roared, as fear ticked up to a whole new level.

If she ran outside, she'd play right into the hands of the person trying to kill her. He was out there, hiding between two cars, waiting.

Christ, where the hell is she? More people ran past me, knocking chairs over, dishes and menus littering the floor. What was wrong with people? The worst thing you could do in a situation like this was panic.

Panic led to bad decisions.

Though the chaos would provide us the perfect cover to escape. I just needed to find Eva.

A cook rushed past me and I glanced over at the still-swinging door he'd come from and hurried to check the kitchen.

Empty.

"Eva!" I tried calling for her again.

Slowly she came into view as she opened the door to what looked like a storage closet.

"Let's go!"

Eva was saying something but I still couldn't hear over the ringing, and her lips were moving too fast for me to read.

No time.

"I can't hear you. We need to go. Where are the boys?"

Eva's head cocked to the side, a deep frown etched her face, but she stepped out of the closet, both boys clinging to her.

Thank fuck!

Without thinking, I rushed forward, scooped up Liam, and he went stiff in my arms.

"I need you to trust me. Carry Elijah and follow me."

Eva nodded, and picked up her son.

"You stay right behind me. We're going to my car. Do not stop for any reason. Eyes up and pay attention."

Eva shook her head. She pointed to the back door and motioned for me to follow her.

I quickly thought about where my SUV was parked in reference to the back door. It wouldn't matter which door we exited, the Tahoe was right in the middle between the two exits. And hopefully, the front of the restaurant was enough of a distraction to give us a clear shot.

"Liam, if I set you down for any reason, you stay behind me."

The boy nodded, eyes wide, fresh fear rolling off of him.

"Let's go!"

Eva darted toward the back door, Elijah in her arms, long brown hair whipping behind her. I caught her arm right before she pushed the bar to open the door.

"Behind me." I fished the car keys out of my pocket, ready to beep the locks when we were near.

Then we were out the door, running toward the vehicle. Blue and red lights flashed off in the distance and I was sure if my ears weren't ringing, I'd hear emergency sirens wailing and people screaming. But I heard nothing but a high-pitched squeal—and that was dangerous. I couldn't hear a fucking thing, including a threat if it approached.

The SUV came into view. I pushed the unlock button, Eva shot around the rear of the car, and the passenger side door opened as I

was depositing Liam into the back seat. Eva climbed in back, pulled both her sons close. I slammed the door and jumped in behind the wheel.

We fishtailed out of the parking lot and hauled ass down the road.

Jesus Christ, that was close.

It wouldn't be until later, when my heart stopped racing and my ears stopped buzzing, that I realized I'd asked Eva to trust me, and she did.

CHAPTER 7

"Here!" Max shouted.

Liam flinched next to me, Elijah shoved in closer, and I fought the urge to cover my ears as I looked up from my boys to find Max passing back his phone to me.

I had a thousand questions; none of them I could ask because Max said he couldn't hear. What the hell was that about? And he looked like hell. The side of his face had pebbles embedded in his flesh, and his forearms and hands were shredded to shit.

What the actual fuck happened? I heard the explosion but I hadn't seen what blew up. Then bedlam ensured the restaurant turned to chaos. People were screaming, diving under tables, and running for the doors.

For a moment, I'd sat frozen, unsure what to do, and scared Max had left us. Then fight or flight kicked in and I decided on flight. Thank God, Max had found us in the kitchen, because beyond getting away from the crowd, I hadn't thought about our escape.

"My password is seven-three-zero-nine-eight," Max told me when I took his phone. "Tex's number will be in the recent call list. Call him and tell him what happened."

My hands were shaking so badly I fumbled with the phone a moment, before unlocking it and pressing Tex's name.

"You find anything?" Tex's voice boomed in my ear.

"It's Eva."

"Where's Max?" Concern laced his tone.

"Driving. There was an explosion at the restaurant. Max says he can't hear."

Tex cursed a blue streak and I waited long moments until he got himself under control before he asked, "Are any of you hurt?"

"Well, the side of Max's face looks like he got into a fight with a cheese grater, and his elbows, forearms, and hands are bleeding, and he can't hear, so yes, Max is hurt. Me and the boys were inside. I didn't see what happened, only heard it."

"Tell Tex, he was right." Max's loud bellow filled the small space.

I caught Max's stare in the rearview mirror, his cool blue eyes full of worry. I wished he could hear me. I had so much I wanted to tell him. We needed to stop so I could clean his wounds. And he shouldn't be gripping the steering wheel with his hands looking like they did. I wanted to tell him how much I appreciated him finding us, getting us away from the danger.

But I couldn't tell him anything.

"I heard," Tex told me. "He must've been close to the explosion if he can't hear."

"What?" I whispered.

My chest tightened, my stomach felt funny, and my heart was beating too fast.

"I was afraid someone had put a tracking device on your car. I asked Max to go and check it out."

"Oh my God."

Max was hurt because he was protecting us.

"I'm thinking there was more than a tracking device," Tex mumbled. "Max needs to get you to a safehouse immediately. No more vacations, no more screwing around."

"Okay," I agreed instantly.

I may've wanted to give my boys normal, but I wasn't stupid.

"You're gonna have to find a way to communicate with Max. His ears are likely ringing like a son-of-a-bitch right now. I need you to tell him to head north. I'll call you back in thirty minutes with a location. And tell him, I'll call this in to his team. You'll have backup soon."

Backup. Holy shit.

"Okay."

"Stay calm, Eva. And listen to Max—he's one of the best men I know. I wouldn't have sent him to you if I didn't trust him. He'll keep you and the boys safe."

Staying calm was a thing of the past—no longer an option on this fucked-up adventure.

But, I could listen to Max, and weirdly, I did trust him.

“Mommy?”

“Hold on, honey,” I told Liam, then went back to Tex. “I’ll wait for you to call and I’ll find a way to explain things to Max.”

“Copy that.”

Tex disconnected and I took a moment to gather my thoughts. I had some explaining to do to my kids, but I didn’t know where to begin.

“Did Max save us?” Liam asked.

“Yeah, sweetie, he did.”

“I’m scared,” Eli whispered.

“I know, baby, I am, too. But Max is going to help us.”

“Where are we going?” Liam inquired.

“I’m not sure where. Max has some friends that are going to help, too. The man I was speaking to is going to find us a safe place to go.”

“Max’s friend is a nice guy?”

I didn’t have time to allow my guilt to consume me. I’d think about it later—why my six-year-old had to ask if every man he met was a nice guy and how utterly fucked up that was.

“Yes, Liam. We can trust him.”

“Okay.”

“I need to let you boys go for a moment and find something to write on.”

Liam disengaged and sat back in the seat, his eyes going to the window. Elijah held on for dear life.

“Baby, I’m not going anywhere. I just have to look around the car for a minute.”

“Is Max staying at the place?” Eli asked.

It took me a second to figure out what my son was asking, and when I did, my heart squeezed. “Yeah, baby, he’s gonna stay with us. You don’t have to be afraid of Max. He’s here to keep us safe. He’s a nice guy, too.”

“I don’t want him to go.”

“You don’t want him to go with us to the house?”

“No. I don’t want him to go without us.”

“Max isn’t going anywhere without us. He’s staying with us,” I reassured Elijah.

My son's arms loosened and he, too, sat back in the seat. But he didn't look out the window—he stared straight ahead, not taking his eyes off Max, like the man was going to go up in a puff of smoke and disappear.

I've made a lot of bad decisions in my life. There was a lot I regretted, but deep down I knew I wouldn't regret trusting Max. He'd help us. I could feel it down to my bones.

I quickly glanced behind me in the cargo area of the SUV. There was a backpack but nothing else. I unbuckled my belt, scooted forward, and reached for the button to open the center console. Max jerked when my hand brushed against his arm and I pinched my lips at the blood now smeared on my skin.

Shit, his arm was seriously bleeding. When Max glanced at me, I slowly mouthed, *pull over*. He shook his head sharply in the negative and his gaze went back to the road. I opened the center compartment and found it empty.

Who in the actual hell doesn't have random shit tossed in their center console?

I carefully shoved myself through the small space between the two front seats, mostly on my belly. I opened the glove box and hit paydirt. A small notebook and pen. I quickly grabbed them and scribbled Max a note.

Head North.

I shoved it in front of him and he glanced down to read it.

With a nod he continued to drive.

I wrote out another message.

Tex is calling your team. Safehouse.

I once again showed it to him and his gaze snapped to mine. I gave him a sharp nod of agreement and his eyes lit with approval.

There was one more thing I had to tell him so I yanked the pad back and wrote.

Thank you!

I held it up for him to read, then I swear to all things holy, my insides warmed when he turned a dazzling smile my way. Sweet Jesus, he was pretty when he smiled. Max Brown looked like a sexy Southern California surfer with a touch of naughty when he wasn't frowning. And his frosty blue eyes even thawed. Oh, boy, he was scary beautiful.

My eyes caught on the scratches on his face and I winced. He was hurt and it was because of me. Then I thought of something else I needed to say to him.

You're hurt. Pull over. I'll drive.

"In a while," he bellowed. "I want distance between us and the restaurant."

There was no use trying to argue. He couldn't hear me and it was dangerous for him to keep reading my notes while he was speeding down the road. I eased myself back into my seat, buckled back up, and pulled my sons close.

"Everything's gonna be okay," I promised, hoping I wasn't lying to my kids.

Neither boy said anything. It took a while, but with Liam and Eli both cuddled in tight, my nerves started to dissipate and I started to think clearly.

There was no more denying the reality of my situation. It wasn't that I hadn't believed Tex when he told me someone had been hired to kill me. It was that I naïvely had no concept of the reality that someone was after me right that very moment. I'd only thought about it in the abstract: Tex found a threat and sent Max to neutralize it. I never dreamed someone would get close enough to actually try.

I'd screwed up again. My good intentions had gotten Max injured, and worse, put my kids in danger.

A vacation? Was I stupid? I should've listened to Max from the start.

CHAPTER 8

After nearly three hours in the car, my ears had finally stopped ringing, and thanks to pain killers and a bottle of water Eva had bought during a pit stop so the kids could go to the bathroom, my head had stopped pounding.

During the drive, Eva handled all communication with Tex and my team. When there was something I needed to know, she'd jot down a few words, just enough for me to get the gist of what she was trying to tell me and hand me the notebook.

The safehouse Tex found us in Atlanta was perfect. A man met us at the property and handed me the keys along with a drugstore bag and disappeared. Eva shuffled the kids inside and didn't argue when I handed her the keys to the Tahoe and gestured for her and the boys to wait by the door. Miraculously, she understood I wanted to clear the house.

I'd made enough mistakes in the last five days, assumptions that could've led to Eva and or her boys being killed. I wasn't taking anymore chances. The house was small; an open floorplan, kitchen, living room, and dining room all within sight as we walked in. Two bedrooms down a short hall, with one bathroom.

"Everything's fine," I told her and she smiled.

"You're not shouting anymore."

"Everything is muffled but I can hear again."

"That's good news."

Eva had no idea. If I'd been any closer to the blast, I wouldn't have been so lucky. That, and whoever set the explosive had set the charge in front of her car instead of at the rear where the gas tank

was. He would've gotten more bang for his buck if the initial burst had more power from the fuel.

"Get the boys settled," I told her. "There should be food in the fridge. I'm going to check in with the guys then I'll help—"

"No."

"No?"

"I'm cleaning the cuts on your face and arms first. It's been hours. We need to take care of them before they get infected."

Eva's eyes narrowed and I knew I'd failed to keep my smile at bay.

"What's amusing?"

There was not one goddamned thing amusing yet I was smiling. There had never been a single person in my life who had offered to take care of me. Not my drunk of a father, not my weak as fuck mother, not my bitch of an aunt or dick of an uncle. None of them had ever showed the least bit of concern. Not when I fell off my bike and scraped my knees, not when I broke my collarbone, not even when I was a little boy and had a bad dream and was scared.

Yet there was this woman, with more baggage than a cargo ship could carry, offering to help clean me up after her car had exploded and her kids' lives had been threatened. Not that she knew her car was gone just yet—I was waiting for the right time to explain that—but the fact remained she wanted to take care of me. Knowledge that slammed into me with such force, I had no defense against it.

Our situation was precarious at best. She knew I needed to check in with Tex and my team to secure our safety, but first she wanted to make sure my cuts didn't get infected.

What in the actual fuck was I supposed to do with that?

"Nothing's amusing," I answered.

"Then why are you smiling?"

"Never had anyone offer to clean me up before."

Eva's hands went to her hips, her gaze held mine, and her forehead wrinkled. "Are you screwing with me?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"No one? Really, not even when you were a kid?"

Yeah, I wasn't touching that.

"Here." I picked up the bag Tex's man had given me and handed it to her. "I can clean my face, if you'll dig out whatever is stuck in my right shoulder."

Eva took the bag but didn't follow me to the bathroom. Instead, she headed to the couch where Liam and Elijah were sitting.

"You guys wanna watch some TV while I help Max?"

Liam looked from his mom over to me then back to Eva. "Sure."

She crouched in front of her sons and kissed each boy's cheek before she handed Liam the remote.

"I won't be long."

The older boy nodded and scooted closer to his little brother.

No way would I wish the shit Liam had gone through on anyone, but if there was one good thing that had come from the shit hand the kid had been dealt, it was that he learned early in life to take care of those he loved.

The bathroom was utilitarian at best. A small vanity, a toilet, and a shower stall for one. Without much space between the three. I pulled my torn shirt over my head and pain radiated down my arm.

"Oh, hell," Eva muttered.

"What?" I started to turn back to the mirror so I could see what had her grumbling, when my arm brushed across her chest and I stopped. "Shit, sorry. There's not much room in here."

"It looks like glass."

Well, that would explain the pain.

"Hopefully, there are tweezers in the bag. You okay to pull it out?"

"Yeah."

I glanced over my shoulder to find her pale face staring up at me.

"I understand if you can't—"

"No, I can. I'm just sorry you got hurt because of me. Then you drove all that time with glass in your arm, and dirt and rocks in your face. We should've looked at it when we stopped. I should've driven. I'm so sorry."

"Eva." I carefully turned to face her, this time making sure I didn't touch her. Which was difficult, not only because the two of us in the tiny bathroom was a tight fit, but now I was very aware of her nearness. *Very* aware she was a beautiful woman with a fantastic body. "You have nothing to be sorry for. And I needed you to be my ears when I couldn't hear over the pounding in my head. You did a great job, by the way. You stayed calm, you kept in contact with my team, you guided us here, and you handled the boys even though I

know you were scared and didn't know what was going on. Thank you for that."

"But you're hurt," she repeated.

"It's nothing. A few scrapes. They'll be healed in a few days."

Her soft look and frown were almost too much to take. There was sadness and fear, but it was the concern that would be my undoing.

"How can you say it's nothing? There's glass in your shoulder and arm. Glass, Max. And you couldn't hear for like three hours. I saw you wincing in pain when you were driving. I don't know you all that well, but a big, strong guy like you..." She trailed off a moment and shook her head. "I assume you'd have to be in a great deal of pain for it to show. And I saw how much you were hurting."

"If you're worried I won't be able to protect you because I'm a little scratched up, I promise you I can."

Eva's lips parted before they closed and opened a few more times before she sputtered, "Wor-worried? I'm not worried about you protecting me. I'm worried about *you*."

"Babe, I swear I've been banged up worse than this and continued on a mission."

Now she was openly gaping at me. If the situation wasn't totally fucked up, I'd say she looked fucking adorable standing in front of me, eyes wide, mouth hanging open, clearly alarmed at my declaration.

"I don't want to know what kind of missions you've been on," she snapped. "Obviously, your definition of a scratch and mine are two different things. My boys scratch themselves when they're playing in the backyard trying to climb the tree. Liam gets banged up when he falls off his bike and scrapes his knees. This...this is something different. There was an explosion." The words whooshed out of her. "Something exploded. That's insane. And how close were you to the blast? What happened?"

Oh, hell no, I wasn't going to tell her it was her car that blew up when I needed her to get the glass out so I could take a shower. That information was for later, after the boys were asleep and we were alone. She'd done remarkably well keeping her shit together, but I had a feeling that tidbit of news would send her reeling.

"Let's talk about what happened later."

"Why?"

"Because you need to get back to the boys, and when you go back to them, you don't need to be upset and worried. Liam watches you, he picks up on your moods. If you're anxious, he'll feel it. Elijah is already nervous around me. I need them both relaxed—it's the only way they'll trust me."

Some of the softness that had crept in slipped away. Anytime I mentioned the boys, she became overly defensive.

"Eva, listen to me. Nothing I just said was meant to be a dig. I'm not trying to offend you. It's a good thing Liam pays attention to what's going on around him. He's smart. He loves his mom and brother. What I'm telling you is, I want you and your kids safe. Which, I swear to you, I will keep you all that way. But neither of them are going to trust me if their mother goes back to them agitated after spending time with me. I have one shot with them. Please give this to me. After they go to bed, I'll tell you everything. Just trust me."

Eva studied me for long moments. And I did something I hadn't done in well over a decade. I didn't mask my emotions. I didn't deliberately blank my features and shut down. I allowed her to see I was being honest. A gesture I didn't afford anyone else in my life. I was a cynical asshole, I didn't trust anyone outside of my inner circle and I didn't give a shit if others outside of those I respected trusted me. I didn't bother to put forth the effort because I knew it would be a waste of time, I wouldn't trust them back, so I saved everyone involved the trouble and remained closed off.

But for some reason beyond the fact Eva was my mission and keeping her alive would be easier if she trusted me to do so, I actually cared if she did.

"You're right. They've done great so far, but if I'm freaked out over what happened, they will be, too. And you need to check in with your team. Brooks said he'd be waiting for your call."

Determination shone in her eyes.

The love she had for her boys was undeniable.

And a flicker of something I couldn't read flashed in her eyes, her chest heaved, and the pulse point in her neck throbbed.

"Hey." I reached out and placed my hands on her shoulders and she stiffened. Damn, I'd meant to comfort her, not freak her out.

"Everything's gonna be okay."

"It doesn't feel that way."

"It never does when you're in the thick of it. Darkness creeps in and tricks you into believing it will never end. But it always does."

"I feel like I'm right back where I started. When Tex saved my boys and brought them back to me, I swore I'd do better. I promised myself that no one would ever hurt them again—including me. One bad decision snowballed out of control. I know you don't care and it doesn't matter, but I never wanted to hurt anyone. And I'm not as stupid as you think I am." Eva's chin jutted out and she stood a little taller. "Tex gave me a new life, and whether you believe me or not, I've spent the months since then doing nothing but working and spending time with my boys."

I wanted to believe she hadn't wanted to kill Bubba and Zoey, that she had a conscience. But it was hard to forget she'd dropped the two of them off in a remote area of Alaska and left them there to die.

What would it have been like if my mother had been willing to do anything to keep me?

"Where'd that come from?" I asked her.

"Where'd what come from?"

"I never said I thought you were stupid. I never said I didn't care. And believe me, it matters to me and to my friends that you have some sort of remorse for what you did to Bubba and Zoey. But why're you bringing all of that up right now?"

"Because sometimes I catch you looking at me with suspicion. I have nothing to hide. I told Tex everything—every painful detail of my life. I withheld nothing, he deserved to know everything about the woman he was willing to help. And now here you are, hurt because of me, because you were sent to play bodyguard. I don't want anyone else hurt because of me, I can't take anymore. I'm afraid the guilt and anger is going to consume me until there's nothing left. And if that happens, where does that leave Liam and Eli? I talk a big game and say I'd do it all over again to save my boys. I tell myself that I had no choice, but it is all bullshit. I'm weak. I was barely holding it together before, and now I'm afraid I'm going to break. There is no light for me—only darkness. Nothing will ever be okay for me. The best I can hope for is that it will be for my boys. As long as they're happy, healthy, and good men, I don't care what happens to me."

Eva Dawson believed every foul word she said about herself and I hated that she did. Hated that she believed her life was meaningless and the only two people who mattered were her kids.

But the funny thing about hate was, it was a hair's breadth away from love. And fuck it all, I admired the hell out of a woman I wanted to dislike. I couldn't stop myself from respecting the fierce mother she was. So, I hated she didn't care what happened to her, but god-damn if I didn't love how she put her boys first—above all else.

There wasn't a damn thing weak about Eva. I knew she'd hitchhiked back to Alaska and I knew where she'd been a stripper to save money to buy her boys back. She would do whatever she had to do to give Liam and Elijah what they needed and she'd drain herself doing it—physically, financially, morally. She'd completely bankrupt herself before she let the boys fail.

CHAPTER 9

My hands shook as I tweezed the last shard of glass out of Max's shoulder. I thought one of the cuts needed stitches. He disagreed, then held up a bottle of skin glue and some tape.

Crazy man!

"It's gonna scar," I told him. "Maybe if a doctor stitches it closed, it won't."

"Babe, does it look like I'm a stranger to scars?"

No, no, he didn't, and if all of the marks on his back were anything to go by, he was well-acquainted with all sorts of injuries. And when he'd been facing me, holy shit, it'd been impossible not to stare at his impressive chest. He had muscle stacked on top of muscle. But what had caught my attention was a long puckered scar that started right above his belly button, went diagonal toward his hip, then dipped under his waistband. I wanted to run my finger over it, trace the line, and see where it ended. But I didn't dare.

"Where'd they all come from?" I asked about his marks.

"Here and there."

"From when you were in the Navy?"

"Some."

Well, that was cryptic. I let the subject drop because he obviously didn't want to talk about it, and I wiped some blood from his skin.

"Do you want to wait for me to glue you shut until after you've had a shower?"

I glanced around him and met his stare in the mirror.

He looked pensive before he quickly shut down and gave me his cool blank eyes. It was crazy how one look could chill me to the bone

or make feel warm and flustered. It was strange—he made me *feel* strange.

Hot and cold.

Fire and ice.

I couldn't get a read on him and I'd tried.

I wasn't afraid of Max, though maybe I should've been. All the way around, he was bad for my health and I knew it the moment I started to care what he thought of me. I didn't have the luxury of caring about anything other than my boys. They were my priority.

"Yeah. Thanks for your help."

"Anytime." I shrugged and beat a hasty retreat out of the bathroom.

Liam and Eli were still on the couch, Eli now in control of the remote. I knew this because cartoons were on, something that Liam tolerated because his brother liked them, but at six, he'd deemed them for babies.

"You guys hungry?" I asked, plastering on what I hoped looked like a happy smile.

Two yeahs rang out from the couch and both boys turned to face me.

Damn, I had good-looking boys. They were everything good in my world—they were my purpose for living. My boys were the only reasons I hadn't curled up in the fetal position and given up. We had to make it through, I had to be strong for them. *Had to*. There was no other option.

"Who wants to help me in the kitchen?"

"Me!" Eli shouted and jumped up.

Liam was slower to follow and less enthusiastic, but he trailed behind his brother.

This was our thing—cooking. It always had been. As soon as Liam was big enough to sit on the counter, his tushie was on it and he was helping. Then Elijah came along and now he did the mixing while Liam measured and poured. I was no master chef, but what I lacked in culinary skills I made up for with fun. We danced, we sang, we goofed around. Our time. Just the three of us, spending time together cooking.

Best time of the day was when we were together.

"What are we going to make?" Liam asked.

"I don't know. Let's look through the cupboards and fridge and see what we have."

"Is this Max's house?"

"No, honey. It belongs to one of his friends," I told Liam, then decided to give my son some honesty. "This place is called a safehouse."

Liam's head cocked to the side, a lock of hair falling over his forehead reminding me he needed a haircut, and his nose scrunched in confusion.

"Remember back at the restaurant, there was an explosion?" Liam's eyes widened and he nodded. "Well, Max wants to keep us safe. So he asked one of his friends if we could stay here. That way, no one can find us and Max and his friends can find out what happened at the restaurant."

"Are we going to die?" Liam asked.

"Absolutely not!" Max boomed from behind me, scaring the absolute shit out of me.

I jumped, banging my elbow on the counter, before I turned to face him. I also may've taken a step in front of Liam and Elijah.

Max's expression was piss-your-pants frightening. Furious didn't begin to cover it. His pale blue eyes had gone glacial. He was scowling, complete with deep, hard lines between his eyebrows. And lastly, he was still shirtless but not wet, which meant he hadn't taken a shower yet.

"Max! You scared me."

His gaze raked over me, then beyond me to the boys, and glacial was a thing of the past. Fire had melted the ice. The air turned stifling, so thick that it was hard to draw in much-needed oxygen since I was panting.

"No one is going to hurt any of you," Max continued.

"But someone hurt you," Liam argued.

"The only thing that matters is no one hurt any of you."

"That's not true," I cut in.

"Which part, Eva?"

"That it doesn't matter that you got hurt protecting us. It does matter. And the boys should be grateful you put yourself in harm's way for us, not told that your wellbeing doesn't matter. That's crap, Max. Your life is just as important as ours, so please don't tell my kids you don't matter."

Nothing.

Not even a flicker of recognition I'd spoken.

"Is everything all right?"

"I came out to remind you not to open the door."

Well, that was mildly insulting—I wasn't some dipshit who had a death wish, therefore I'd go traipsing outside for funsies.

"Right," I mumbled. "Thanks for reminding me, otherwise I may've taken the kids for a stroll."

"Now's not the time to be a smartass."

"But now's the time for you to treat me like I'm an idiot?"

Max said nothing.

Then he turned and walked away.

I was reconsidering my earlier assessment—maybe I should be afraid of Max. He had no problem turning his anger toward me.

Liam broke into my thoughts. "Is someone trying to hurt us?"

I took a deep breath, and even though Max was no longer scorching the room with his presence, it still burned to inhale.

"Remember Tex?"

"The man who saved us."

It wasn't a question, I knew my boy would never forget Tex—I made sure of it.

"Yes, honey, that's him. He still watches out for us. He thinks that...well...he sent Max to make sure we were safe."

"But you said—"

"I know what I said, honey. I didn't want you or your brother to be scared. So I didn't tell you the truth about who Max was."

"You lied."

Christ Almighty, Liam's accusation hurt like a bitch.

"Yes, Liam. I didn't tell you the truth. Like I said, I didn't want to scare you and I wasn't certain Tex was right. He likes us a lot, and because of that, he's protective of us. I thought that it would be best until I knew for sure not to tell you."

"But lying is wrong. That's what you always say."

"It is. I'm very sorry if I hurt your feelings, but it's my job to protect you. And part of that is making sure you and your brother aren't scared and worried something bad is going to happen."

"Mommy," Eli murmured and my eyes went to my youngest son. "Is Daddy gonna take us again?"

"No, Elijah," Max said from behind me. But this time I didn't move. I was utterly frozen from the fear in Eli's voice. "No one is going to ever take you from your mom again."

"Are you sure?" Liam pressed.

"Positive."

"So we're not really on vacation?"

"You *were* on vacation," Max continued. "Your mom wanted to give you and Elijah something fun to do while I kept you safe."

"But we're not on vacation anymore?"

"Elijah, honey?" I called.

My boy looked up at me, tears welling in his big eyes, hands trembling, and agony tore through me. I stepped around Liam and scooped Eli up. His little arms went around my neck and his legs wrapped around my waist.

"I don't want to go," Eli whispered.

"Honey, you're not going anywhere. No one is gonna take you from me. I promise."

Eli's body shook in my arms, shattering my loose hold on my own tears. "Swear it, Elijah. No one is taking you or your brother. Not ever again, honey."

Elijah shoved his face into my neck, wet leaked from his eyes, blazing a path down my skin, scorching my flesh. Once again, my son was scared. Once again, he was crying. And again, it was because of me.

My chest burned, my heart shattered, my stomach roiled, and soul ached.

When did it end? Not for me but for my kids. When did they stop paying the price for my stupidity?

"Did you guys decide on dinner?" Max inquired.

His voice—rough and deep. I looked over my shoulder to find him with fresh clothes on, his hair wet. His face looked better, but not super. Arms crossed over his chest, fiery look aimed direct at me.

Great.

I appreciated him intervening and trying to change the subject, but damn, I didn't need his attitude.

"Not yet," Liam told him.

My son stared up at Max. I had him in profile but I could tell he was struggling with the news that Max was playing bodyguard. Or more to the point, that we *needed* a bodyguard.

"Mom makes the best grilled cheese sandwiches," Liam informed Max. "Maybe we can have those?"

"The best, huh?" Max teased, smiling at Liam.

Once again, Max's mood flipped. It was seriously hard to keep up.

"Yeah. They're like, world famous."

"Well, now I have to try one."

Liam glanced over at me and looked hopeful.

"Sure, honey, if that's what you want."

Eli nodded his agreement into my neck. Liam smiled. Max just stared.

Two out of three wasn't bad.

And really, Max wasn't my problem. He could scowl at me all he wanted. As long as he continued to be nice to my boys, it didn't matter.

But it did sting.

CHAPTER 10

What the hell has Tex gotten me into?

Fucking hell, when Elijah asked Eva if Jay was going to take him again, something inside of me snapped. The unmistakable fear in the little boy's voice was enough to make me want to take Eva and the boys and hide them away so nothing could ever touch them again.

Christ, the kid was four. Four goddamn years old and scared to death he's going to be taken from his mother. That fear born from experience.

And Liam, the ever-watchful son and brother. The kid was sharp, he picked up on everything. Sometimes it was hard to remember he was only six.

Then there was Eva. I didn't have the first idea how to deal with her.

I needed to remember who she was and what she'd done. She was a liar—but was she really? At every turn, she insisted on telling the truth or the closest version of it the situation allowed for. She'd even fessed up about who I really was and why I was with them. Even though she knew that meant Liam would call her out on it.

Now I was making excuses for her, spinning the lies she had indeed told to Bubba and Zoey, excusing them because she wasn't as horrible as I'd thought. Or, maybe she was a better liar than I thought. Maybe this was what she was best at—manipulating people. She certainly had me twisted in knots and that was damn near impossible to do.

"Let me help Max put a bandage on his shoulder, then we'll start dinner," Eva said.

I suppose she was speaking to her kids, but she was looking at me.

Perplexed—that's what she looked like. She was trying to figure me out—*good luck with that, honey*—but I'd carefully blanked my expression. Something I was good at.

"I'll get everything ready," Liam chimed in excitedly. "Eli, let go of Mom and help me."

There it was, Liam taking charge. Eva's brows pinched and I wondered how she felt about her six-year-old playing sentry over his baby brother. Had that protectiveness been born into him, or had he learned that? My guess was Jay had taught him that the hard way.

"You wanna help your brother or do you want to watch TV?" Eva murmured.

"Help."

"All right."

Eva set Elijah down, ruffled his hair, and smiled the worst fake grin I'd ever witnessed. Thankfully, the boy didn't pick up on it and walked to his brother, awaiting instruction on what to do next.

"Liam, set everything on the counter. I won't be long." Then Eva turned to me, the fake smile faded and she asked, "Ready?"

"Yep."

Wordlessly, I made my way back to the bathroom. Eva followed me in and went directly to the vanity. Everything was laid out and ready to go. I pulled my shirt over my head. Now that the glass had been removed, the pain had subsided to a manageable throb.

"Go ahead and clean it with the alcohol," I told her and gave her my back so she could get to my shoulder wound.

"Isn't that gonna sting?"

"Yep."

"I guess that's better than getting infected," she murmured.

I heard rustling, and a moment later, she dabbed a wet gauze pad over the gash. *Holy fucking hell*. I clenched my jaw, ground my molars, and worked to block out the pain. Then I felt it, Eva's warm breath blowing on the area she just cleaned, followed by a few moments of relief. In that moment, I didn't care she'd just introduced all sorts of germs that could cause infection. I didn't care she'd done the exact wrong thing. All I could focus on was that she was the first person in my entire life to ever try to dull my pain.

I didn't know what to do with that, so I shoved it aside and added it to all of the other shit I didn't understand about Eva Dawson. A place inside of me that was quickly filling up with all sorts of bits and fragments of information that needed to be dealt with, but I knew I never would.

Eva was a puzzle I didn't want to solve because if I did, once the pieces came together the picture wouldn't be what I'd thought. She wouldn't be the lying bitch—the villain who tried to kill my friend. She'd be a desperate mother, a devastated woman who'd been taken advantage of, a victim in a game she wanted nothing to do with.

I couldn't deal with that Eva.

For my own peace of mind, she had to remain the villain.

Eva moved swiftly and efficiently, making fast work of gluing two of the incisions closed.

"All done," she announced.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

I heard the tension, the wobble in her voice, but being the asshole I was, I didn't turn around. I also didn't invite further conversation. This was in an effort to keep much-needed space between us.

Mission. Focus on the mission. Eva is nothing but a job.

"I'll be out in a minute," I told her when she didn't move.

"Right."

I felt it the moment she left—physically felt her absence. My good buddy Tex had seriously fucked me over asking me to take care of Eva and her boys.

* * *

I'D GIVEN EVA TIME TO GET THE BOYS READY FOR BED. TEX HAD toothbrushes, toothpaste, pajamas, and a change of clothes sent over for Eva and the boys.

Always on the ball—that was Tex.

Except when he was screwing with my head by sending me to Eva. Then he was a devious ass and I'd be having words with him the first chance I got. Tex did nothing that wasn't well thought-out. Life was a chess game to the cyber-genius. So I now had no doubt he'd put Eva in my path on purpose.

I was unapologetically eavesdropping outside of the boys' bedroom. Eva had no idea I was there and I didn't want her to know.

"You ready to say your prayers?" she said to Liam and Elijah. "Then I'll tuck you in."

The woman was a mystery. Prayers? That shocked me. I wasn't sure why, but it did. It was also something else my mother had never done with me, nor had she ever tucked me in.

"Yep," Elijah said.

"I'll go first," Liam interjected. "Dear God, thank you for today. Thank you for Mommy and Eli and keeping us safe."

"Thank you for Mommy and Liam," Elijah added. "And for us being all together."

"What else?" Eva asked.

"Please keep Tex, Mark, and Zoey safe," Liam added.

What in the actual hell? Why was Eva having her children pray for Mark and Zoey?

"And thank you for sending us Tex to watch over us," Eli put in.

"Blessings?" Eva inquired.

"Grilled cheese sandwiches. Trains. And a fun day before...it wasn't so fun," Elijah muttered.

"Thank you for sending Max to protect us," Liam said matter-of-factly.

A scorching burn filled my lungs as I inhaled. The left side of my chest went tight. And there was a huge, gaping hole in the wall I'd built to keep intruders from infiltrating my life.

"Yes, Liam, I agree. We are blessed to have Max helping us."

What the fuck? Eva sounds like she means that.

"In Jesus' name we pray, amen," Elijah finished.

Liam and Eva echoed their amens, and I quickly turned to leave the hall. I'd heard enough. Fucking hell, I'd heard too much.

More questions. More doubts. More truths about a woman than I ever wanted to know.

* * *

I WAS SITTING ON THE COUCH READING AN EMAIL FROM DECLAN, MY team leader, when Eva came into the living room.

"If you're not busy, I'd like to know what happened today."

I should've put her off—I was too raw, too overwhelmed. I needed space and time, two things my current situation wouldn't allow for.

Without waiting for my answer, Eva sat on the far end of the couch. She pulled her heels up to the edge of the cushion, curled her arms around her shins, and rested her cheek on her knees. She looked so damn small and fragile. Vulnerable within the protective ball she'd folded herself into.

"Are you scared?"

"Yes."

"Of me?"

Why I'd asked her that, I didn't know.

"Yes."

She should be afraid of me—I was a dangerous man. I should've left well enough alone. But the thought of her being frightened of me churred my gut. Eva had enough of being scared to last three lifetimes—I didn't want to add to that.

"I'd never hurt you or the boys."

"I believe that."

"Then why are you scared of me?"

"Maybe I'm not scared, maybe I'm more unsure of you. I never know where your mood will take you and when it shifts, it takes on a physical presence. It takes over the room, it fills the air, it presses against my skin, and it either warms me or chills me to my core."

"Come again?"

"You keep me off-balance. You're hot and cold. But I do need to thank you for being kind to Liam and Elijah. That hasn't changed since you first met them. I'm grateful for that. The rest doesn't really matter."

What the hell was her game?

"Why do you have your kids pray for Bubba and Zoey?"

Eva's eyes widened before they narrowed. "You were listening?"

"Yeah."

There was no sense in bullshitting. I asked her a question, one that I needed the answer to nearly as much as I need oxygen. And she'd never understand how desperately I needed her to answer on the right side of the truth.

"Because what I did to them is horrible. We pray for them so every single night I have to hear my boys say their names and every

single night, it hurts. It's a reminder that I deserve that pain. My penance. But also because I believe in the power of prayer, so yes, we pray for their safety."

There was so much there to sift through, I wasn't sure which part to dissect first.

"Why did you do it?"

"You know why."

She was correct, I did know why—Jay had taken her kids from her. What I didn't understand was how the hell had the courts awarded the slimeball custody of the boys in the first place. Tex had been unable to uncover how Jay had done it.

"Okay, then tell me how Jay was able to get the boys."

"Why does it matter?"

That was something I wasn't willing to answer.

It shouldn't have had any bearing over the mission and really, it didn't change a damn thing about how I was going to keep her safe. But I cared, probably too much.

CHAPTER 11

This was not how I pictured my evening.

I went back to the living room after the boys were asleep to find out the details about the explosion at the restaurant. There was also the small detail of my car. With the fleeing for our lives, and the safe-house, and Max being hurt, it seemed rather insignificant at the time. I mean, Max was injured and bleeding and he'd gotten that way protecting us.

Not even I was naïve enough to think that an explosion at an eatery I happened to be dining at could be a coincidence. I liked to live in denial most of the time, like believing the best in people and not paying attention to huge red flashing neon warning signs, but I wasn't dumb.

"Humor me." Max's nonchalance pissed me right the hell off.

"Humor you?" I spat. "Seriously, you want me to spill my guts, for what? Your entertainment?"

"There's not a damn thing entertaining about children being taken from their mother." Every muscle in my body seized at his angry tone. "I need to understand how a judge awarded a drug dealing, money laundering prick custody of two boys—one of them not even his blood."

"Have you ever been to Kenai, Alaska?" I found myself asking.

"Nope."

"Picture this, the prettiest little town you've ever seen. Cook Inlet and all its beauty. The Kenai River so blue-green you wouldn't believe. Except at sunset, when the Kenai turns pink. Mount Redoubt in the distance, tall and proud, a beacon of splendor. Beauty all

around you, Mother Nature at her finest. The whitest of whites. The deepest greens and yellows. Eagles soar, whales play, salmon run, trout plentiful. Glaciers and brilliant, vivid wildflowers in bloom, the contrast is mind-blowing."

"It sounds beautiful."

Beautiful didn't begin to describe the majesty. Nor could I begin to explain the magnitude of the pain that had sliced me to shreds while living amongst all that magnificence.

"It is. There is so much to love about Kenai. About Alaska."

Though there was way more for me to hate.

"I'm not understanding how that has to do with—"

"Population under eight-thousand," I interrupted. "Now, that sounds like a lot of people, but it's not. Not when you're involved with the criminal underbelly. Jay had a knack for collecting favors. But he was better at collecting dirt. And once Jay had something on you, you were screwed. He played the long game, he'd bide his time, hold his cards, and wait for the perfect time."

And when Jay found his perfect time, he brought me to my knees.

"So he blackmailed someone," Max surmised.

"A lot of someones."

"What happened when you were arrested?"

Whoa! That was a cold hard slap.

But of course he knew. He knew everything about me and I knew nothing about him.

And the way Max framed his question annoyed me—he sounded so casual, like he was asking about the weather, not one of the worst days of my life. Yet surprisingly, his tone didn't hold any of the disgust I felt for myself.

Disgust and shame seemed to be the running themes of my life. I swallowed down the humiliation, cleared my throat, and with my palms sticky with sweat, I explained.

"Jay set me up. Start to finish. He played me, but it began long before I was arrested. When I met Jay, I was eighteen, pregnant with Liam. He was just some guy who came into the sporting goods store where I worked. Looking back, I see it; he went out of his way to be nice to me. Every time he came in, he asked me how I was feeling, then after Liam was born, he'd ask about him, too. But of course he knew who I was—who my parents were—so I'm positive he saw me as an easy mark."

“Who are your parents?”

My arms tensed around my legs, pressing my knees tighter to my chest. My heart pounded so hard I felt the beat against my thighs as I curled into myself.

Hell to the no! I would never tell him about my parents. Max already thought I was trash, but he had no idea how right he truly was.

White trash.

Trailer trash.

A gutter rat.

That was all I'd ever been.

“That’s a story for another time,” I told him. There was only so much I could take, and adding my parents’ dysfunction and abuse to the stupidity of me falling for Jay was more than I could bear. “This went on for almost two years. Then Jay made his approach and asked me out. I thought I’d hit the jackpot. He was sweet, funny, good looking, and I was none of those things. A single mother trying to make ends meet. Six months later, he said he had a job offer in Anchorage and he asked me to go. I wanted out of Kenai but I was hesitant. Then he asked me to marry him, said he wanted to give me a better life, that he loved me and Liam. He said he’d waited so long to ask me out because he’d wanted us to be friends first. I fell for it. Like a fucking idiot.”

“So you moved.”

“Moved, married him, and got pregnant with Elijah. Now, you see, he had me trapped. That was when he let it all hang out. He showed me exactly who he was.”

God, it hurt to even think about how dumb I was. I’d never forget the first time I’d witnessed Jay sell drugs from our house. Liam had been asleep in his bedroom and I was in disbelief. I don’t know what I found more shocking; my beautiful baby boy being in the other room and Jay not giving a shit, or that Jay was selling drugs. Something that up until that point I hadn’t known, yet I should’ve because all the signs were there. Jay had told me he was a day worker on fishing boats, picking up jobs from the dock when they were available. That was how he explained always having cash, but he always had too much of it. Yet, I didn’t question him.

“Whose idea was it for you to become a pilot?”

"His. Jay said I needed to go back to work, he was tired of supporting us on his own. He said he'd pay for the flying lessons. I felt guilty because he had been supporting us for almost three years. So I went along with his plan and became a pilot, which are always needed in Alaska. I had a job with a private charter company a month after I finished my mandatory hours."

"Did you like it?"

"I hated it. But I made decent money. Then I started planning my escape. I was in hell and I wanted out. Having a job was going to make it possible."

Until it wasn't, because I was fired.

"Why'd you agree to run drugs for him?"

There it was—I was a convicted drug trafficker. Well, sort of; I was arrested, convicted, and served time, but my charges had been reduced, thanks to one of Jay's buddies who was a lawyer and owed him a favor. But there was more to it than that. It was Jay's scheming, all the way down.

"I didn't. It was all bullshit. I was set up. I didn't know there were drugs in my plane. And not that anyone would've believed me, but Jay planted them there, then he was the one that called it in and tipped off the authorities. Just enough to get me busted, but not enough for me to do any real time."

"What the fuck? I read the arrest report and the trial notes, why didn't you fight the charges? You pled guilty."

"Can we stop talking about this?"

Max's features softened and for a moment I thought he was going to acquiesce, but then he frowned and I knew he wasn't going to let up.

"This is important."

"Why is it important for you to hear about what a fool I am?"

"Do you think you're so unique you're the first woman to be snowed by a con-man?"

"No, but I wasn't snowed. I was buried in an avalanche. Most women are smart enough to get out long before I did."

"You did what you could—"

"I stayed with him for three years after the first time I saw him deal drugs. I was pregnant with Eli. I should've taken Liam and ran then. But I didn't, I stayed. That is not doing what I could, Max, that's just plain ridiculousness."

"So he used your arrest record to get custody?"

"Yes. But Jay had dirt on the judge, so he was gonna get the kids no matter what. His whole plan hinged on me losing the kids. Once that happened, he had full control."

"Why'd he want them?"

"He had four thousand pounds of cocaine he and his partner, Novak Yazzie, wanted me to fly down to Seattle for them."

Max let out a low whistle and his eyes widened. "Seriously?"

I didn't answer his question. Instead, I told him, "One-thousand-fourteen kilos. Four-point-five million dollars. I refused. He burned Liam. I went to the DEA. I wanted to make a deal, but they were taking too long. Then suddenly Jay had a different plan—if I paid him three-hundred-thousand dollars, he'd give me back the kids."

"That's when you—"

"Yes, that is when I was hired to leave Mark and Zoey in the middle of nowhere."

I couldn't bring myself to say the truth out loud. I was hired to kill them. Leaving them stranded in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness would've been certain death for the average person. Thankfully, Mark Wright wasn't your everyday average man, he was a highly trained SEAL, and he and Zoey had survived.

"Fuck." Max tore his fingers through his hair and he shook his head. "You weren't supposed to strand Bubba and Zoey. All three of you were supposed to die. Malcom Wright's plan didn't work if his brother was only missing. He needed him dead. Malcom and Tracy Eklund had no intention of paying you. Hell, Eva, they didn't have the money."

I tried to keep my face blank. I was afraid of what it said about me if I allowed my hurt to surface. After all, I'd tried to kill Mark Wright and Zoey Knight. Why shouldn't I have died right along with them?

"You didn't know?" Max inquired.

"That I was supposed to die? Yeah, I knew. When I got to Seattle and reported the job was done, she told me, she never had the money I was promised. Though I shouldn't be surprised. It's not like criminals and assholes keep their word."

"What else did she say?"

"No more, Max. I've told you enough and you've yet to tell me what happened at the restaurant."

There was no chance in hell I was talking about sitting alone in that stupid, fucking hotel room in Seattle knowing, *knowing*, my life was over. The deal that Jay had set up had gone to shit. I wasn't going to get the money to pay him off. I was beyond crushed—at my absolute lowest. I didn't know what Jay was going to do, but I didn't think I'd ever see my kids again. I would never admit to him or anyone what I was contemplating in that room.

"This is important, Eva. I need all the facts, every detail. I can imagine this is hard—"

"You cannot imagine shit, Max. You can't begin to know what it feels like to have your heart ripped from your body. My children were in danger and I was literally powerless to help them. I was hundreds of miles from them and they were in the hands of a monster. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, I couldn't think of anything other than my babies being tortured by a ruthless man who hated me so much he'd do anything to hurt me. Any-damn-thing, including physically hurting my kids. So, no, you don't know what I was going through, you can't imagine, and you have no fucking clue what I'm still going through. That there's not a day that's gone by I don't remember what happened to them. Not a night I don't lie in my bed and know down deep into my soul that it is because of me that my children suffered. Every time I help Liam dress, I see the marks Jay left on my son's arms. I *see* them. My little boy has physical reminders of what that motherfucker did to him and he will for the rest of his life.

"And I will never forget that I nearly killed Mark and Zoey. Thank God, Mark had his pockets full of—"

"What about Bubba's pockets?" Max stopped my tirade.

"The pockets of his cargo pants were stuffed full. I saw him at the vending machine before I went out to do my pre-flight check. He pulled out a compass and a flint. I think he was looking for change or something. Anyway, I knew he was a SEAL and I prayed that whatever else he had in those pockets would keep him and Zoey alive until someone found them."

"You knew he was a SEAL?" Max asked incredulously.

"I looked him up on the internet. I found an article about Heritage Plastics. An interview where Colin Wright boasted about his son, Mark Wright, being a Navy SEAL and his other son, Mark's

twin, Malcom, being his right-hand man in the business. Colin was proud of both of his sons."

It was a horrible thought, but thankfully, Colin had passed away before he knew that it was his son Malcom who'd tried to kill Mark. Though, Malcom had killed Colin, so maybe my thinking was wrong. In a perfect world, Colin would still be alive and Malcom wouldn't have been a greedy, lowlife swine.

"What do you know about Malcom and Tracy?"

"Nothing."

"Has anyone from Alaska been in touch with you since you moved to Florida?"

"No. Now, please tell me about the explosion?"

"It was your car," he said without preamble.

"What?"

"Your car blew up. Tex thought there might've been a tracking device on your car and asked me to go check it over. That's what I was doing outside."

My ass was up off the couch. I spun in a circle, undecided why I was up and where I was going. I just couldn't sit anymore. I couldn't live under this cloud any longer.

"Whoa!" Max was up, his hand shot out, and he grabbed my arm before I could flee. Not that I would've been able to go far, I was locked in a fucking safehouse, my boys in the other room, all of us under threat.

"Let go of me."

"Calm down."

"Calm is a thing of the past, Max. Someone blew up my car. My boys..." I tried to yank my arm free but he held tight. "They could've..."

"But they didn't. Right now, they're down the hall asleep, something they're not gonna be if you keep shouting."

I clamped my mouth closed and stared up at Max—jaw tight, mouth hard, eyes narrowed. I was so sick and tired of being on the receiving end of his scowl.

"God, you're always mad at me," I blurted.

"Come again?"

"Never mind, it doesn't matter," I mumbled, and his scowl deepened. *Time to move on.* "Why did Tex think my car had a tracking device?"

“Eva?” Max’s hand tightened around my bicep before it trailed down my arm and he captured my hand and tugged me forward. I stumbled into him. My free hand shot forward and landed on an impressive hard, wall of muscle. It was either that or faceplant into his chest. “Tell me why you think I’m always mad at you.”

There was a lot going on in my muddled mind. I was raw from over-sharing, scared, emotional, and now I was utterly confused. Why on earth would he care what I thought? Max wasn’t with me to make friends. He was there to play bodyguard—as a favor to his friend, no less.

I seriously needed to watch what I said to Max.

Bodyguard. That’s all he was, all he’d ever be.

CHAPTER 12

I was very aware of Eva's palm on my chest and her hand in mine. So goddamn aware, my body was reacting to her touch in ways I couldn't explain. She was looking up at me with wide, scared eyes and damn, if I didn't want to soothe the fear.

I probably should've found a better way to tell her about her car. I'd been told a time or a hundred I lacked finesse. Under normal circumstances, I found pussyfooting around a subject a waste of time. Shit was what it was, so why waste time sugarcoating it?

Life happens—you deal and move on.

But watching Eva's face grow pale and her eyes go guarded churned my stomach. I should've found a way to break the news gently. And the mere recognition of that made me wonder what in the hell was wrong with me. I wasn't a complete asshole but I dealt in facts, not emotions. And the fact was, her car had been used as a bomb. But fuck if it didn't suck watching her take in that information and try to process it.

Of course her mind went immediately to her boys. They'd indeed been in that car not even thirty minutes before it exploded.

That thought ate at me. Why the fuck hadn't I checked her car before we'd left Georgia? I knew better and my lack of attention to detail could've gotten them killed. I'd been too caught up in giving Eva what she wanted that I'd let her call the shots.

That shit had to end.

From there on out, I was in charge. No more bullshit games.

"It really doesn't matter, Max," she whispered. "Just please tell me why Tex thought my car was being tracked."

"You keep saying it doesn't matter, but it does. You said you weren't afraid of me. So why do you think I'm always mad at you?"

"Because you're constantly scowling at me. I know you don't like me and I don't blame you. I've done things I'm ashamed of. I've made more than my fair share of bad decisions. But I'm not a bad person. Everything I've done was in an effort to protect my kids. Everything, Max. Jay infiltrated my life and once he was in it, I couldn't get him out. He was a cancer that ate away at my soul. I hated everything about him, everything about the person I had to become to get my boys away from him. But since Tex... I haven't done one single thing that I'm not proud of."

Her hand in mine tensed and her fingers flexed against my chest. Another reminder I'd pulled her close, and not because I didn't want her to flee. I'd simply wanted all of her attention. And if I was being honest, I'd wanted to touch her since I'd walked into her living room. Even knowing what she'd done to Bubba and Zoey, I couldn't help the attraction. And the truth was, that made me feel like a disloyal dick. Mark Wright was a friend and by extension, so was Zoey.

I should not want to touch this woman. I shouldn't want her close, I shouldn't want to make her feel better, and I sure as fuck shouldn't want to lean down and kiss the hell out of her. But I wanted all of these things with an unhealthy desperation.

Maybe that's why I was always frowning. Because I could not for the life of me figure out why I would be infatuated with Eva Dawson.

But there it fucking was—a spark of interest that I couldn't stop. And the hell of it was, it was more than lust. Eva intrigued me. It didn't take a rocket scientist to know I had mommy issues. I'd grown up with a shit mother, so maybe my infatuation had to do with how she was with Liam and Elijah.

Yeah, asshole, keep telling yourself that big honkin' lie.

"I don't dislike you," I told her.

Disbelieving eyes met mine and a small, deprecating smile tipped her lips.

"Right."

"Straight up, Eva, what you did to Bubba and Zoey was jacked. But believe it or not, they understand why you did it. Which I'll admit, until I met you and heard you explain why you did it—rather than reading it in a report—I did not understand how they could've

forgiven you. But they have. Tex saw something good in you, and I know you don't know the man all that well, so let me explain this to you—Tex is as loyal as they come. If he didn't believe with a hundred percent conviction you were a good person made to do something unbelievably shitty, he would've let you rot in jail. What he wouldn't've done was save your ass. He would've gotten your boys help, because that's the type of man he is, but he wouldn't've busted his ass to protect you.

"I'm telling you all of that to say this—I understand why you did what you did. Beyond that, I respect how much you love your boys. The lengths you'll go to protect them I admire. I didn't have a good mom. Mine was pretty much the opposite of everything that you are. So I'm telling you, I do not dislike you. I'm not scowling at you. I'm simply not finding anything to smile about. The situation you've been put in is fucked. I'm not being nosy asking you personal questions, I'm trying to gather as much information as I can to catch the motherfucker who is after you. That's the only way I can make you and the boys safe."

Eva remained silent, either from stubbornness or disbelief. Either way, I didn't have time to convince her I was being honest, and frankly, I hated having to prove to people I was being honest. Either they trusted my word or they didn't. The irony of that wasn't lost on me. I trusted no one until they demonstrated I could, and even after that, I rarely extended the gesture.

"Tex sent in a team to intercept the man who accepted the contract to take you out." *Good Lord, those words tasted foul.* "Intel says Chris Peters is on a flight to Florida. One man went to the airport to look for him as he disembarked. The others went to your house. When they opened the front door, they smelled gas." I paused and waited for her to digest the new information.

I didn't get to continue. Eva's eyes turned glassy and wetness pooled before the first fat tear slid down her cheek.

"Why?" The question was barely audible—more like a warm puff of breath that I felt wash over me. The feel of it crawled inside and seeped so deep I didn't think I'd ever forget her terrified whisper.

"I don't know, babe, but I promise you I'm gonna find out."

"Wait." Eva's brows drew together and I knew the moment she figured it out—her palm on my chest spasmed right before she fisted

my tee. "If that Chris guy wasn't in Florida yet, why did my house smell like gas? Was there a leak?"

"No, Eva. Someone set your house to explode."

"But...but Tex said..."

I was losing her, I knew it when her eyes went wild, her lips stretched into two flat lines, and the unshed tears started to fall. I couldn't watch Eva crumble, so I did something incredibly stupid and pulled her into my arms and held her tight.

I learned two things: Eva's body pressed against mine, arms wrapped around me, cheek to my chest, felt fucking great. The other was even more disconcerting—she fit perfectly. Her petite frame molded to my larger one and her head tucked under my chin. She felt right, almost as if she was made to be there. The perfect size to hold and protect.

"Babe, we're gonna figure this out."

"You already said that," she hiccupped.

"And I'll keep saying it until you believe it."

"When?"

"When, what?"

"When will this be over? When can me and my boys just live? Be normal? That's all I want, Max. I want them to be safe, to live a normal, happy life. And I feel like every time I get close to being able to give them that, something happens."

I had no answers, so I remained quiet. The silence stretched, and with every passing second that ticked, Eva relaxed until her erratic breathing evened out. Her head tilted up, mine tipped down, and goddamn, her mouth was a hair's breadth away. Right fucking there—so close I could feel her breath on my lips.

So wrong.

So achingly beautiful.

"Max," she whispered my name and before I could stop myself, my lips were on hers.

There was no hesitation. Eva's mouth opened, her tongue brushed mine, and I was lost. One taste was all it took. The salt from her tears mixed with the apple juice she had with dinner. Salty and sweet—a deadly combination I couldn't get enough of. I took more until Eva was whimpering, the sound snapping my control. My hands went to her ass, lifted, and her legs wrapped around my hips.

There was nothing gentle about this kiss. No finesse, no long, slow seduction. All tongues and teeth, clashing, battling, violent passion. Need took over common sense and I was walking down the hall toward the bedroom. I waited for Eva to protest, to stop the madness before it went any further. But by the time I had the door closed, locked, her back pressed against the wall, she was yanking my shirt up and grinding down on my cock.

Fuck this, there was a perfectly good bed five feet away and I needed her naked and under me with a craving I'd never felt.

I set her on her feet next to the bed, tore my shirt over my head, and wordlessly she followed. Clothes came off and were carelessly tossed on the floor. Eva's mouth went to my chest, her hand fisted my cock. Pleasure ricocheted through me. *Good Christ.*

"Eva," I groaned when her tongue swiped my nipple, her hand still working my cock in tight, fast strokes.

Her mouth went lower, nipping, licking over my stomach until she reached my cock, and without warning, she pulled me into her warm, wet mouth.

I locked my legs and let the sensation wash over me.

"Goddamn, babe."

I gathered her hair and watched my cock disappear between her lips, coming back out wet before she took me deeper. Best goddamn blow job ever. And it had nothing to do with technique and everything to do with her wild abandon. In less time than I cared to admit, Eva had me near release.

"You gotta stop, Eva, I'm gonna come."

She hummed her approval, dug her nails into my ass, pulling me closer, and took my cock to the back of her throat. *Fucking hell.*

"Seriously, Eva, I'm gonna come, baby. Pull off now if you don't want me in your mouth."

Eva did not pull off my cock, she doubled her efforts, until my hands in her hair tightened, and I took over. And, Christ, she let me, going to her knees in front of me, wide, pretty eyes looking up, and she gave herself over. Her hand fell away from my cock, allowing me to set the pace. *Holy hell, perfect.* I fucked her mouth harder, watching her closely, not wanting to hurt her but wanting to see how much she could take.

"Touch yourself," I demanded.

The hand that had been on my cock went between her legs, her other one moved from my ass to my balls, and she not so gently rolled and squeezed them until my vision went blurry and my head dropped forward.

"Are you wet for me, honey?"

Eva hummed her answer, the vibration on my over-sensitive cock pushed me closer to release.

"Fuck, yeah. Can you take more?" She nodded and closed her eyes. Hell, no, that wouldn't do. "Open your eyes, I want to see you."

Slowly, her dazed gaze came to mine. Nothing but desire filled those crazy-beautiful, yellowish eyes and I couldn't hold out any longer. Heat rushed up my spine and sweet bliss shot out of my cock, filling her mouth until my come spilled from her lips. So god-damn sexy. I slowed my thrusts and Eva took over, swallowing what was left in her mouth before she licked the head and pulled off.

My hands went under her armpits. I hauled her up off her knees and tossed her on the bed. Her surprised squeak filled the room, followed by a moan when my mouth landed on her pussy.

Fuck yeah, she was wet—it was dripping down her thighs—and if I wasn't in such a rush, I would've licked her clean, savored her taste. But I had a singular mission and that was to get her off as fast as I could so I could fuck her.

There was no doubt she was of a similar mindset—her hips surged up, grinding hard against my mouth, her hands were in my hair, and she was yanking me closer.

Hell, yeah.

I couldn't get enough, not of her taste, her heat, her desire. I wanted more, more of everything, but mostly I wanted her just as crazy with need as I was.

She was intoxicating, all of her.

"Max." Hearing her groan my name had my spent cock stirring back to life.

I slowed, deciding it would be more fun to tease her, hear her beg before she fell over the edge into ecstasy.

"Yeah, baby?" I asked, then flicked my tongue over her clit.

"More."

"More what?"

"Your mouth."

I pushed her legs wider and made a show of looking her over. It didn't take long for her to start squirming.

"Max," she whimpered and my eyes went to hers. "Please."

I was fucked, totally and completely. With just one look into her lust-filled gaze, I knew I'd give Eva Dawson whatever she wanted if she promised to look at me with those lazy, soft eyes.

Fuck, yeah, I was in trouble.

I wasn't supposed to be having these thoughts. I wasn't supposed to feel anything but blinding pleasure.

Time to shut this shit down. Promises and emotions had no place in the bedroom or in my life.

Pleasure, that was all I could give—there was nothing else inside of me, I was a barren wasteland of nothingness.

I slipped a finger into her sleek, hot, wet center and grunted, "Goddamn, you're tight."

Eva's hips bucked and I worked a second finger into her and lowered my mouth to her clit. Yeah, I could do this. I could eat her pussy to orgasm, then fuck her until she was boneless.

I was good at this—dirty, emotionless sex.

With my fingers and my tongue working her over, it didn't take long for her back to bow off the bed, her thighs to quiver and tighten around my head, and finally her pussy to convulse as she chanted my name.

And there it was again, my name falling from her lips and filling me with warmth.

No, lust. That's all it was, all it could be.

That was precisely what I was telling myself when I pulled my mouth off Eva's pussy, licked her excitement from my lips, savored the sweet, tangy taste, and for the first time, I allowed myself a moment to fully take her in. Unhurried in my perusal, I examined every inch of her as I crawled over her—from her flat stomach, protruding hip bones, perky tits tipped with the sexiest erect nipples, all the way up to her pretty face, flushed and tinged pink.

"Max." I looked down at her and knew I shouldn't be doing this but I was going to anyway. I had nothing to offer her, nothing to give—nothing but the here and now and instant gratification that would wear off the moment I rolled off of her. I knew it, yet I couldn't fucking stop myself from having her. It was like a compulsion, a need so deep it couldn't be denied.

The tip of my cock nudged her opening and a tingling of awareness somewhere in the back of my mind told me this would be my undoing—I'd never come back from this moment.

"Please," she begged.

I snapped.

I surged forward and drove my cock into her silky, hot pussy. Then I froze—my cock planted deep, my eyes locked on hers. Therefore I saw them gloss over, turn hazy, and her lips parted on a swift exhale.

Shit, fuck, what have I done?

I shoved my face into her neck, blocking out every emotion as they crashed over me, shattering me into tiny shards of pain.

Goddamn, why did Eva Dawson feel so right?

CHAPTER 13

I was completely surrounded by Max.

His heat.

His scent.

Masculine, no cologne for Max Brown. Soap and man—*delicious*.

The weight of him settled over me and all the air from my lungs whooshed out, leaving me breathless.

And Max wasn't moving. Every muscle strained and rigid.

What the hell happened?

"Max?"

I hated that my voice came out weak and unsure. And when his head pulled away from my neck, our eyes locked, and I sucked in a breath—warm blue eyes latched on to mine as he slowly pulled out and pumped back in.

My thighs tensed at his sides, my ankles locked tight behind his back, and a moan slipped from my throat.

Sweet Jesus.

My hips tipped and my hands roamed his sleek back—hot to the touch and hard as a rock.

Max's eyes flared, the muscles in his neck bunched, then he lowered his head and touched his mouth to mine. Chills raced over my heated skin.

Just. A. Touch.

What the hell was that? How was it possible a brush of his lips could drive me crazy?

One hand went to my thigh, his fingers pressed tight, and his thrusts became harder, rougher, filling me over and over.

His eyes stayed locked with mine—the blue, so blue, I was mesmerized.

Lost.

Max shifted his weight on his elbow, freeing his hand to wander to my breast. His thumb brushed my nipple before he pinched and rolled. Zaps of pleasure had me squirming under him.

His gaze never left mine—the level of his intensity was overwhelming, disconcerting, too real, too raw, I was too exposed. I had to close my eyes—my emotions were too close to the surface.

“No,” Max growled. “Open your eyes.”

They snapped open to find intense pools of stormy, ocean blues staring down at me.

“Keep them open,” he grunted.

Through this exchange, Max’s thrusts never faltered—demanding, hard, controlled.

He drove his dick deep, my leg captured in his strong grip, and he held my soul hostage with his gaze.

All of it too much.

Yet not enough. My hips bucked to meet his as he pumped harder. So close. It was coming, I could feel my orgasm barreling full speed. And when his hand left my breast and went between my legs, his thumb circled my clit, and my back arched off the bed. Max was not a gentle lover, he didn’t start slow and work his way up. He went for it.

“Max.” I meant to say more, but I lost my breath and the ability to think when he adjusted his angle and slid in deeper.

So fucking good, I was going to die from it.

Max’s eyes flashed and I didn’t miss it because he was still staring at me—never in all my life had anyone ever watched me so intently.

There was nothing I could do but hold on. My legs tightened, my heels dug in, and I pulled him closer. Reaching for a closeness that was more than I could handle. A connection that I knew would break me, but I wanted it all the same. I shouldn’t want it. I knew I should’ve just taken the orgasm he was wringing from me and been happy, but I wanted more. I needed it and I knew I didn’t deserve it—especially from Max—but just for a moment, I didn’t want to feel so alone.

It was wrong and I knew it, but I was going to ask for it anyway. I was going to use Max to fill the void of nothingness that was inside of me.

"Kiss me," I moaned.

He hesitated and his rhythm became choppy and unsure.

My heart pounded in my chest, my insecurities rose to the surface. With great clarity, I saw up close and personal when Max slowly blinked how badly I'd screwed up. I knew better than to want something for myself.

I was nothing.

And I didn't deserve a damn thing.

"Eva, honey, open your eyes."

Softer, but still a demand.

His thumb on my clit slowed and the orgasm he was building started to slip away.

"No. Please," I begged.

I was so close, and if I could have him, at least I could take the pleasure he was offering.

"I'll give you anything you want if you open your eyes and look at me."

"But you won't kiss me."

Good Lord, why did I have to go and say something so pathetic?

Max drove his cock so deep it was startling, and then he stilled. Leashed power vibrated under my palms, the feel of it both frightening and exciting.

"Open. Your. Eyes."

I did a full body quake before I obeyed.

Angry, annoyed, cold blue gaze.

Fire and ice.

Max went back on his knees, hefting me up with him, my arms wound around his back. Then he twisted and rolled to his back. All the while he kept us connected. The move was so insanely cool I was in a state of shock, so I missed him do an ab curl and sit up with his back to the headboard.

"Max! Your shoulder."

"It's fine."

"The fact that I dug glass out of it, tells me it's not fine. Roll over."

"I said, I was fine."

I looked down at his handsome face that was marred with scrapes and my heart squeezed. He wasn't fine, he'd been hurt because of me.

"Eva, babe." Max brushed my hair over my shoulder, before he trailed his knuckles down my neck, and over the swell of my breast. "I said I was okay."

"I don't want to hurt you."

His lips curved up into a wolfish smile before his finger traced my nipple. "Honey, the last thing I'm thinking about right now is a cut on my shoulder." My back arched as Max rolled and plucked my nipple. "Not when I got you on my lap and my cock lodged in your sweet pussy."

"Oh, God," I moaned and lifted my hips to explore.

Max's hands went to my ass, gripped tight, and stopped my upward glide. "Now I'll explain why I didn't kiss you."

Oh, shit.

"If I kiss you, then I can't watch. You're quiet, but your eyes tell me everything I need to know." I felt my face burn at his complaint. "Babe, stop. It would suck if you were shouting the house down and you woke the boys. So I'm not complaining."

Oh my God. This was so embarrassing. We were in the middle of having sex and I stupidly demanded something I shouldn't have wanted in the first place, and now Max had halted the festivities for a chat. How unsexy. God, I was a fucking, *fucking* idiot.

Now that my mind wasn't muddled, I was thinking I should've never started this in the first place. But I had. I kissed him. I was the harlot that couldn't control myself and sucked him off.

What had I done?

Fuck.

Max's mouth crashed onto mine, his fingers pressed deeper on my ass, and his tongue pushed in.

I braced for his assault but it never came. This time, when Max kissed me it was softer—not gentle, but some of the demand had waned. His tongue stroked and coaxed mine and soon I relaxed, my hands explored his chest—steel under scorching hot flesh.

Max's hands travelled from my ass to my hips and started thrusting up.

"Move with me, honey," he murmured against my lips.

Our breaths mingled and I started to rock, grinding down hard, my clit scraping with every swivel of my hips.

"Oh, God," I panted when Max captured my nipple in his mouth, flicking the sensitive bud with his tongue before he gave it a painful nip.

"That's it, honey, ride me." His mouth moved to my other nipple and repeated the same lick and nip before he kissed the sting away and continued. "Harder, Eva."

I was beyond insecurities and mid-sex chats, my mind was back to muddled and I was chasing a momentous orgasm that had come roaring back and hovered just out of reach.

"Goddamn, you feel good," Max grunted and bit the side of my breast.

Pain exploded right before it turned into blinding pleasure and my orgasm snapped free.

"Jesus fuck," Max groaned, his cock swelling, his hold on my hips tightened, and he bucked up and rocked me faster. Which was a damn good thing because I couldn't move, blessed ecstasy had consumed every cell in my body, leaving me able to do nothing but feel my pussy contract and my skin burn.

My nails dug into Max's shoulders, my orgasm showing no signs of stopping, everything inside of me trembling, heating, shattering.

"Fuck, Eva, fuck."

Then he yanked me off his cock and wet, hot come erupted, splashing onto his stomach. Jesus, that would've been super fucking hot to watch if I'd been able to focus. Max crushed my body to his, and I felt the stickiness between us and his heart thumping wildly in his chest. Sex with Max had been the best I'd ever had, even with the stop-and-chat in the middle. Him holding me tight, even better.

I searched, but in that moment, there was no loneliness to be found. And for one small flash of time, I wasn't nothing. I was filled with happiness.

But the moment would be fleeting. Because I was Eva Dawson and he was Max Brown and I had no business feeling anything for a man who wanted nothing to do with me.

Fucking hell, what had I done?

And I knew that minuscule seed of contentment was over when Max's gruff voice hit my ears.

"I didn't use a condom." My insides seized at his cold, dead tone.

Well, fuck me running. So stupid.

"We're safe. I mean, I'm on birth control so that's covered. And I'm clean."

"You okay?" he asked, not offering me his health status, which, if I hadn't been so damn embarrassed, I would've asked for.

"Yeah, sorry. I should get up."

At this juncture, it should be noted Max didn't try to stop me. His hands simply fell away and his body under mine remained still.

Yeah, I'd messed up bad. Now I had to climb off Max naked and do the walk of shame. Thankfully, that walk would be short, but no less shameful.

With all the grace and poise I possessed—which incidentally, I lacked both, therefore I was clumsy in this endeavor—I rolled off Max. I hit the mattress and rolled again, this time in an attempt to pull the covers over me, which was futile considering Max's big body was laying on top of them.

Whatever. It seemed I would be collecting my clothes off the floor in the nude. It wasn't like Max hadn't seen the goods up close and personal, but now that I wasn't in the throes of passion, I was all kinds of mortified.

I made it around the bed and started gathering up my clothes, finding my t-shirt and putting it on sans panties. Same with my jeans when I found those. Dressed, I allowed myself to glance over at the bed. Max still reclined against the headboard, legs stretched out, his thick, heavy dick resting on his stomach, and even semi-soft, it was still damn impressive.

Of course he'd be unabashed in his state of undress—he looked like a freaking god lounging on a throne of crumpled bedsheets.

"You good, babe?"

Shame—burning shame—washed over me.

"Yeah. You?" I plastered a fake smile on my face and his eyes narrowed, wordlessly calling me out on my lie.

No, I was not good. Nothing was good. I had to be the dumbest broad on the face of the planet.

"Right," he mumbled. "I'm gonna hit the shower."

Of course he was. The faster he washed me off his skin, the better.

"I'll let you get to it. Goodnight."

"Night, Eva."

Eva. Not babe or honey.

Just Eva—reminding me I was nothing.
The loneliness crept in and filled me with ice.
Then I turned and left.

CHAPTER 14

I'd been lying awake in this goddamned bed tossing and turning for hours, therefore I heard the soft creaking of the door, and quiet footsteps down the hall.

Eva was still awake. That was the second time I'd heard her get up.

The first time, I should've gone to her and made sure she was okay. But after the way I'd treated her, I didn't think she'd be happy to see me. So I'd stayed in bed, the bed that smelled like apples and sex. Even after my shower, I couldn't get her sweet smell off my skin. Not that I'd wanted to wash her away, but my stomach had been covered with come. Never had I been so caught up in a woman I forgot to use a condom.

At least that's what I was telling myself instead of admitting I'd wanted to feel Eva bare. And that was the fuck of it, I'd purposely taken her, without protection.

Now I was behaving like a spineless dick because I knew I'd been wrong. From start to finish, I'd been a prick, but especially the way I'd let her leave. But when my first thought had been to keep her in my bed, because I didn't want to let her go, I knew I had to get a lock on my emotions.

Fucking hell, I hadn't even kissed her goodbye. But worse than that, I let her walk out of the bedroom knowing she wasn't all right.

Fuck! I scrubbed my hands over my face and sucked in a breath.

It was time to face what I'd done. I couldn't continue to hide in this damn room knowing Eva was awake and upset.

I tossed the covers off and found my discarded jeans, yanked them up, and went for the door hoping like hell I didn't find Eva crying.

I made my way down the hall and into the living room and there she was, ass to the kitchen counter, glass of what looked like apple juice aloft. But she wasn't drinking it, she was staring into nothing.

Goddamn, I'd done that to her.

I cleared my throat, not wanting to scare her as I started to make my way across the room. Her head turned to the side, her eyes locked onto mine, and she frowned.

"I hope I didn't wake you. I was trying to be quiet."

I could've lied, which is what I should've done instead of admitting the truth.

"You didn't, I was awake."

She nodded like she fully understood my restlessness, which by the weary look she wasn't hiding, I suppose she did.

"Well, since we're both awake at..." Eva glanced over at the microwave. "Three-thirty in the morning, we should probably get this over with now."

"Get what over with?"

Please don't fucking say it.

"That was a mistake."

Goddamn, she said it, and instead of relief, her words were a knife to the gut.

"Which part?"

Her eyes widened before they narrowed and her lips thinned into two slivers.

Yep, I was being a dick—on purpose, too. All because I hated that she said what happened was a mistake. Which I agreed with, but not for the reasons she did.

"What do you mean, which part?" she hissed. "All of it. And before you say it, yes, I know I was the one who started it."

I took the two steps necessary to invade her personal space. Her torso jerked and her hands lifted, palms out, warning me off.

"I don't think you sucking me off was a mistake."

"Of course you wouldn't."

"Your mouth is fucking heaven." I was so close, I felt and heard the air whoosh as she sucked in an angry breath. "I don't think burying my cock inside your sleek, wet—"

"Stop."

"And it certainly didn't feel like a mistake when you were grinding your tight pussy on my—"

"I said, stop."

"Why? You didn't mind hearing me tell you to ride me harder when my cock was inside you. And you can try to deny that, but, honey, your pussy tells the truth. And when my mouth was on your perky tits, my hands on your ass, it was gushing wetness, and milking the come right out—"

"Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what? Trying to figure out which part you think is a mistake?"

"Being an asshole. Trying to embarrass me. I was there, I remember—all of it seared into my memory. I don't need a blow-by-blow of tonight's events. I know I behaved like a hungry whore who couldn't get enough, but that is not me. I know you think that it is, but I've never done that."

"Done what? Had sex? Given a blow job? Because, babe, I have to tell you, if that was your first blow job, you're a goddamn natural. Best head I've ever had. Bar none."

"God, would you stop saying blow job?"

"All right. Then we'll talk about why you called yourself a whore. Is that what you think about yourself because you like sex?"

"I don't like sex."

"You don't? You could've fuckin' fooled me." I had to bite back a laugh at the horrified expression on her face.

Damn, she was cute.

"Why are you smiling?"

"Because you're fuckin' cute when you get all riled up."

"I'm not riled up and I'm not cute."

"You sure as shit are. Your nose scrunches." And before I could stop myself, I reached up and tapped her on the nose. What in the actual fuck was wrong with me? When had I ever tapped a woman on the goddamned nose? *Oh, well, fuck it, in for a penny...* my finger traced up to her forehead and I smoothed the creases. "Your forehead scrunches and you bite your lip..." I moved my hand lower and swiped my thumb over her bottom lip, pulling the soft, abused flesh free.

All sorts of illicit memories flooded in, remembering what those puffy lips felt like wrapped around my cock. Thoughts that I should've been pushing out of my head, but, damn, I did not lie to Eva when I told her that was the best head I'd ever had.

"Why are you doing this?" Eva repeated, and my gaze left her lips to find she'd lost the angry-cute and gone straight to sad.

Christ, I was a dick.

I dropped my hand and took a step back, putting some much-needed distance between us.

"For the record, I don't like it when you call yourself a whore. You're not that. What you are is a beautiful, adult woman who is allowed to have and enjoy sex however it is you want to enjoy it. Neither of us did anything to be ashamed of. As far as it being a mistake." I shrugged, not willing to commit to the notion. "It sucks you feel that way, but I can't tell you how to feel. I can only tell you I don't regret it. And if you want the truth; not only did I enjoy it, I hope it happens again."

"You don't regret it? But—"

"Two things I regret: I didn't take my time with you, and the ending."

"The ending?" Eva pulled in a breath, misunderstanding what I meant.

"Babe, seriously, I think you know I thoroughly got off on what we did. What I meant was, the way you left. I fucked up and shouldn't have let you leave that way."

"Then why did you?"

Eva's blunt question took me off-guard.

So much so, I didn't guard my response. "Because I was taken aback by what I felt. I'm not relationship material. I'm not the type of man that feels anything beyond physical when I'm with a woman. And you want the God's honest truth? I wasn't happy about Tex asking me to go down to Florida to see to you and your kids. Before I met you, I'd made assumptions. I don't trust women and knowing what you did, I didn't trust you."

I watched in horror as Eva's eyes filled with tears and her shoulders sagged forward. I hated I was hurting her but I had to be honest. "Over the last few days watching you, I had to admit to myself I was wrong. I don't like being wrong and I don't like unfairly judging someone's character. I was wrong *and* unfair and struggling with

what to do with that knowledge. I didn't expect what happened earlier to happen. My head was all fucked-up about how I felt about you, your situation, and my attraction toward you. So the bottom line is, when we hit the bedroom, I wasn't ready. I was still processing all that I'd learned about you. The woman you are, the mother you are, and the depth of your love and loyalty to your kids. Straight up, Eva, I couldn't separate the sex from what I was feeling for you, and that fucked with my head. So when we were done, I let you walk out the door because I needed you to leave so I could get my shit together. That was uncool and screwed up. I regret that ending. I should've been man enough to talk to you then, instead of making you feel like shit. And that's on me. You did nothing wrong."

"I did do something wrong," she mumbled.

"Come again?"

"I was wrong to ask you to kiss me. I got caught up in what we were doing and I wanted to pretend for just a few minutes I wasn't so lonely. That what we were doing meant something, that I'm not this empty pit of nothingness. It was unfair for me to use you like that. It made you uncomfortable."

Fucking Christ.

Her candor gutted me. I'd been so wrong about so much—so fucking wrong I wanted to kick my own ass.

"Can I ask you something personal?" Eva asked.

"What's that?"

"Why don't you trust women?"

Of course Eva would hone in on that.

"Because it's been my experience women are only out for what they can get. I learned early on I was nothing more than a meal ticket. And I'll be damned if I'm ever fucked over again by a bitch with an agenda."

"Sounds familiar," she muttered.

"Yeah?"

"Sucks we seem to have that in common. People using us to get what they want. Only in my case, I guess I was too stupid not to let it happen."

"And what makes you think I wasn't too stupid?"

"Because I can't see you ever being so naïve that once you saw the red flags waving you wouldn't have walked away. I'm just dumb

enough to put blinders on, pretend not to see them, even when I did."

"There's lots of ways to be stupid, Eva. And lots of ways to be used. The first time it happened, I was too young to do anything to stop it. The next time, I wasn't old enough to know the difference between a good time and love."

"Sorry that happened to you."

Fucking hell, she means that.

"I'm not, it taught me to be careful about who I let into my life and who to trust."

"I guess it did." Her eyes softened and her gaze dropped to the floor. "I better get back to bed."

"You okay?"

"Yeah." Eva lifted her head. Gone were the soft yellow eyes—gone was the openness.

I would've been impressed she could shut down so quickly if it didn't piss me off so badly.

"Right. I let that shit slide back in the bedroom because I was being a dick. But, babe, I know you're lying."

Her spine shot straight, her shoulders squared, and her chin jutted out defiantly.

"So, what, you thought you'd continue to be a dick and call me out on it instead of leaving it alone and letting me go back to my room where I could lick my wounds in private?"

"No, Eva. I thought we should talk about what's bothering you—fix it, then move on."

"There's no fixing what's broken inside of me. There's no moving on from the sins of my past. If you're worried you hurt me tonight—don't."

"Eva—"

"Goodnight, Max."

Eva started to skirt around me in an effort to flee, her movements stiff and on-guard.

"Wait." I grabbed her hand and held on tight when she tried to pull away.

"Let. Me. Go."

"Not until we work this out."

"Why?"

Fuck, that was a good question. Why was I pushing her? Why did I care? Why in the hell was I demanding her honesty when I had no intention of giving her more than I already had?

"Because I don't want you going to bed upset."

Eva huffed a sad chuckle and shook her head. "You don't understand, Max. I go to bed upset every night. You think this is about you? Me up at two-thirty in the morning pacing around, unable to sleep? Well, you can rest easy in the knowledge you're not the reason I'm losing sleep. This is my life, my penance, my punishment. I close my eyes and I see Zoey—the terror in her eyes. I see Mark Wright's confusion and anger. I see it so vividly it's like it's happening all over again. Every night, I'm sitting back in that plane praying they'll be found quickly. Warring with myself, willing myself to pull back on the yoke to take off. Four people's lives are in my hands. Two are innocent strangers. Two are the most precious people in my life. So, no, I'm not okay. I'll never be okay again. But I deserve that, I don't get to be okay after what I've done."

Eva tugged her hand free and loped through the living room and down the hall. I watched her go in a haze of anger. And for once, I wasn't angry at her for nearly killing my friend. I was mad as fuck at the people responsible for putting Eva's ass in that plane, making her do the unthinkable.

Bubba and Zoey, or Elijah and Liam.

I made my way to the bedroom. Not bothering to undress, I climbed back into bed and lay awake thinking about Eva.

Not even the sweet smell of apples and sex could lull me to sleep.
Fucking hell.

I needed to get a grip and get my head sorted.

CHAPTER 15

Seven in the morning comes early when you've been up most of the night. Thankfully, the safehouse had a queen-size bed in the master, giving the boys and me plenty of room. But Elijah had always woken up rough—he moved, he kicked, he whined. This had always been his way, even as an infant. Therefore, I was being used as a punching bag as my son came awake.

"Stop," Liam demanded and rolled away from his brother.

Now, Liam was the opposite. He was a cuddle bug in the mornings. He woke up sweet and easy.

"Morning time, my loves," I mumbled.

Eli grunted. Liam sighed—loudly.

"Good morning, good morning," I sang. "Sunbeams will soon shine through."

"Good morning, good morning," Liam mumbled his part of the song.

"Good morning, my darlings, to you," I finished.

Eli rolled and tucked himself into my side, his little arm going around my belly, his head on my chest, and I sighed.

Nothing better than waking up with my boys.

I kissed Eli's hair and breathed in the smell of his shampoo. Something so small, but I'd never fail to appreciate. *The small things mean everything*. Something I knew as fact, considering they'd been taken away from me.

"What are we doing today?" Liam asked, sitting up. "Is Max still here?"

"Yeah, sweetheart, he is. And I'm not sure what we're doing."

"Can we have pancakes for breakfast?" Eli asked.

"If there's stuff in the kitchen to make them, sure."

"Can we check?"

"Absolutely."

The boys started to get out of bed, and my thoughts wandered to coffee, or more specifically if the house was stocked with the brew of the gods, and alternately if it wasn't, what my chances were of talking Max into going out and getting me some.

Thankfully, I got my answer after I opened the bedroom door and hit the hall. The smell wafted from the kitchen through the living room and filled my nostrils, lifting my spirits.

Max stood in the kitchen, his ass against the countertop, one ankle crossed over the other, feet bare, yesterday's wrinkled clothes on, looking so damn good I rocked to a halt so I could stare.

Unfortunately for me, he was looking directly my way, therefore he saw my reaction. The sexy smirk on his face annoyed me. But when he caught sight of Liam and Elijah, it turned into a smile. That was irritating as well—he had a great smile.

Actually, he had a great everything, and since I'd seen every inch of him, I knew that to be absolute fact. There was no part of Max that wasn't muscled to perfection. Great body, beautiful eyes, soft hair, square jaw, handsome face, nice, thick, long—

Gah! I shook the thought from my head, needing to concentrate on feeding my kids, not the size of his package.

"Morning," Max rumbled and I shivered.

I knew what the deep, gruff voice felt like against my skin.

Liam skipped off toward the kitchen but Eli hung back with me, still shy and leery of Max. I was more than a little surprised that Liam was as comfortable around Max as he was. Liam had taken the brunt of Jay's abuse and he'd protected his little brother the best he could, making my son at the tender age of six distrusting and watchful.

But for some unexplainable reason, Liam relaxed around Max.

I heard my son happily jabbering in the kitchen so I bent down and swung Elijah up. His little legs wrapped around me and I hugged him close.

"You okay?" I asked into his neck.

Eli nodded and snuggled in closer.

"Are you scared of Max?" I whispered.

Again, Eli nodded.

Damn.

"It's okay to be scared," I told him. "You take your time. We'll make pancakes together."

Elijah didn't agree or disagree and he didn't take his head off my shoulder as I walked into the kitchen.

Max watched as I made my way to the coffee pot, Eli wrapped around me like a monkey. Something was working behind those blue eyes of his but I couldn't put my finger on it. Not with only two hours' worth of sleep and no caffeine. Maybe later I'd think about it, maybe I wouldn't, maybe I just needed to stop trying to figure out Max and all of his mercurial expressions and concentrate on the perilous situation at hand.

"Eli wants pancakes. Mom makes the best pancakes," Liam told Max.

"Better than her grilled cheese?"

"Yeah. Way better."

"Well, then, I can't wait to try them."

Who said I was making any for you?

"I'm starving," Max finished.

I bet he is. He expended a godly amount of effort last night.

"I need coffee first," I spoke for the first time.

"Fresh pot." Max chuckled and unnecessarily tipped his head toward the machine. "Do you need any help?"

"Nope." I was already pouring one-handed, but even if I needed both hands, Elijah wouldn't fall. All four limbs were wound around me tight. "How's your shoulder?" I asked, and immediately regretted my question when Max's lips twitched and his eyes danced.

"It's good." He smiled.

I chose to ignore the dancing eyes, the smirk, and humor in his tone. Instead I focused on how grateful I was that I was holding Eli. I had a feeling if we'd been alone he would've said something seriously embarrassing.

"Great. I'm happy to hear that," I mumbled and Max's smile broadened.

Good Lord, he was good-looking.

Time to move on.

"Has Tex called?" I asked.

"Yeah, talked to him about an hour ago," he told me and shook his head knowingly.

"And?"

"After breakfast." Max jerked his chin and his eyes slid to Liam. "You want some apple juice?"

"Yes, please."

Max grinned at my son and moved to do his bidding gratefully, taking him across the kitchen and away from me.

Yeah, last night was a huge mistake.

* * *

"SO, YOU'RE A FAN OF *SINGIN' IN THE RAIN*."

"Huh?"

"The musical."

I knew that *Singin' in the Rain* was a musical, I just didn't understand why Max was asking.

It was after breakfast, the boys were still in their pjs sitting on the couch watching TV, and I was in the kitchen cleaning up the dishes. Max had disappeared into his room to take a call but now he was standing behind me asking me this question that was so bizarre, even after consuming two cups of the strongest coffee I've ever had, I still couldn't comprehend why he was bringing up a musical.

But more, Max didn't strike me as the type of man who'd know that *Singin' in the Rain* was a musical.

"I know what it is, I just don't know why you're asking."

"Heard you singing to the boys this morning. The Good Morning song."

"Were you eavesdropping again?"

"No, babe," he snickered. "I was walking by the door to grab a shirt. I figured you wouldn't appreciate your boys waking up and coming out into the kitchen seeing me shirtless."

No, I wouldn't have wanted my boys to see him half-naked, but I was sure sorry I'd missed the experience.

Damn, so it was just bad timing he heard me singing to the boys.

"Yeah, the kids and I like that movie. We used to watch it all the time."

"It's good they have that, the memory of watching that movie with you, and them waking up to you singing. Something they'll always remember."

I braced myself against the counter, my palms pressing into the sharp edge of the Formica, and I closed my eyes. God, I hoped they remembered us singing in the mornings and not the five-hundred shitty mistakes I'd made.

"We need to talk about what's gonna happen today."

My eyes remained closed and I steadied myself for a new kind of pain. Not the sweet kind that Max had just given me telling me my boys would always remember their mornings with their mom. No, this pain sliced deep and twisted in my stomach—a reminder I was a fuck-up and because of that, my kids were in danger.

"Eva," Max called, but when I didn't answer, the heat from his chest hit my back, and his arms came around me, his hands covering mine on the edge of the counter. "Everything's going to be okay."

"Don't say that. Nothing will ever be okay."

"I'm not gonna let anything happen to you or the boys."

"I believe you'll try."

"I'm gonna do more than try, Eva. I'm gonna fix this."

"Right. Fix it."

Cold seeped in, even though I was trapped between Max and the counter, even though heat radiated from his body, even though he'd slipped his fingers between mine and held tight.

I wasn't alone in the kitchen, yet I was *alone*.

And there I was, needing someone else to fix my life *again*.

"One thing at a time," he told me. "Today, we're gonna head up to Maryland."

"Fine."

"Fine?"

"Yes, fine." I shrugged my shoulders. "Thank you."

"Eva—"

"What? Did you expect me to argue? I'm hardly in the position to fight about where we're going. You're the bodyguard, I'm at your mercy."

"You are not at anyone's mercy, Eva." His growl reverberated over my skin, leaving chills racing over my arms.

"Right, because I have a say in what happens."

"You goddamn well do."

"So, if I said I wanted to go back to Florida, we'd go?"

"No. If you wanted to go to Florida, I'd hear you out, then I'd explain why that's not a good idea. Then I'd lay out all the reasons why going to Maryland is our best option. And I'd do that until you understood my reasons are sound, they're smart, and they're in your best interest. What we're not gonna do is this bullshit where you clam up, lock your emotions down, and give me a line of shit that you're at my mercy."

Frustration and fear mingled until I couldn't stop the tears from forming.

"We're not going back to Florida, are we?"

"Probably not." Max softened his tone. "When this is over, Tex wants to set you and the boys up someplace new. A fresh start."

A fresh start. Right, how many times does one person need to start over—fresh?

I nodded but didn't say anything because there was nothing to say.

"If you want to go back home, I'm sure we could talk to Tex, see if—"

"I don't have a home."

Max's fingers tightened painfully around mine and his whole body turned to stone. The vibe in the room turned suffocating, and once again, Max's mode shifted.

"We're gonna fix that, too," he growled and stepped away. "Get you and the boys ready. We'll leave in an hour."

Then he was gone, leaving me frozen, chilled to the bone, and alone.

CHAPTER 16

Ten hours in a car with two kids was too damn long. Against my team's advice, voiced the loudest by Declan, our team leader, I decided to break up the drive and stop in North Carolina.

That leg of the trip should've been five hours, but between bathroom breaks and stopping for lunch, it was closer to seven. My ass was sore, my eyes heavy, and my head was throbbing from the constant memories of Eva telling me she had no home.

What the fuck?

Between that and her admitting she was lonely, my head was in a weird, fucked-up place.

It was something else we had in common, though I wouldn't admit that to her. I'd already shared too much. Came way too close to explaining exactly why I didn't trust women.

Then, as if to fortify my belief that all women were out for themselves, I lay in bed torturing myself, vacillating between thinking about Eva and Pam. The two women were worlds apart in their motives. Eva was trying to protect her children. Pam had no such excuse, she was simply a scheming bitch. Yet I was still comparing the two.

More than ten years later, I still remember the lessons Pam taught me. I was nothing more than a good time. The boy from the wrong side of town as far as she knew, since I lived with my aunt and uncle by then—going nowhere, good for nothing except a quick walk on the wild side. She'd taken my virginity, gave it to me regular, sucked me off anywhere, anytime, essentially leading me around by my dick. And yeah, because I didn't want to lose being able to fuck her

anytime, anywhere, her mouth wrapping around my dick whenever I wanted kept me oblivious to the fact she was a scheming bitch.

She was a good girl from a middle-class family that had no problem slumming it with me, getting off on it. But when the time came, when we graduated and I wanted to marry her, she had no issue telling me I wasn't good enough, I was going nowhere, and the Navy wouldn't be enough for her. She was going places, and those places included a nice house, nice cars, designer shit, and she had no fucking issue telling me I wouldn't be able to afford to keep her in all of that on Navy pay.

My bank account balance proved she was wrong about me not being able to afford all that shit. But she was right about one thing—I was nothing more than a good-time guy. A quick and dirty walk on the wild side.

"This place is too nice," Eva mumbled, pulling me from my thoughts.

I glanced around the lobby of the Greensboro Marriott, taking in the white marble floor and the wide carpeted staircase that came to a landing and split in two directions, each leading to guest rooms that circled the entrance. I did this thinking that the hotel was indeed nice but it wasn't luxury. Then I thought about how Eva likely had never been able to stay in a hotel where the rooms were two-hundred dollars a night.

My gut twisted.

"Come on, let's go up and decide if we're ordering room service or heading down to the restaurant."

"We should've grabbed McDonald's. It would've been cheaper."

Fuck, another kick to the gut.

"Babe, we had fast food for lunch. There's only so much grease my stomach can take before it goes on strike. And considering we got another five-hour drive tomorrow that will likely turn into seven, where we'll be stopping for grease-laden junk, we are not eating McDonald's for dinner."

"Well, I get that, but the boys and me can eat—"

"You and the boys are eating a real meal."

"But—"

Careful not to let the boys hear me, I leaned in until my mouth was close to Eva's ear and I continued. "Babe, you got a sweet body. Tight, toned, just enough ass that it's a handful. But you are too thin.

You need to eat and I'm gonna make sure it's something somewhat healthy. Best I can do while on the road is sit your ass down in a restaurant that's sure to have some sort of vegetable. But mark this, Eva, you're gonna eat."

Eva stumbled and my hand wrapped around her forearm before she could take a header.

"I...I..." she stammered.

"I know why you're so thin," I told her. "I know you're too busy taking care of your boys, making sure they eat well so you don't watch what you're putting in your body. I also know you're watching your money, so I'd guess you go a lot of nights not eating at all. But tonight, you're eating, and you're eating well."

"I don't like that you know that."

Sometimes Eva's honesty shocked the hell out of me—no games, no bullshit, no denial. She didn't eat because she was making sure her boys did and money was tight. Straight up, totally open, she didn't bother trying to deny it.

"I'm sure you don't. And I'm not mentioning it to make you feel bad. One more thing I'll add, I wish like hell when I was growin' up I had a mom that cared enough to make sure my belly was full, I was eating healthy, and I was getting what I needed. Something you give to your boys. They might not recognize it now, but one day they will, and they'll appreciate it."

"I don't want them ever to know we were so poor I couldn't feed them and myself."

"Why not?" I jerked us to a stop and kept my eyes on the boys.

"Because it's embarrassing. Because—"

"There's not one damn thing embarrassing about loving your kids, Eva." Then for some strange reason, I told her the truth. "My dad was filthy rich yet I was the poorest kid on the block. We had nothing, because behind the walls of that nice house, was an abusive asshole who raised his fist to my mother every damn day, and when he got bored beating his wife, he turned to the next best thing—me."

"Max," she whispered.

"Money means not a damn thing when it's coated with evil. I would've taken being homeless if it meant I had parents that loved me. Your kids aren't growing up poor, Eva, they're growing up surrounded by your goodness, and that means more than the balance in your checkbook and what's on the dinner table."

Needing to get us up to our rooms and away from Eva's sweet, soft eyes, I tugged her forward and caught up to the boys patiently waiting at the elevator. We rode the elevator up in near silence and when we made it to our adjoining rooms, I handed Eva her key and waited for her and the boys to go in before I let myself into mine.

In a minute, I'd open the connecting door, but my emotions were too raw, I needed time to get myself sorted.

* * *

"THANK YOU FOR DINNER," EVA SAID.

We were standing outside of her room and she'd already thanked me three times—it was starting to piss me off. She'd reminded the boys to say thank you as well, which I understood—she was teaching them manners—but good God, it was a hundred-dollar meal, not a vacation to the Alps.

"You said that, babe," I reminded her.

"Yeah, well, I really appreciate everything you're doing for us. I want—"

"I know, Eva. Go on and get in the room. The boys look like they're sleepin' on their feet."

"Okay," she whispered and opened the door.

Once again, I waited for them to be safely locked away before I went into my room. The adjoining doors were closed but unlocked. After I knew they were all asleep, I'd open them up before I went to bed.

That was after I checked in with my team, but I needed to talk to Tex first.

I pulled out my phone and checked the time—early enough I wouldn't wake Melody or their kids.

"I was getting ready to call you," Tex greeted.

Of course he was, the man was dedicated to the cause of saving the world. That was, when he wasn't dedicated to making his pretty wife happy.

"Whatcha got for me?" I asked.

"We got Chris Peters in custody. He's a tool. Total amateur hour, which only solidifies my theory there's a second contract."

"So, what, you think Peters was being set up?"

"That'd be my guess. I think the person hired to kill Eva put the contract out as a way to cover his ass. From start to finish it's sloppy, easily found, but I can't trace the source."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means the person who put out the bid is smart and covered their ass while leaving Chris Peters swinging. The authorities could easily find the contract that Peters accepted but not *who* put out the bid. And considering Chris Peters is currently singing the blues, confessing to all kinds of shit but has no idea who hired him, I'd say he's the patsy for the real hit."

Fucking hell.

"Find anything else at her house?"

"Nope. Not a damn thing. Whoever rigged it was good."

"Not good *enough* to wait for her and the kids to be in the car before he blew his load and blew it up empty," I reminded him.

"I don't think that was a mistake. Though whoever blew up the car miscalculated your distance from it."

"You think I was the target?"

"Yep. With you out of the way, he's got a clean shot at Eva."

"Fucking Christ, Tex, you're saying someone wants her alive?"

"Before her car turned into a bomb, I thought someone wanted her dead. Now I'm thinking they just plain want her. Not that I think she'll be left breathing at the end of whatever's in store for her."

"No one's getting their fucking hands on her or the boys."

"Why do you think I sent you?"

"Yeah, about that, Tex. Why did you send me and not Dec or one of the other guys?"

"You haven't figured it out yet?"

What the fuck?

"No, I haven't. But I have to tell you, it's something I've thought a lot about."

"Because I knew, once you got to know her, you'd understand."

Could he be anymore cryptic?

"Understand what, Tex?"

"Why she did what she did. Why she doesn't trust anyone. Why she is the way she is."

"She seems to trust me just fine. I'm sure—"

"If she trusts you already, then I absolutely made the right choice sending you in."

"That makes no sense. She would've trusted—"

"If you think that, Maximus, you're a fuckin' idiot. She doesn't trust anyone. Other than you, I've never met someone so distrusting in all my life."

Maximus? Christ, no one calls me by my full name—ever.

"I think you're wrong," I noted.

"I know I'm right; as a matter of fact, when all this shit blows over, you and I will sit down, have a beer, and *you* can tell *me* all of the ways I'm right."

Tex had lost his mind.

"You inviting me up to Pennsylvania to have that beer?" I asked.

I'd only ever seen Tex in person a handful of times in all the years I'd known him and he rarely invited anyone to do anything with him.

"Sure am, but that invitation is only valid if you bring Eva and the boys."

"What the hell?"

"I've heard a lot about Liam and Elijah."

"They're good kids," I told him.

"I've heard that. Get this shit done. Get your shit sorted. Then get their asses up to my place and we'll share a beer. You can stroke my ego, tell me how smart I am—"

"I'm not stroking anything of yours, friend."

"Right." Tex laughed. "Stay sharp."

Tex disconnected before I could explain to him that once this shit was over, I wasn't taking Eva or her kids anywhere. They'd be safely tucked away someplace new, starting over, and I'd never see them again.

Damn.

My hand went to my chest to rub the phantom ache that thought caused.

Then I dialed Declan.

"Yo," he answered.

"You busy?"

"Nope."

Hopefully that meant he wasn't at the home of a woman he had no business visiting. No, fuck that, hopefully that meant he'd stopped seeing the woman altogether before everyone else found out where he'd been going and all hell broke loose.

Declan was the very definition of a ticking timebomb. Between his past—most of which I didn't know because the man was a vault of secrets, but what I did know about his childhood made mine seem normal—his time in the military, then going on a long cover on a covert mission for the CIA and whatever the fuck happened there, he was the perfect recipe for disaster. Hence, I wasn't all that surprised he was skirting the line of death around Thad and our boss, Zane Lewis. Because if those two men found out, Declan's balls would be in a vise.

Zane, because what Dec was doing was beyond stupid and Thad would lose his mind because his wife Emerson would lose hers.

"Have you heard from Tex?"

"Yeah, he called about an hour ago and filled us in. Everything good with you?"

That was a hell fucking no. My head was so far up my own ass where Eva was concerned, I was afraid I'd never breathe fresh air again.

"Yep. We're at the hotel. Everything set for us to arrive tomorrow?"

"Really wish you—"

"We talked about this already. No way was I gonna make those kids sit in the car for ten-plus hours, which really means fourteen. It's bad enough we did seven today. I heard you the first time you bitched about me not driving straight through. Get over it, Dec. I got them covered."

"Right, but who's got you covered? Yesterday you were almost taken out."

"That was yesterday. Today no one tried to kill me, it's all good. We'll leave first thing. Which by the way, have a rental at the hotel by nine. No way in hell am I putting them in an SUV that's been sitting in a hotel parking lot unwatched."

"Copy that."

"And make sure it's an SUV."

"Goddamn, King Max. Anything else?"

I couldn't stop from smiling at Declan's annoyance.

"No, that will be all, my faithful servant."

"Fuck off."

Dec disconnected and I shook my head—two people in the last five minutes had hung up on me.

Damn, my friends sure know how to make a guy feel the love.

* * *

I HEARD IT, THE DOOR CREAK, THE SOFT FOOTFALLS, THE SHALLOW breathing, the hesitation, before I felt a soft hand touch my shoulder.

Then I heard Eva's squeak of surprise after I reached out, snagged her hand, yanked her onto the bed, and rolled her under me.

"Max."

That was all she said, all it took for my control to slip, her saying my fucking name in that sweet, breathy whisper.

"If this isn't what you want, tell me to stop now."

She didn't tell me to stop, she didn't utter a word, but her legs wound around my back and her heels dug in.

One hand fisted her hair, keeping her mouth where I wanted it, and the other traveled down and yanked her panties to the side before I dipped two fingers into her pussy.

Fucking hell, wet.

Not bothering to waste time taking them off, I shoved them farther out of the way and lined my cock up and drove home.

Christ, better than I remembered. Hot, slick, and tight as fuck.

Our tongues continued to play as I tried to find some sort of control to slow this down. I wanted to savor her, take my time, explore her body, and learn what drove her wild. But when her nails raked down my back and her legs tightened, control wasn't an option.

Eva wrenched her mouth from mine, her head tilted back, and on a long moan she mumbled, "Harder."

Fucking perfect.

"Shush, honey," I reminded her when her soft moans grew louder.

Her face went into my neck, her hips bucked up to meet my thrusts, and her pussy hugged my cock so fucking tight I was counting back from ten to fight off my need to explode.

With every stroke, I sank deeper into heaven.

Every moan was the sweetest sound.

"Max, please."

Yeah, the *sweetest* fucking sound.

"What do you need, honey?"

"More."

"You want my hand, Eva?"

"Yes."

"Gotta loosen your legs, honey," I told her, giving her thigh a squeeze.

Her legs fell open, her heels went to the mattress, knees bent, and she fucked me, driving up as I plunged down. Hell, yeah, Eva felt like heaven.

My hand started to go between her legs, then I changed direction, grabbed hers, and brought them both to my original destination.

With her finger on her clit, mine over hers, I started to rub.

"I want to feel you get yourself off." Eva started to shake her head but I pressed harder on her clit and continued. "Come on, honey, take over," I coaxed.

After a second, her finger started to move and I wished the lights had been on so I could watch.

"Next time, we're taking this slow."

"Max."

"Just like that, honey, harder."

Wetness gushed and her pussy started to flutter.

"Christ, Eva," I grunted. "Get there."

"I'm there, Max."

Yeah, she was, and she felt like a hot, sleek fist squeezing my cock.

Control gone, I let go and powered into her. Fast, hard, and rough, until all my restraint was gone and I spilled inside of her.

With my cock planted as deep as I could go, still wanting to get deeper, Eva's hand trapped between us, her pussy convulsing around my shaft, my face buried in her neck, I couldn't stop myself from sinking my teeth into the soft flesh between her shoulder and neck.

"Oh my God, Max," she moaned, and sweet fuck, she wrapped all four limbs around and held on tight.

Eva's lips pressed against my chest and she nuzzled closer. The gesture did all kinds of crazy shit to me—it muddled my head and made me want to keep her pinned under me for eternity. *Where in the fuck did that come from?* Her choppy breath fanned across my heated skin and pulled me back to reality. Begrudgingly, I lifted my weight

off her and balanced on my elbow while brushing her soft brown strands away from her pretty face.

Unlike the first time she made no move to disengage, there was no shock or panic in her eyes, nothing but soft, hazy satisfaction. And I couldn't stop the swell of pride—the knowledge that I'd put that look on her face. It hit me in all the places I normally kept locked down.

Maybe it wasn't her pussy that was heaven, maybe it was just her—all of her. The way she said my name, the way she held me tight, the way she allowed herself to be open even when she thought it was embarrassing.

Her hands roamed my back and a smile played on her puffy pink lips when she asked, "Is your shoulder okay?"

"Yeah, honey, it's fine."

I rolled to the side, taking her with me and did something I'd never done—I pulled her close, not wanting her to run away. Not yet, not until I got my fill, not until I sated this crazy need to hold her.

Eva was unabashed in her examination. Her palm skimmed down my chest, and for the first time in years, I enjoyed the soft touch of a woman. This wasn't about sex or passion, it was exploratory. Her hand made it down my stomach, pausing before her finger traced my scar.

Not even the goodness of her touch could erase the memories, and before she could continue, I grabbed her wrist, halting her progress. She lifted her head off my chest and in the dim light, I could read the question in her eyes.

"Just don't."

"Don't what? Touch it or ask about it?"

"Both."

Eva gave me a sad smile before she lowered her head back down and burrowed close.

"All right, Max, I won't touch it."

I released her wrist and she immediately moved her hand to safer territory—but the moment was broken. Eva was no longer relaxed.

"It's just—"

"Shh, Max. I get it. We all have things we don't want to talk about. You don't need to explain."

Jesus, she did get it—more than most, she understood that there were things that were better off left buried. And how that scar came to be was one of those things. The problem was, with Eva's warm, soft body pressed against mine, I didn't want secrets between us. I didn't want to leave things buried. I wanted her to know why that scar was a visual reminder never to let my guard down. But if I told her that, I'd need to explain what happened to the person who'd tried her best to kill me.

And with all of those crazy thoughts swirling around in my head, and with Eva cuddled close, I realized I was a little more than over my head.

CHAPTER 17

"Why are we switching cars?" I asked when a member of the hotel staff interrupted our breakfast to give Max a set of keys.

Max's gaze went from me to the man dressed in a suit still standing next to our table, and instead of answering my question, he made his own inquiry. "Is the car parked in front of the valet?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I'd like it left there until we're ready to check out."

"But—"

Max reached out and I saw a folded bill in his hand before the men clasped hands.

"No problem," the man in the suit said. He tipped his head then walked away.

"Did you give him money?"

"Yep."

"Why?"

"Because I want the car left in front of the building where no one will think to get near it or they'll get caught on camera. To get my way, I paid him."

"Why did—"

"We're not taking any chances," Max cut me off and looked over at the boys.

Both of them were coloring on the restaurant's paper kids' menus, neither paying attention.

"Chances?"

Max shook his head and asked, "Are you done with your breakfast?"

I knew he wasn't going to like my answer, because he didn't like the one I'd given him five minutes ago when he asked the first time and that answer was, I didn't have a big appetite in the morning. I suspected we'd sat there for those five extra minutes after I'd told him I was done with my half-eaten meal in the hopes that I'd change my mind and dig in. But I hadn't—to which I'd been on the receiving end of one of Max's glacial stares.

"I really can't eat much in the morning," I told him.

"You need to eat."

"You need to stop trying to force-feed me. Last night, the steak you had me order was too much. Now this morning I knew I couldn't finish all of this." I motioned to the leftover eggs, pancakes, and toast. I had laid waste to the four slices of bacon—because, *hello*, it was bacon. "I don't like wasting food, and with us travelling, I can't pack it up and take it with us."

"I don't care if—"

"I do, Max. I appreciate what you're trying to do. I was stuffed full last night..." A sly, sexy smirk tipped his lips up and my cheeks heated.

"Stuffed full?"

"You just couldn't pass up the chance, could you?"

Do all men have the minds of teenage boys?

Max tilted his head, smirk firmly in place, yet he remained quiet.

The silence gave me a moment to reflect on last night.

I'd gone to him.

After lying awake for hours after my boys had fallen asleep, I'd gone into his room with the sole purpose of having sex with Max. It was not smart—as a matter of fact, it was probably the stupidest thing I'd ever done and that was saying something considering I'd hooked up with Jay, then married him.

The sex had been phenomenal—better than the first time.

That wasn't the stupid part. That came later, when I continued to lie under Max after we'd finished. After he'd slowed his strokes, slowed the kiss, and started nibbling on my lips, then moved lower to my neck. After he'd gone soft but didn't move from between my legs.

I'd kept my legs wrapped around him, my hands continued to roam his back, memorizing the puckered scar on the lower left side, feeling the rough edges of skin glue holding together the gash he'd

earned saving my life. All of that was just dumb. But it was when I lay there and allowed myself to pretend Max was someone he wasn't, that I'd crossed into stupid.

In this imaginary world I was make-believing, Max was just Max—not my bodyguard. And I was just Eva—not a single mother on the run with a boatload of baggage and a past full of lies and felonies.

The hardest part was Max let me have it. He didn't rush me out of his room, he didn't roll off me severing our connection, he let me savor it.

It was a nice thing for him to do, maybe the nicest thing anyone had ever done. He hadn't treated me like the stupid bitch I was, coming to him in the middle of the night to have sex. He gave me something sweet and tender. Something no one had ever done for me—not even Jay in the beginning when he was playing me, pretending he was a decent human being and not a low-life, drug-dealing, piece of shit. The only awkward part was when I'd touched his scar, something I'd wanted to do since I caught sight of it. Obviously, it was a sore subject, one I would avoid in the future. I knew a lot about sore subjects. I'd show him the same respect, he'd shown me last night and never bring it up again.

So, to bring my musing full circle back to Max sitting across from me, he had a lot to be smug about, and his smile told me he knew it. Last night I had indeed been stuffed full in a variety of ways. He'd made sure I'd eaten a big, healthy meal. One I would've never ordered for myself, mostly because it was a fifty dollar steak, and I hadn't ever been to a restaurant that offered one of those. The other part of that was, I wouldn't have ordered it so that I could give my kids what they wanted off the menu. Max had done both, given me the best steak I'd ever eaten and the boys whatever they wanted, including two Shirley Temples each.

Then throughout dinner, he'd given me more by being kind to my boys. He asked them about all sorts of stuff, he listened when they talked, and Max had done the impossible and won my shy, quiet Elijah over. Part of it was watching how comfortable Liam was when talking to Max so he mimicked his older brother. But the rest was Max asking Eli about the cartoon he'd been watching at the safe-house the day before. I didn't even realize Max had been paying that

close of attention. By the end of the night, Eli was talking as much as Liam was.

So, me going to Max last night with a full belly, a full heart, emotions raw and at the surface, was the dumbest thing I'd ever done.

I was setting myself up for heartbreak and strife.

I knew it and I still went to him.

"Mom," Liam called.

"Yeah?"

"Eli asked you when we were leaving," he informed me.

"Sorry, I was woolgathering." I focused on Elijah, then I looked at Max. "Are we ready?"

At some point during my musings, Max had stopped smiling and had switched to his favorite expression. And since I was sitting across from him, I couldn't avoid the spear of his icy blues. I wasn't sure how ice could burn, but those eyes aimed in my direction studying me close, pinning me in place, blistered.

"Yeah, we should hit the road." I was staring right at Max so I didn't miss it, though I didn't think he tried to hide it when he softened his features and looked to the boys. "Would either of you like anything else before we leave?"

His question should've felt patronizing—him asking my boys if they needed something—like their mother couldn't provide it but he could. But instead, it felt a whole lot like he was asking because he cared. Another stupid thing I'd pretended last night, and apparently that notion had carried over to breakfast.

Max didn't care in the way I'd hopefully imagined. He was simply being nice, because as I was learning, under all that rough fire and ice he was a nice guy and he did care about us in the sense he didn't want us dead, so he would protect us the best he could.

But when this was over, he'd be gone. I couldn't let my boys get attached to him. In the not-so-distant future, he'd just be another person we kept in our prayers and were thankful for.

Max received two 'no thank yous' to his question. And after watching Liam and Elijah for a beat, he turned back to me.

"We'll check out and hit the road."

Ten minutes later, we were in a new fully kitted-out SUV, complete with individual TVs in the headrests and headphones so the boys could each watch what they wanted but we didn't have to hear.

I kept quiet about this and didn't disturb Max as he guided the beast of a vehicle onto the interstate. I also kept silent after the boys had donned the headphones and were into their shows and Max called a man named Declan. He made this call and kept it on speakerphone so I could hear it, too.

It was weirdly personal, me listening to Max speak on the phone. It felt like he almost trusted me with the details of the conversation. Though the men were talking about me, so I guess I had a right to listen in, yet it still felt strange.

The call was short and to the point. Declan reported that Tex hadn't found anything new and the house that the boys and I would be staying in was ready and stocked. Declan also said that Anaya had picked up the stuff that Max requested for the boys and had already dropped it all at the house.

I didn't know who Anaya was but Max's face gentled when Declan mentioned her name. I didn't think that Max was the kind of man who would've had sex with me *twice* if he had a woman, but he'd been clear he wasn't relationship material so maybe he just had *friends*. The kind he had sex with without the hassle of the relationship part. That thought didn't sit well—as a matter of fact, it churned my stomach. Couple that with Max asking this woman to buy stuff for my kids and I felt a little nauseous.

"What's wrong?" Max asked after a few minutes of silence.

Instead of asking him the real question, the one burning my stomach, I decided to touch on the topic that was somewhat safe, or at least the issue that needed to be settled that didn't make me sound like a crazy-jealous woman who didn't understand the difference between stress-driven sex and feelings.

"You shouldn't've bought the boys anything."

"What?"

"Whatever you asked your *friend* to pick up for the boys. You shouldn't be buying them stuff. If they need something, I'll get it for them."

"My friend?"

"Anaya."

I tried, I really, *really*, did. But I failed to keep the inflection from my tone when I said the woman's name.

I knew just how unsuccessful I'd been when Max smiled.

"Anaya."

That was all he said, just her name like it meant something to him and it should mean something to me. The pancakes from this morning were sitting in my stomach like a brick, threatening to make a reappearance.

That's when I knew with a hundred-percent certainty last night had been a huge mistake. I was jealous and I couldn't hide it.

"Yeah, her. But you can't—"

"We don't know how long we'll be staying at the house. Liam's six and Elijah's four. They're gonna be bored outta their heads sittin' around a house they're not allowed to leave. I asked my teammate, Kyle, to ask his fiancée if she had time if she could run to the mall, or wherever the hell it is women buy shit, and pick up some stuff to keep the boys occupied. I didn't ask her to go all-out and fill the house to overflowing, but I also didn't give her direction other than for her to pick up Liam a train set, Elijah that stuffed animal he keeps talking about, and that book they like for you to read them. So, it's a crapshoot what the house will look like. There might be just those three things, it might look like Christmas morning times ten. I have no clue. What I do know is, there's enough shit swirling around those two, enough change and traveling that if I can give them a few things or a lot of things to fill their minds and make this a little easier for them—hate to say it because it's gonna piss you off, but I don't give a shit if it makes you mad."

I'd pretty much stopped paying attention to everything Max had said after the stuffed animal and book part. I couldn't believe Max had paid attention enough to see my kid was sad he'd lost his favorite toy. I also figured it'd be a miracle if anyone could find the stuffed parrot Blu from Eli's favorite movie, *Rio*.

Wet hit my eyes and I didn't try to hide my gratitude at his thoughtfulness.

"Thank you."

"Babe."

"Really, Max, thank you for that. Elijah's upset Blu's gone. I know it might be silly, but he's slept with that parrot nearly every night of his life. It means a lot to me that you saw he was upset and you tried to do something to ease that for him. I'm sorry I was bitchy about it. But it's not lost on me I can't give my kids nice hotels and dinners. And I might be able to pull off a few extra toys for them to have at the safehouse, but I could never give them Christmas, let alone

Christmas times ten. Part of it is I'm jealous I can't do that for my boys. The other part is I don't want them getting used to it, because they'll be disappointed in the future when they don't get it from me. And part of it is, I feel like shit you're spending your money on them when we're nothing more than three strangers and a job that will be over in a few days.

"But even with all of that, I want you to know I'm beyond grateful for how cool you're being to them. They haven't had a lot of good in their lives and they've never had a man do anything that was kind. So thank you for that, too. I promise you that I won't let them forget your generosity. They'll remember that there are men out there who are good and strong and protective, men that they should be like when they get older."

"Christ," Max grunted.

"Max?"

"You have no idea." His voice sounded low and rough—full of gravel and grit—the tone he used when he was pounding into me.

"No clue about what?"

"How deep you cut me when you're being open and honest. You have no clue that when you say shit like that to me, whisper my name, give me your fears, I wish I was a different man. I wish I was a clean slate, free of the lessons I've learned. I wish I could be the man you'll eventually find and I'm jealous of some asshole that's nothing more than a figment of my imagination. Because when he finds you, and you give him what you just gave me, he's gonna rightfully hand you the world. And I wish like hell I could be that man."

I sucked in a breath so deep I was surprised there was any oxygen left. But no one had fallen over dead from suffocation and Max continued.

"The three of you are not strangers. You're not just a job, though it's important you know I'm taking the threat against you seriously and I will not let anything harm you or the boys. But you aren't that, Eva, you're a fuck of a lot more."

Now I thought I was the one who was going to fall over dead from suffocation because I wasn't breathing at all. My heart was hammering in my chest, my lungs were burning, and my head was filled with a yearning that wasn't healthy.

I didn't want Max to want to be the man he thought I'd eventually find. Mostly because he'd flat-out said he'd never actually be that man and that hurt someplace deep inside. But him saying he *wanted* to be, but in the next moment taking it back, killing the dream, hurt worse.

And lastly, I knew I'd never find a man to spend my life with. I had two boys I had to raise into men. I needed to mend the pain my bad choices had caused them and find some slice of peace for myself. Those efforts wouldn't allow me to ever find a partner. I was destined to be alone, and until Max had said what he'd said, I was okay with that.

Now my head was filled with garbage.

Some of it had to do with the sex. Some had to do with the fact I plainly just liked Max. Some had to do with the kindness he'd shone a woman who didn't deserve it. Some of it was how he was with my boys.

None of it mattered.

All of it was just junk filling my head with the stupid idea I could have something that I couldn't.

Max would never be mine.

Not ever.

And that didn't hurt, it destroyed me.

CHAPTER 18

Anaya didn't go a little overboard. She went crazy.

Elijah had fallen asleep in the car about an hour ago. This was after driving for six hours and stopping to get dinner. The TVs in the headrest were a godsend and had kept the boys occupied. Unfortunately, that meant there was a whole lot of silence during the drive.

Eva had damn near shut down. She gave one word answers when she could, would hum her agreement, and grunt her negative responses to any questions I asked.

This should've been good. I needed to distance myself from her, and not getting to know her any better was a great way to do just that. However, the quiet gave me too much time to think my fucked-up thoughts. What it didn't do was give me time to sort myself.

I used the hours in the car to ponder all the reasons why I was the way I was. I'd gone all the way back to the beginning and started wondering what in the hell was so broken in my mother that she loved an abusive dick more than her own child. I would never know because I'd never asked. But as hard as I tried, I couldn't for the life of me figure out why she'd given me up into foster care instead of leaving my dad and keeping me.

I was an unlovable burden.

Then I deliberated what was so wrong with me that my aunt and uncle couldn't love me. Sure, they'd taken me in. Not because I was the son of my aunt's sister, but because they got money each month for my care. I was just a kid, but I remember the conversation clearly. They did not hide that shit from me and straight out asked how much money they'd receive. My dad was loaded after all, so they hit

paydirt. They did not use that money to take care of me. They didn't even use it to move into a better home in a nicer neighborhood. They didn't save it for my college education. They bought me the bare minimum and they bought themselves cars, clothes, and vacations I was not welcome to attend. And the money had afforded them babysitters. Which I spent a good amount of time with so they could go to fancy dinners to wear their nice clothes and take their trips.

I was an unlovable meal-ticket.

By the time my thoughts went to Pam and her bullshit, I was no closer to figuring out why not a single person in my life could love me.

Therefore, it was me who was broken, damaged, and not good enough.

I was the common denominator.

And even if I wanted to fix myself—which I didn't—so a woman could give herself to me, I didn't have the first clue how to do it.

The fuck of it was, I'd never really contemplated my life so thoroughly.

I just went through life protecting myself, not trusting anyone to get close.

But it wasn't until I watched Eva lean into the back seat, unbuckle Eli from his car seat, and carry him into the house that I wondered if I'd missed out on something.

Was there more to life?

It was with those thoughts that I opened the front door of the safehouse and saw no less than twenty bags piled in the middle of the room, that I realized I had no idea what Christmas times ten meant, because I'd never had a real Christmas.

Yeah, *fuck yeah*, I'd missed out on a lot.

After Eva had laid Elijah down and Liam had changed into pajamas, both mother and son had come back into the living room. My eyes went from the bags Anaya had dropped off to Liam's eyes, then up to Eva's. I couldn't read either of their expressions.

"What's all that?"

"I asked a friend to pick up some stuff for you and your brother," I started.

"That's for us?"

"Yeah, but before you tear into anything, your mom needs to go through it and make sure it's okay for you to have."

That was the right thing to say, right?

I thought it was, giving Eva the final say on what the boys got to keep, but she kept her face completely blank.

"Mom?"

"That's a lot of stuff, sweetheart. We'll go through it in the morning. But I don't want you to get your hopes up. We won't be here all that long, so I don't think we need all..." Eva's hand swept out, motioning to the bags. "That."

It was then I understood what she'd meant about disappointment—Liam's face fell and I wanted to kick my own ass for not talking to Eva about my plan first, then for not giving Anaya a limit. Not that it was her fault—she'd done what I'd asked and got some shit for the boys. It was my fault completely I hadn't put a cap on that.

"It looks like there's some clothes in some of the bags, too," I tried to defend.

"Right," Eva mumbled. "It's been a long day, why don't we head back to the bedroom and lie down? There's a TV in there you can watch for a bit."

Liam nodded his easy acceptance then turned to me. "Thanks again for dinner."

"You're welcome, kid. Sleep tight."

"You'll...um... you'll be here in the morning?"

"Yep. I'll be here."

"Night, Max."

"Night, bud."

Eva didn't say anything as she walked away, which actually said more than I wanted to admit. I'd totally fucked up.

Damn.

I pulled out my phone and called Kyle.

"You there?" he asked when he picked up.

"Yeah. Just wanted to call to check in and say thanks for sending Anaya out."

"She was worried she got too much, but she also knew they didn't have anything, since everything they brought with them was in the car. She said there's some clothes and toiletries and shit for the kids and for Eva. Shoes, too, but she had to guess on the sizes."

Well, that explained why there were so many bags.

"She did great, I appreciate it."

"We figured we'd come over there tomorrow at ten. Didn't want you to have to leave the house, but there's a lot to go over."

"Might be a lot for the boys. Elijah, the youngest, is shy and extremely timid. And Liam's not far from that but more watchful. Let me talk to Eva later tonight if she's still awake after she gets Liam down. Then we'll talk to the kids in the morning and feel them out. Eli's finally coming around and talking to me. I don't want to have a setback with him. And, fuck, Liam's been through a lot and the last two days, he's been cooped up in a car. We're gonna have to play that by ear."

That was met with silence and it stretched long enough I called out, "Kyle?"

"Yeah, right. Just call us in the morning."

"Who's got the first shift watching the house?"

"Dec. He rolled out of here five minutes ago. Should be circling the block by now."

"Right. I'll call him."

"Glad you're back. Hope I get to meet Eva and the boys tomorrow."

Kyle disconnected and I dismissed his weird as hell comment about meeting Eva and the kids. Instead, I dialed Declan.

"Hey," Dec greeted. "I'm just coming on your block now. I'm gonna do a drive-by, get the lay of the land. Then I was gonna call you so you don't shoot my ass when I do a walk-around."

"Before you do that, knock on the door."

"Everything okay?"

Fuck, no, everything is not okay.

"Yep. Just want a face-to-face. Kyle mentioned everyone coming over tomorrow. Want to talk to you about that."

"Give me five."

"Copy that."

I hung up the call and pocketed my phone just as Eva was walking back into the living room.

"Liam asleep already?" I asked.

"No, he's thirsty. I was gonna check the kitchen."

Those nine words were the most she'd said to me in hours. But they were said in a way that was devoid of emotion.

"Everything all right?"

"Just a lot on my mind."

At least that was honest and she didn't shut me out, lie and tell me she was fine when she damn well wasn't.

"Listen, my team wants to come over here in the morning. I told them I needed to talk to you about that first."

"Why?"

"I don't want Liam and Eli to be scared. Brooks, Thad, Kyle, and Declan are..." Damn, how did I describe my team? "They can be, shit, Eva, I don't know. They're all big men. My size and bigger. Eli was freaked out when he met me, I don't know how he'll react to four strange men in the house. And Declan, he can be gruff, not to mention, he's got a scar across his neck. One look at him and Liam might take you and his brother and try to make a run for it."

Eva's teeth scored her bottom lip, her brows creased, and her crazy-beautiful yellowish eyes held mine. But she remained silent.

"What are you thinking about?"

"They're your friends."

"Yeah, they are. They're all good men—"

"They're your friends," she repeated. "So of course they're good men. I trust you."

I felt that statement in my gut, my chest, and for some unexplainable reason, in my dick.

"You trust me?"

"Well, yeah, of course I do."

"What does that have to do with my team coming over?"

"It means I trust that you wouldn't put my kids in danger. I'll talk to Eli and Liam and explain that your friends are coming over. They'll both be wary, because that's how they are. But they'll be okay. It will take time for them to warm up like it did with you, but if your friends are patient, it will happen."

Yeah, I'd totally missed out on life, but I didn't want to miss out on Eva. I wasn't sure what that meant in the long run, but in the here and now, I wanted more of her.

"Tell me what happened in the car."

"Huh?"

"The car, babe. After you rightfully laid me out about not talking to you before asking Anaya to buy shit for the boys."

"I didn't lay you out," she argued. What she didn't do was tell me why she'd grown quiet, then shut me out for seven hours.

"Yeah, Eva, you did. And you did it in a way that cut me to the quick. What you didn't do was throw a shit hemorrhage or be a bitch. You laid it out for me and I want you to know, I heard you. And now, seeing all these bags and Liam's expression when he saw them, I understand where you were coming from. It wasn't cool of me to go around you and not ask. It won't happen again. Anaya's a good woman. Her heart was in the right place. I talked to Kyle and he said there's clothes, shoes, and shower shit in there, too. But she'd worried she went overboard."

"I wasn't mad about the toys," Eva murmured.

"Then why'd you pull into yourself?"

"I...um..."

There was a light tap on the front door. Eva's body jerked before she went solid, and her eyes widened in fear.

"That's just Declan," I told her.

Eva nodded but still looked unsure.

"I wish like fuck I knew what's been on your mind," I muttered as I walked to the front door.

"What?"

"Nothing I want more than to pull you into my arms and wash that fear away," I stopped and told her. "But without knowing where you're at, I shouldn't touch you."

I left her standing where she was, put my hand to my hip, unholstered my weapon, and checked the peephole just as Dec tapped again.

I unlocked the deadbolt and opened the door.

"That was fast."

"Street's dead," Declan explained. "Thought we'd do a walk-around, then I'd circle the block."

I stepped away from the door, allowing Declan to enter, and open holstered my gun when the door was shut and locked.

I followed Declan's gaze across the room. Eva was where I left her—no less tense.

"So, you're Eva," Dec drawled and walked farther into the room.

And just like she did the first time I met her, Eva's armor clicked into place. Gone was any trace of fear—she stood taller, her hands balled into fists at her sides, and her mask of indifference replaced her soft features I'd grown accustomed to.

I hated it.

Clearly, Eva had no idea her attitude and posture gave away just how insecure and unsure she was.

"And you're Declan," she returned.

Dec glanced at me then back to Eva. The man was no dummy, he saw it, too. She was afraid of him, maybe not physically, but emotionally he could decimate her.

"Your kids settling in okay?" he asked.

And as if Declan's question conjured up the boy, Liam appeared in the hall.

"Mom?" His hesitant tone had me stepping forward, blocking Declan from Liam's view.

"Come on out, bud," I instructed before Eva could answer. "I want you to meet my friend, Declan."

"Your friend?"

Liam's shaky tone made me wish Jay Dawkins was still roaming the streets somewhere so I could be the one Tex called on to put his ass six-feet under.

"Yeah. Declan and I work together. He came over to check on us."

Liam came out of the shadows but stopped at his mother's side. Eva's arm wrapped around his shoulders and she held him close.

"Declan's here to help Max watch over us," Eva told Liam.

"Hey, Liam."

My body jolted and my eyes cut to Dec. Never had I heard him talk so gently.

"Hi."

"Bet you're happy to be out of that car." Dec continued to blow my mind with his soft tone.

"Yeah. It was long."

"Looks like Max hooked you and your brother up with lots of stuff." Dec motioned to the bags that were still on the floor and I wanted to throat punch him for the reminder.

"Mom says we'll go through them tomorrow. She said we'll keep what we need but it's not cool to waste Max's money on stuff we won't use since we won't be here very long."

"Sounds to me like your mom's pretty smart. No sense in being wasteful."

Huh? What?

"Eva. Liam. It was nice meeting you both. Sorry to have disturbed you." Dec tipped his chin. "Max, a word in private?"

I followed Dec to the sliding glass door off the dining room when Liam spoke, bringing me to a halt.

"Are you leaving?"

"No, bud. I'm just gonna step out back with Declan."

"You won't—"

"Liam, I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying with you, your brother, and your mom. Promise."

Liam nodded and wrapped his arms around Eva's middle. I couldn't miss her tight features—she felt her son's attachment and uncertainty and she felt it deep.

* * *

DEC AND I STEPPED OUTSIDE, AND BEFORE I HAD THE SLIDING DOOR closed, Dec started.

"It's too bad that motherfucker's already in the ground."

I felt the same way but was taken aback Declan had voiced his thoughts.

"What?"

"That kid in there is jumpy as a rabbit. Doesn't want you out of his sight. Kid doesn't behave like that unless he's been traumatized, scared, or both. I reckon that boy's both."

"He is," I confirmed.

Declan knew all about childhood trauma, not that he spoke about his past. However, everyone knew he and his twin sister, Violet, had been separated and placed into foster care after their parents' deaths. In a cruel twist of fate, Violet had not remembered she'd had a brother.

"Seems pretty attached to you," he noted a second time.

I didn't say anything because there was nothing to say. Declan was smart, he was also observant. He didn't need me to confirm what he saw.

"Is this what you wanted to talk to me in private about?"

"Tom's people got Landry to talk."

"Tom's people?"

Tom Anderson was the president of the United States. He was also a personal friend of Zane's; they were such good friends they were on a first-name basis. Something I still wasn't used to calling him even after several years, but the man became cranky if someone on the team addressed him by anything other than his first name. And a cranky Tom Anderson didn't make for a good day.

Harry Landry was a scumbag of the highest order. He trafficked most anything of value but his favorite was the human market, and he'd been extremely successful until Anaya and Emerson took him down. Even thinking about it now, pride hit my chest. Those two fierce women had done what we couldn't—find and capture one of the major players in the Omni organization.

Declan's gaze turned dark when he continued, "He didn't give Zane specifics, just an update. Landry's started to talk. We should have something to work with soon."

"You know as well as I do, intel collected under duress isn't always reliable."

"Duress?" Declan barked out a harsh laugh. "You mean torture. Everyone is well-aware Landry could be fucking with us. Apparently, Ashaki Maloof has confirmed—"

"Seriously? Ashaki Maloof? Who knows if that bitch is on the up and up?"

Ashaki was supposedly undercover CIA agent. When we first met the woman she was allegedly posing as the daughter of an antiquity dealer, Tatiana, Brooks' wife, was tracking. Ashaki's cover was solid until Tatiana and Brooks saw the agent in a compromising position with her "father". And in the time since then, Ashaki Maloof hadn't done a damn thing that made me trust her or the intel she'd supplied. Either the woman was seriously committed to the cause and she had no issues with terrorists, traffickers, and dirt bags fucking her or she'd turned. I couldn't figure the woman out therefore I didn't trust a fucking word that came out of her CIA-trained mouth.

"She got Emilio Ruiz to talk," Declan informed me.

It would seem a lot had happened while I'd been out of the office, so to speak. Ruiz was a member of Omni, however his daughter had been the target of a kidnapping plot and he was no longer feeling the love for the organization he was once balls deep in.

"Oh, yeah? And what did Ruiz give up?"

"He confirmed Icon Fashions was a major player in the Omni organization. The way Ruiz explains it, Icon is the upper echelon."

"So Garrett was right?"

Our in-house intel specialist, Garrett, had been adamant Icon Fashions was involved with Omni. I trusted Garrett's information the same as I trusted Tex's—that was to say explicitly. Neither man had ever led us astray. However, Garrett had been working on a hunch, which wasn't unusual; we'd all learned to listen to our instincts. But Garrett nor Tex had been able to find a link.

"Yes. Zane gave him the green light to start digging."

"Like Garrett wasn't already tunneling his way through Icon."

"Yeah, well, now it seems the CIA boys are feeling generous. They have an agent in Icon and kicked some intel Garrett's way."

"Never gets any easier dealing with those dicks," I mumbled. "No offense."

"None taken. One of the many reasons I walked away."

There was a story there, one Declan had never fully shared. We knew he'd been undercover for the CIA in Brazil and shit had gone sideways. Enough that it tweaked Declan and he left but other than that, he'd never shared. Or at least, he'd never shared with me. And if Zane Lewis knew what happened, he'd never tell.

"First things first," Dec continued. "Zane was clear that Eva's top priority. Omni's not going anywhere. We'll handle Eva's situation for Tex, get the three of them safe and set up somewhere new then we'll finish off Omni."

Safe and set up somewhere new. Why did the 'somewhere new' in that statement make my gut clench?

"Surprised Zane's setting aside Omni for Eva," I noted.

We were at war with Omni. The operation had started with clear and concise parameters; that was, until things turned personal. Emerson, Thad's wife, had been kidnapped and all the women attached to a man who worked for Zane Lewis had been threatened, and that included the president's daughter, Erin Anderson-Doyle.

Now Zane, Tom Anderson, and every member of Z Corps wanted a piece of the men in charge of Omni.

"It shouldn't surprise you. After everything Tex has done for Zane over the years—never asking for anything in return. No way the first time Tex asks for a favor, Zane's not gonna drop everything and give it his full attention."

"That's not the surprising part. You know what Eva did to Bubba. Zane's loyalty to the brotherhood is unshakable. It doesn't matter to Zane he never served beside Bubba—brotherhood is brotherhood."

"And you're a part of that same community. Once a SEAL, always a SEAL and all that shit." Declan paused and narrowed his eyes. "You have a problem with this mission?"

"Nope."

"Then why'd you bring that shit up? We all know who Eva is and what she did. We've all also read the reports so we know why she did it. Bubba and Zoey agreed with Tex that she needed help. You don't have to trust her to protect her."

"Come again?"

"Don't bite my head off, brother. I know you and that's to say you don't trust anyone but Brooks, Thad, and Kyle. You don't—"

"You do know you're on that list, too. And I trust Anaya, Emerson, and Tatiana."

Declan crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head.

"You held Tatiana at gunpoint—"

"We were in the middle of a fucking mission when she suddenly got involved and that same fucking day my head almost got blown off. What the fuck was I supposed to think?" I defended my actions even though I now regretted them.

"You called Anaya out in front of the whole company," he reminded me.

Thankfully, I had not pointed a gun at the woman, but I had been a dick.

"Again, Dec, she shows up in the middle of a mission and has ties to one of the men we were investigating."

"She took a fucking beating for me and Kyle," Dec snapped and I flinched.

"Part of why I trust her," I noted. "And just to say, I backed Emerson from the start. I understood why she ghosted Thad and I took her back in that shitshow. Just because I'm an untrusting dick doesn't mean I'm stupid and incapable of seeing reason. I know why Eva did what she did, but more than that, I fucking understand. That woman loves her children and she'll do anything to keep them safe."

"Is there something I need to know about you and Eva—"

"How 'bout this, Dec? I unload all the shit that's swirling around in my head when you explain to me how in the actual hell you think it's a good idea to fuck Autumn Pierce."

Declan's torso jerked then stiffened. "What the fuck?"

"You heard me."

"Yeah, I did. And how the fuck do you know—"

"I followed you. You've been disappearing a lot. I was worried —"

"Worried about what? That I was somehow fucking over the team?"

I reared back in disgust that my teammate would think I'd doubt his loyalty.

"No, you asshole. I was worried about *you*. You and Kyle came back from Timor-Leste and you were even more withdrawn. Then Ivy and Violet gave birth and you went even deeper into yourself. I know nothing about you, except you carry a heavy burden and you're hellbent to carry that alone. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

Declan went still and remained silent.

"Your past isn't my business, I get it. But what you're doing with Autumn is gonna hurt a lot of people. Emerson is gonna be devastated her sister has been living close and she's been denied the knowledge. Thaddeus is gonna be pissed his wife is hurt, and Brooks is gonna take his back. You're risking the team for a piece of—"

"If you finish that, you and me got problems," he growled.

"So it's like that?"

"It's not—"

"If you think that it's not my business, then you'd be wrong. My team. My business. I get it, brother. The need to let off steam, bury your problems, even if it's for a few hours, but Autumn Pierce is not the woman to do that shit with."

"Is that what you're doing with Eva? Burying your problems for a few hours?"

I had to admit his question held merit, which was part of what was swirling around in my head. It sure didn't feel that way, but her situation was extreme. Someone was trying to kill her—and now me—and I was trying to prevent that from happening. I didn't know if I could trust what I was feeling, what I did know was it felt damn good to be around her.

"Maybe," I admitted. "But Eva is not Autumn—not even close. Autumn means something to this team. She means something to me—she saved your sorry-ass life and every time I see that scar on your neck, I'm reminded that if she hadn't taken out the fucker whose blade sliced your throat, none of us would've gotten to you in time."

Declan lost none of the harshness in his voice but he did something I hadn't expected.

He shared.

"She's the only person who gets me. I don't need to tell her shit because she just knows. Not the details, not the circumstances, but she knows my loss. She understands the demons that live inside of me because she has them, too. She doesn't try to fix me or talk to me because she knows what's broken will always be broken. And in exchange, I give her the same. I know who she is, I understand why she's compelled to do what she does. We know who we are and what we have—when we're together, everything else falls away. We don't have to pretend to be anything but who we really are—two lost souls that are emotionally bankrupt and dead inside. What Autumn is not and never will be, is a piece of ass."

"And what loss is that, Declan?"

"The kind that eats you alive—every single day it gnaws itself deeper. The kind that never goes away. A version of what lives inside of you and colors your world. You think every person is out to get you, when in reality the only person who's preventing you from living a life that doesn't include you putting everybody around you through a series of tests before you let them in even a fraction is *you*."

Declan moved toward the sliding glass door but stopped before he opened it.

"I'm not going to insult you by asking you twice, but if you need to take a step back to get your head sorted, I can—"

"I'm good," I bit out.

"Right. Then I'm gonna do a walk-through of the neighborhood."

Declan let himself into the house but I didn't move.

I needed a minute to clear my thoughts.

I should've been thinking about the Omni case and the new intel that had come in while I was in Florida—but I wasn't. The next best thing would've been to figure out what the hell was going on with Eva and why I was drawn to her—but I wasn't doing that, either.

Instead, I stood alone in the darkness and thought about what Dec had said about me testing those around me—and damn if he wasn't right. I did do that. I did it to protect myself because he'd also been correct when he accused me of thinking everyone was out to get me.

But everyone was, weren't they?

Everyone had an agenda, even me. Some were more fucked-up than others but everyone was using someone to get what they wanted.

The question was, what was Eva using me for?

What was it that she wanted?

And an even bigger question was, what was it I was using her to get?

CHAPTER 19

"Is that what you're doing with Eva? Burying your problems for a few hours?"

"Maybe. But Eva is not Autumn—not even close. Autumn means something to this team. She means something to me."

So, I'd overheard Max and Declan talking.

Eva is not Autumn.

Autumn means something to me.

I'd hurried Liam back into the bedroom after I found a bottle of water in the kitchen, which incidentally was where I was when I heard Max telling Declan that I didn't mean anything to him. And after that, I tossed and turned all night, falling into spells of sleep, then I'd wake up and it would start all over again. Me replaying what Max had said until the sun started spilling through the window.

Now I was up and I still couldn't stop thinking about it.

All that shit he'd said to me on the drive was just that—shit.

He was a liar.

But I couldn't understand why he'd lie.

Why would he say he wished he could be the man to give me the life he thought I wanted if I didn't mean anything to him?

But you aren't that, Eva, you're a fuck of a lot more.

I guess more than strangers wasn't much.

Giving up on going back to sleep and not wanting to wake Liam and Eli, I slipped out of bed as quietly as I could and made my way into the kitchen.

Once I had the coffee set to percolate, I moved into the dining room and looked out into the backyard.

It was much bigger than the yard I had in Florida, complete with a swing set, something I wished I could afford to give my boys.

"You're up early."

Deep, rumbly, and gruff.

Only this time, Max's voice didn't send chills down my arms, it churned my stomach.

"I wasn't sure Brooks could find a place with a decent backyard and play set but he pulled it off."

My already stiff body went stiffer, then I whirled around and came face-to-face with Max. But this time I wasn't dazzled by his blue eyes or his handsome face. I was even impervious to his bare chest that I had the misfortune of getting an eyeful of.

"Just stop."

"Stop what?"

"The bullshit," I spat out.

Then I watched with more attention than I should have as Max crossed his arms over his chest, every muscle flexing and jumping, reminding me how powerful his large body was.

"What bullshit?"

"You know, I didn't take you for a man who played games. Guess I was wrong."

His blue eyes sparked. This Max I could handle. This Max, the pissed-off one that frowned and breathed fire, was easier to deal with.

"Woman, straight up, I don't have any idea what the fuck you're talking about. But I do not play games."

"You know the part I just don't get? I'd already proved I was easy so it wasn't like you had to sweet talk me to get me into bed, so all that shit you said in the car was meaningless. You didn't have to say it, I would've fucked you again."

"Nothing easy about you," Max growled and stepped closer. "And never once have I sweet talked a woman to get her under me."

"No, not you. You just sweet talk after the deed's done—spouting bullshit about wishing you were the man who could give me something more. When we both know that's just not the case. I'm nothing—just a woman to bury your troubles in for a few hours. And you know the fucked up thing, Max? I was okay with that. I knew that's

what I was. Hell, I knew that's what you were. Once I pulled my shit together, I understood what we'd done and why we'd done it. But then you ruined it. You fed me a line of bullshit and lied."

Yeah, oh yeah, Max was pissed.

Fire and ice.

I turned to walk into the kitchen, not because I was afraid of him but because I needed caffeine and if I was being honest, it hurt to look at him.

But I didn't get far.

Max's hand curled around my shoulder, stopping my exit, and he moved to step in front of me.

"Eva—"

"Let go of me."

"We need to talk about what you think—"

"I said, let go of me. Now, Max."

His hand fell away and he stared down at me with eyes so blue I took a moment to gaze into them. Study them. Really look at the specks of darker blue that were scattered about. I would never have the opportunity again, not this close.

And it sucked that even hurt and angry, I couldn't stop myself. It sucked even more, Max turned out to be a liar. Not because I thought we were going to sail into the sunset together, but because believing in Max, falling into bed with him, and for a moment hoping I could have him, meant I was still the same foolish, stupid woman I'd vowed not to be.

"You came up with all of that because you heard part of a conversation with Declan," he surmised. "You know, you could've asked me about it. But instead you ran away, hid, and let your imagination take over. All you had to do was ask and I would've told you that when Declan asked me if I was using you to bury my troubles and I answered with a "maybe" it was because my head's jacked and I'm not ready to think about how I feel about you, let alone talk about it with Declan. But you didn't ask, you got your ass in the air, locked yourself in the bedroom, and didn't come back out. Now you're standing in front of me calling me a liar."

"And I'm supposed to believe that? I heard you tell him that woman meant something to you, and I didn't."

"Yeah, Eva, you are, because it's the truth. And you didn't hear me tell Dec you don't mean something to me," he returned. "You

heard me tell him that you're not Autumn. Which, given the opportunity, I would've explained all the ways you are not her—two of the most important ones are: you aren't the sister-in-law of one of my teammates. The other is, you weren't kidnapped, sold into the sex trade, forced into a life that led you to have sex with men against your will, then compelled you to live years seeking vengeance.

"And I would've told you that Autumn Pierce means something to me because she saved Declan's life. But what that something is, is not romantic; it's not attraction, it's gratitude. But again, you didn't give me that chance, you made assumptions—ones that were incorrect and turned your bullshit around onto me."

Well, dammit to hell. He was kind of right. More than kind of, actually. I did do those things. I had made assumptions. I had hidden in the bedroom so I could lick my wounds.

"You're right. I didn't ask," I told him. "And I'm sorry about what happened to Autumn, that's terrible."

Max kept staring at me, face hard, body taut, and suddenly I noticed it wasn't all anger in his features. There was something else there, too.

"You're sorry about what happened to Autumn, but not sorry you called me a liar?"

"I'm sorry about that, too," I admitted.

Max shook his head and some of the irritation slid away. "You know, any other time, any other woman pulled the shit you just pulled, I would've walked away. Last night before Dec got here, you told me you trusted me. Not only that, you went so far as to say you trusted me with your kids. Then you overhear part of a conversation and now I'm suspect. That's not trust, Eva, that's bullshit." Max paused and I figured out what was beyond the frustration that shone clear, it was hurt. "I'm gonna go take a shower," he informed me and started to walk away.

"Max?" I called when he was nearing the mouth of the hall.

"Yeah?"

"I'm..." I trailed off because I wasn't sure what I wanted to say.

"You're what, Eva?"

"Confused. Afraid. I don't know what to believe. I think you know I'm not a very good judge of character. And well, I jump to conclusions. It was uncool and—"

"It was uncool. But you know what's fucking worse? Is you lumping me in with the assholes in your past. I am not them—not even remotely close. So while you're sifting through all those conclusions you jumped to, cast your mind back to the beginning. I've never lied to you—not once—even when the truth was probably a little uncomfortable for you to hear, I still gave it to you straight. And I'll give you more, Eva. I've never been open and honest about where I'm at in my head with anyone. I've never paused and considered that maybe I've missed out because I can't get over something that happened over ten years ago. But I have to tell you, that shit you just fed me, tells me that maybe I've been right, it's just not fucking worth it."

And with that kill shot, he was gone.

Gone in a way I should let him be forever—emotionally checked out.

That was safer.

I poured my coffee, went back to the sliding glass window, and stared out into the backyard.

Max had asked his friend to find us a place with a swing set. He'd asked another friend to get the boys stuff so they would feel comfortable. He'd been honest with me from the start—even when his honesty hurt, he still gave it.

He'd given in and allowed me to tell my boys we were going on vacation instead of the truth. Then he'd played along with my stupid plan until he couldn't any longer. And even after the jig was up, he cushioned the truth and protected my relationship with my boys.

He bought Eli a blue parrot. He bought the boys' favorite book.

And I'd repaid all of that by running away and hiding instead of having the courage to ask him about what I'd heard.

Now Max was gone. *I should leave it alone and let him stay mad at me.*

That was the wise thing to do.

The smart thing.

But my stomach roiled at the thought, my heart clenched, and my temples throbbed.

I understood there wasn't and never would be anything permanent between Max and me. I knew there was no future, no hope, but I still had to make things right. I had to make him understand why I'd reacted the way I had, even if it was for my peace of mind.

I had to change, be better, take responsibility for my actions and the frustration and hurt I'd caused.

But how I was going to do that, I didn't know.

And after my boys had woken up, eaten breakfast, and gotten dressed for the day, I was no closer to figuring it out.

When Max sat them down to tell them about Declan, Brooks, Kyle, and Thad coming over, the gentle way he did it, the softness in his tone, only made the ache in my chest hurt worse.

I was lost.

CHAPTER 20

Eva was giving me a wide berth and the distance she put between us was beginning to piss me off.

The physical reserve, I understood.

The emotional detachment made me want to grab her and lock her in the other room so she couldn't avoid me.

"I think we need to call Bubba." That was Declan's suggestion as the team sat around the table discussing options while Eva paced. Her eyes grew round, then she immediately looked at her feet.

"I think you're right," Kyle agreed. "We've been over everything else."

Kyle was correct. We'd spent the last two hours dissecting Eva's life. We'd gone over Jay Dawkins and his partner in crime, Novak, which Eva was careful to discuss only after the boys were back in the bedroom watching TV so they didn't overhear.

I hadn't learned anything new about Jay and Eva's relationship—however, my team had learned a great deal about Eva and what she and the boys had gone through.

We'd also touched on Liam's biological father, a man who was not Jay Dawkins, but someone she'd met when she was seventeen. He was older, promised her the world, she fell for it, he got her pregnant and took off immediately, moving to the lower forty-eight as she called it, and she hadn't heard from him since.

Tex had done a thorough background check on the dude and he was currently serving a nickel for fraud and identity theft so he'd been cleared.

We'd exhausted all other avenues—since Eva had moved to Florida, she lived clean and kept to herself. There was no indication someone there wanted to harm her. Therefore it was time to call Bubba.

That was a call no one wanted to make. The man had been through hell, including losing his father and twin brother. Not a single one of us wanted to pull him into this mess, but unfortunately, we needed to know about Alaska.

And he was the only one who could weigh in and give an opinion about Tracy Eklund, the only person still alive in the duo that hired Eva to kill Bubba and Zoey.

"Damn," I muttered and looked at Eva. "We wouldn't—"

"Maybe I should leave the room or something," she whispered.

"Why?" Tex's voice boomed from my cell phone laying in the middle of the table.

"Maybe..." Eva hesitated, then, "I don't think you should call Mark at all. Actually, I would really prefer if you didn't bother him about this."

"We need his help," Thad carefully told her.

Eva's gaze swung to my friend and her lips pinched tight before she spoke.

"No, *we* don't need anything. *I* need the help. And it is beyond anything that's acceptable. I don't want to involve him."

"Acceptable—"

"You know," Eva spat, cutting off Thad. "You know what I did. And now what, the tables are turned and someone wants me dead and I get to ask Mark Wright for help? Where was his help when I dumped him and Zoey off, huh? Who was there to protect him, when I left him for dead with nothing more than a pocketful of junk? I don't get to ask Mark for help. The last thing he needs is to ever hear my name again. He deserves to be left alone."

"Eva—" I tried to cut her off, to warn her that Tex may've already patched Bubba into the call, but she kept going.

"No. Just no. I don't want anyone to bother Mark." Eva shook her head and her eyes cut around the table looking at each man. "I don't get to ask for his help."

"Someone is trying to kill you," Kyle reminded her. "They almost took out Max. If Bubba—"

"I'd rather die a thousand deaths than call Mark. It is not right. I don't get to ask for anything."

"I think I get to decide what's right and what's not," Bubba cut in.

Eva sucked in an audible breath that filled her lungs so full her chest heaved.

"I can't..." she stammered, and I desperately wanted to pull her into my arms but I remained seated.

"Tex briefed me last week, Eva. You need all the help you can get."

I felt the unease rolling off Eva. There wasn't a man in that room who couldn't smell her fear—it coated her skin and leaked from every pore.

"Bubba, have you heard from Sean Kassamali recently?" Declan charged ahead.

Sean was Colin Wright's business partner and now the sole owner of Heritage Plastics, a company that Sean and Colin had grown into one of the largest in Alaska. Bubba had never wanted any part of it, not when his father was alive and not after he passed. Unfortunately, Bubba's twin, Malcom, hadn't felt the same way and had been willing to kill to get his grasping hands on what he thought belonged to him.

Had Malcom not plotted with Tracy Eklund to kill Bubba, he would've found out Bubba had planned on selling his shares of the company to his twin for a dollar.

But Malcom was a greedy fuck and murdered his father, something that might have gone unpunished had he not hired Eva.

"Not since the last time I was in Alaska to deal with the final sale of the houses. I met with Sean to sell him my shares of my dad's company. Why?"

Declan quickly and efficiently gave Bubba a rundown, summing up the last two hours into five minutes. Throughout Dec's explanation, Eva grew more and more rigid until I was worried she was going to snap. The woman looked positively miserable.

"So the working theory is, Chris Peters was hired to take the fall. Or, was he the backup plan?" Bubba asked.

"What do you mean backup plan?" Kyle inquired.

"Well, is someone trying to kill her or take her? Her house was rigged to explode—that says death. A contract was put out to take

her out—that says death. But her car exploding without her in it, and if you’re correct in your assumption, the explosion was meant to kill Max to get him out of the way so someone had a clear shot at Eva—that says kidnapping. Which, if you’re asking my opinion about that, I think you’re wrong about the car. I think that was a mistake. Maybe the guy got spooked and blew his load. Maybe he knew Max saw him and used the car as a diversion to get away. If someone wanted to take Eva, they would’ve done a quick snatch and grab when she was leaving work, or going to the store. Hell, they could’ve easily broken into her house and just taken her.”

“Shit,” Thad mumbled. “I think Bubba’s right.”

“Which brings us back to who wants her dead,” Bubba continued. “And you think it has something to do with the Alaska debacle?”

“This isn’t right,” Eva whispered.

“What’s that, Eva?” Brooks asked.

“This isn’t right,” she repeated louder. “Mark shouldn’t—”

Bubba cut her off. “Eva, earlier you asked who was helping me. The answer is, my team. They knew I was missing and they deployed immediately and went all out to find me and they didn’t give up until they pulled Zoey and me out of the Lake Clark Preserve. That’s who was protecting me. These men are acting as your team now, let them do their job and protect you.”

“I don’t deserve a team,” Eva mumbled.

“Well, lucky for you, Tex believes you do, so he sent in some of the best men in the business to take your back. Use them wisely.”

“That’s just it, I’m tired of using people. It’s just not right. I don’t want anyone else getting hurt because of me. Especially you. I’ve hurt you enough. I don’t understand how you can even stand hearing my name. I almost—”

“I know what you did, Eva. Zoey and I spent a week in hell. But you know what? I’m alive. Zo’s alive. And the silver lining is, I reconnected with Zoey. You were in a bad situation, trapped with no other options and because of that, you were forced to make a decision I’m sure you’re not proud of. But you gave me Zoey. Can’t say that I’m grateful you tried to kill me, but I also know you could’ve dumped us somewhere else and it could’ve been worse. What I can tell you is, I understand, Zoey understands, and we’ve let it go.

We're moving forward, looking on the bright side. I suggest you start doing the same."

That was some of the craziest shit I'd ever heard, but damn if it wasn't true. It was also gracious and if I was in Bubba's shoes, I don't think I'd have it in me to look on the bright side of anything. But that was the difference between me and pretty much everyone else. I didn't have a bright side.

"I'm not proud of what I did," Eva confirmed. "I regret it every day. I regret every decision I've ever made that led me to that day. That's why I can't stand here and ask you to help me. I've taken too much."

"Don't know what to say to that, other than you're gonna have to get over it. If not for you, for your kids. If they lose you, they have nothing. I'm offering you help—take it."

"I'm sorry," Eva said with tears brimming. "I'm so sorry, Mark."

"That's all you needed to say. Now let's get back to Sean," Bubba ordered. "Last time I saw him, he was barely keeping his head above water. With my dad and Malcom gone, the daily operations of Heritage Plastics falls on him. Sean's committed to keeping the company afloat. He's working day and night to do that. Now, I can tell you, Zoey told me Sean's wife, Vivian, hates the company and apparently had been trying to get Sean to sell his shares for years. If that's true, which I believe Zoey, then I'd assume Vivian's not happy her husband is pulling an extra twenty hours a week behind his desk. Though I don't know what that'd have to do with Eva's situation—just giving you what I know."

"And Tracy's husband, Kenneth?" Brooks asked. "Have you been in contact with him?"

"No," Bubba clipped. "I saw him the day I met with the prosecutors. He's hired his wife the best attorney he could find in Anchorage. For obvious reasons Sean's fired him and severed all contact. That's what you do when your personal lawyer's wife plans several deaths including your business partner's murder, and then the subsequent takeover by his crooked son."

It was no surprise Sean had cut ties. What was surprising was, Kenneth was standing by his wife who was also having an affair with Malcom.

Oh, the tangled web you weave when greed and murder mingle.

"Kenneth's standing by his wife?" Kyle sneered. "You've got to be shitting me."

"Wish I were," Bubba mumbled. "I've known the man a long time, my dad trusted him, Sean trusted him. Never thought I'd see the day where Kenneth Eklund defends the woman responsible for my pop's death."

The sadness in Bubba's voice couldn't be missed. Eva was right—not that she didn't deserve Bubba's help, but we were digging up demons that should stay buried.

"Wait." I stood, doing my best thinking while on my feet. "You met with the prosecutors. Did they ask you about Eva?"

"Shit," Tex mumbled. The man had been so quiet, I'd forgotten he was still on the line. "I see where you're going with this."

"They did," Bubba confirmed. "But since Zo and I had already decided we weren't pressing charges in light of Eva's situation, I didn't correct them when they called her Eve Dane. I also didn't tell them I knew where she was."

"So, they're looking for her," I surmised. "But they're looking for Eve Dane."

"And if the prosecutors are looking for Eve Dane to tie up their case and possibly press charges, then Kenneth Eklund would be looking for her, too." Thad picked up the thread and finished it.

"Mother—" Tex started, then stopped. "You're correct. The prosecutor's office is running searches on Eve Dane."

I'd long ago learned not to ask how Tex got his information and how he did it as fast as he did. It seemed there was nothing the man couldn't find.

"If they find that plane, they'll have her prints," Kyle added.

"Plane's been taken care of, no one's gonna find it, because there's nothing to find," Tex told us. "The prosecutor's office was nowhere near finding Eva. They're not even on the right track, but just in case, I wiped Eva's new identity clean. Eva, Liam, and Elijah Dawson no longer exist. Neither does Eva Dawkins for that matter."

I glanced over at Eva as the first tear rolled down her cheek.

Earlier, Eva had told me she was nothing, and now standing in the dining room of a safehouse, Tex wiping her identity clean, she was less than nothing. She was a woman who didn't even exist.

She was no one.

And that was unacceptable.

If I gave her nothing else before we parted ways, she'd know she was something.

Someone special.

CHAPTER 21

I stood frozen, listening to a group of men I didn't know, save Max who I only knew slightly better—and most of that knowledge was in the biblical sense—and Tex, who I only knew from speaking to him over the phone, as they dissected, scrutinized, and investigated every part of my life.

Brooks had been scribbling notes on a pad of paper. Kyle had his tablet out and was scrolling. Thad, Declan, and Max hadn't written anything, nor had they been scrolling, but they were intently participating verbally.

It totally unnerved me—these strangers knew pretty much everything about my life.

Tex already knew everything down to the very last detail because he'd deserved to know all of it before he agreed to help me.

Mark Wright knew what he knew about me, which was to say a lot, and even though I'd done what I had, he'd helped me.

I couldn't begin to wrap my head around that.

And now Tex was doing more for me, and that was interfering with the prosecution of Tracy Eklund.

It wasn't right. I should be in jail.

That was where I belonged.

"Kenneth hired an investigator," Tex announced. "A good one."

"So he found her," Max, who was pacing the room, guessed.

"Yes. He found her," Tex confirmed.

"This is good," Max said, and I glanced in his direction, noting he was speaking to me. "Now we know who took out the contract. We're one step closer."

"Okay," I agreed.

Though it didn't feel good—all of it felt bad, really fucking bad.

"Give me a few hours and I'll call you back." Tex's voice boomed. "Bubba, thanks for your help. Know how difficult it is to dredge up the past."

"Glad I could help. Eva, take care of yourself."

"Thanks...um... you, too, Mark."

"Is that Mark?" Liam shouted from behind me.

Damn. I'd been so caught up in my misery, I'd missed him entering the room.

"Liam, honey, what are you doing?" I asked as my son came closer.

"Is that *the* Mark Wright? I wanna say hi," my son continued.

Okay, this is not good. Not even a little bit.

"This is Mark, who am I speaking to?"

Oh, shit.

"This is Liam. Is it true, what Mom told us about you, that you're a Navy SEAL?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Wow. Mom says you're the bravest person she ever met. She says you're like a hero. Mom says that Navy SEALs are better than superheroes because they're real. I said that Captain America was cooler but she said, and I quote, Mark Wright can beat Captain America any day. Is she right? Could you beat Captain America?"

Mark's deep rumbling laughter came over the line and I closed my eyes.

"Don't know if I could beat Captain America. Though I could totally take Spiderman."

Oh, God, Mark was being a good sport. Laughter from the other men filled the room.

"Really? Spiderman?" Tex sputtered. "I think you mean Captain Underpants."

"Tex, brother, I don't even know who that is but—"

"Tex, too?" Liam cut off Mark. "Wow. This is so cool. Mom says you're a hero, too. I don't need to ask you if you can beat Captain America because you can beat anyone. Mom says she thanks God every day for you. And that's the truth, she totally does. Every night when we say our prayers me and Eli do, too, and Mr. Mark and Miss Zoey, too. All of you. You saved us."

The room went deadly silent. So silent, I could hear my breaths coming out in pants and I really wished my son hadn't announced that.

"That's real kind of you, Liam," Mark said after he cleared his throat.

"Got stuff to do," Tex clipped. "Liam, we'll see you soon."

Before Liam, or I for that matter, could ask what that meant, Tex disconnected, and with him went Mark since Tex had patched him into the call.

"Wow, Mom that was so cool," Liam gushed.

"Yeah, son, it was. What brings you out here?"

"I know you said we had to stay in the room while the adults were talking, but me and Eli are hungry."

"Go on and get them something to eat," Max said. "We'll finish up."

I took a chance and glanced around the table—four sets of eyes were on me. All identical in their inspection yet I couldn't read any of their thoughts.

Damn, damn, damn.

They all must think I'm a fool, having my children pray for the very people I'd tried to harm.

It wasn't the first time I'd felt like a total idiot and I doubted it would be the last.

"Come on, Liam. Let's get you and your brother something to eat."

Thankfully my son was completely oblivious to the tension in the room as he happily skipped into the kitchen.

"Does anyone want anything? I could make some sandwiches or something."

"No, but thank you," Declan answered. "We're gonna be on our way in a few minutes."

"Right," I mumbled, and followed Liam.

It wasn't until after I'd made the boys lunch, sat on the bed with them while they consumed their sandwiches, and Max's team left, did I think about what Tex had said: he'd wiped my identity clean.

I was officially a no one and that meant my boys didn't exist either—not on paper anyway—and they didn't even realize it or the significance. That was what my life choices had come to.

Fuck.

* * *

"SORRY TO DROP IN ON YOU LIKE THIS." I WAS IN THE BEDROOM FOLDING the boys' new clothes while they sat on the bed playing the video games Max bought them, when I heard a woman's voice in the other room. "It's good to see you, Max."

My back went straight and suddenly my stomach was protesting the spaghetti we'd had for dinner.

"I was gonna call you to thank you for all the stuff you got, but the day got away from me," he answered her.

That wasn't an exaggeration, the day flew by.

First, the team meeting, which had dispersed by the time the kids finished their lunch. Then I went through all of the bags with the kids. We found there weren't only toys, books, and handheld video games. There was also an abundance of clothes and shoes. Whoever had guessed sizes had guessed correctly because all of the clothes fit and the shoes for Eli fit perfectly. Liam's were a half-size too big but they still worked.

And there was a boatload of toiletries for me.

"I hope I didn't go too crazy."

So, that was Anaya in the living room with Max.

"Nope. You did great. I really appreciate it." There was a lull in the conversation, then Max continued, "Why are you here, Anaya?"

The humor in his voice was easy to read.

A lighthearted tone that had been missing all day and for some strange reason, I was jealous he was giving it to her when all day there'd been tension between us. It was so thick, the boys didn't miss it, even though Max had been nothing but sweet to Liam and Eli.

He'd helped them unbox the toys he bought them and didn't complain once about the ungodly amount of plastic packaging that locked action figures into their clamshells, or the myriad of twist ties that made you wonder who in the world had that job and made you happy it wasn't you.

But Max had been different around me.

The only way to describe the atmosphere was chilly and uncomfortable.

"I was hoping to meet Eva and the boys."

"Anaya."

"What? Jeez, Max, don't get all alpha-protective. I just wanted to welcome them to Maryland and ask Eva if she needed anything else. I kinda know a thing or two about being locked in a house under guard. I got a lot for the boys but not much for her."

Anaya knew what it was like to be under guard?

"You weren't locked in the house," Max argued.

"You're right. I was kept in the basement," she corrected.

"Whatever." Max chuckled. "I think you mean you were kept in Kyle's underground love cave."

"Call it whatever you want," Anaya said, not sounding the least bit upset about being locked away in a 'love cave'. "But you can't deny that I know how difficult it is to suddenly find yourself around a bunch of strangers. The sooner we pull her and the boys into the tribe, the better. She has to know there are women around her who will offer support."

"Eva's different," Max retorted. "Her situation is not the same as yours. And she has kids. I don't think—"

"Max, you and the guys are great at what you do. How about you handle the protection and mission planning and you trust that I know better what Eva and her kids need emotionally right now? She's not alone and she needs to know she has more than just you to lean on."

"And what if I don't want her to lean on anyone but me?"

Whoa, there, Nelly, what did that mean?

"Momma, is someone here?" I jerked back when I heard Liam's question, feeling slightly guilty for eavesdropping. Probably not as guilty as I should—I was justifying it as payback for Max listening to me sing to the boys.

"Yeah, honey, it sounds like one of Max's friends is here."

"Can we go say hi?"

"Um. Maybe we should wait in here," I told him and shoved the t-shirts I'd been folding in one of the drawers.

"But—"

"Hey." Max poked his head into the room, cutting off Liam. "My friend Anaya's here. She'd like to meet you three."

"Cool," Liam muttered and climbed off the bed.

Elijah was much slower to crawl to the edge. My sweet, shy boy had had enough of meeting people for one day.

"C'mon, baby boy." I lifted Eli into my arms. His small frame still easily fit on my hip, but it wouldn't be too much longer before he outgrew me holding him.

That was something I wasn't looking forward to.

We followed Max into the living room. I didn't know what I was expecting but a tall, beautiful woman with shiny brown hair was not it. And when the woman smiled, dimples formed in each cheek, making her look like the sexy girl next door.

"Hey! I'm Anaya."

Great. Not only was she beautiful, stylishly dressed—when I was in sweats and a t-shirt—but she was friendly, too.

What an awesome way to finish my evening—not.

"Hi, Anaya," I greeted. "I'm Eva and these are my boys, Liam and Elijah."

Liam gave her a wave and said his hello and Eli lowered his head to my shoulder without acknowledging Anaya.

"Elijah's shy," Max explained.

"Ah." Anaya's smile grew, making her dimples pop. "I get it. I'm shy, too."

Seriously? There didn't seem to be anything shy about the woman.

"It was a nice day out today, did you boys get to play on the swing set?"

"Yeah. Eli wanted Mom to push him on the swing for like ever," Liam told her.

That was only a slight exaggeration. Elijah loved the swing and I'd spent the better part of an hour standing behind him pushing.

"Cool."

"Thank you for the shopping you did. That was very kind of you to go out of your way."

Anaya waved away my gratitude. "It was no problem. Besides, that's what we do. When I first got here, Tatiana and Emerson had my back."

I didn't know who Tatiana was and I wasn't going to ask. I wasn't sure if I could take hearing about another woman Max cared about.

When the silence stretched to uncomfortable, Anaya spoke again.

"Anyway, I wanted to stop by and meet you but also to ask if you needed anything. Clothes? Shoes? I can run to the mall and pick up

whatever you need."

"Thank you, but we're fine. You set the boys up pretty well."

Anaya's smile fell and her head tilted to the side. "But I didn't get much for you. Kyle said that you..." She paused and I prayed she wouldn't bring up my car exploding and the suitcases I'd packed for our vacation going up in flames.

Not wanting to take the chance of her saying something that would upset the boys, I spoke over her. "Really, I'm fine. We actually stopped on our way up here and I picked up a few things. We're not going to be here long and there's a washer and dryer here so I can just do laundry."

I followed Anaya's worried gaze when it moved to Max.

And for once he wasn't wearing his frown. His face was blank, maybe a little contemplative, but there was no anger.

"Okay. Well, if you're sure you don't need anything."

"I appreciate the offer but really, I'm fine."

"If you change your mind, have Max call me or Kyle. It's no problem for me to run out."

That was nice of her.

"Thanks, Anaya. And thanks again for all the stuff you picked up."

"You're welcome. I'll let you guys get back to it then. It was nice meeting you all."

"You, too."

Liam gave her a wave, Eli didn't budge, and Max followed Anaya to the door.

"I'll walk you out." I heard him mutter.

"You boys want a snack?" I asked.

Elijah nodded against my shoulder and Liam gave a verbal answer.

"Yeah. I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry." I smiled at my son.

"I'm a growing boy," he joked.

"That you are."

I was in the kitchen looking through the pantry when I heard the front door open and close. I wasn't sure what would be worse, Max going directly to his room, ignoring me and the boys completely, or him joining us in the kitchen.

What I was sure about was I'd messed everything up. And not only did I not know how to make it right, but I wasn't sure if I should try.

If the distance between us hurt this bad now, it was a damn good indication I was in over my head.

The problem was, I missed Max.

CHAPTER 22

I was sitting on the couch, beer in one hand, tablet in the other, reading a report Garrett had sent when I heard a door creak, then footsteps. I glanced at the right corner of my screen, noting it was after midnight, and waited.

My day, technically yesterday, had been shit.

It started with Eva accusing me of being a liar, then it had descended further into the murky pits of shit when we called Bubba, and had not gotten any better from then on. Eva had been withdrawn, guarded, and so fucking detached my jaw hurt from clenching it all day.

I swear, there were a few times I tasted blood because I bit my tongue so hard instead of saying what I wanted to say.

Eva silently walked past me on her way into the kitchen. I feigned disinterest and kept my head down. Only when I heard the fridge door close harder than it needed to be did I look up and find her pouring a glass of apple juice.

Fucking apple juice.

The sight had me setting my tablet aside and standing. My mind filled with memories of Eva tasting like goddamn apples and I stalked into the kitchen.

Then I snapped.

"You done?" I growled.

"Done?" Eva's body jolted, her back went straight, and her eyes narrowed.

Yeah, sweetheart, I'm pissed, too.

"Done with whatever crawled up your ass."

"You didn't... you didn't just say that."

"I sure as fuck did. All day I've been treated to your shit. You done yet?"

"My shit?"

"I'm speaking English, Eva. You don't need to repeat everything."

"I'm not the one who's been in a mood all day."

"Right."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I wake up thinking we're finally settled in a house, the boys can have semblance of normalcy, we can relax, but instead I catch a bunch of shit about how I'm a liar. Then when I get out of the shower, you give me the silent treatment. And when you're not doing that, I get one-word answers. And if that's not wacked enough, you've made damn sure there's at least ten feet between us at all times. So, yeah, babe, I've been in a mood. A bad fucking mood because you're acting like a child instead of a grown-ass woman."

Eva's torso jerked so violently, her juice sloshed and spilled over the rim, and it looked like I'd landed a physical blow when in reality I was still feet from her.

"I apologized." She set down the glass on the counter and pointed at me. "I told you I was confused and afraid."

"Yeah, sweetheart, you think you're the only one confused? Welcome to the club."

"Why are you confused?" she asked, bending slightly at the waist leaning toward me. "You're the one that's throwing—"

"Because you scare the shit out of me," I admitted before I thought better of it. "You freak me the fuck out, woman. You make me question everything I thought I knew. You make me think about my life and how I've lived it. You make me feel shit I don't want to feel. You drive me fucking crazy."

Eva's eyes went round and she stood straight before she stumbled back and rested her ass against the cabinet behind her.

"I... what?"

"Confuse the hell out of me. That's what you do. And I can't figure out why, even though I know better, I can't stop myself from wanting to get close."

"That's crazy."

"Tell me about it," I mumbled. "But it's the damn truth. And I'll tell you something else, I'm done trying to fight it."

"Trying to fight what?"

"Are you fuckin' serious?"

I was done with the distance between us and Eva's eyes widened as I moved to her and bracketed her with my chest inches from hers and my hands on the countertop near her hips.

"Do *not* lie to me and tell me you don't feel it, too."

Her breath was coming out in choppy puffs, fanning across my neck, conjuring up all sorts of illicit memories of her panting while I was pumping inside of her. An activity we would be doing again—and soon.

"I don't know what I feel."

"Don't try to bullshit me, Eva. You felt it back in Georgia when I was sittin' across from you havin' lunch. I know you did. I know you felt it when I kissed you. I know you felt it when I took you to my bed and fucked you. You feel it the same as me. The question is, why the hell are we fightin' it?"

"Because it's not smart to explore it," she huffed. "Me being here is temporary."

"What if it wasn't?"

"And what if pigs—"

"I'm being serious, don't be a smartass."

Eva's mouth clamped closed, then some of the sass drained out and sadness crept in.

"This is hard, Max. Please don't make it harder."

"What's hard?"

"All of this. Taking my kids on the run. Everything coming back up. Tex having to help me. Mark Wright getting involved."

"Us asking Bubba for help was the right thing to do and it got us one step closer to making you safe."

"But it wasn't fair."

"Straight up, babe, get over it. It's time to move on. Everyone else has, but you."

"How do I just get over it?" Eva's voice pitched higher and she was back to angry.

"You put it out of your head and move on. You've apologized, they've forgiven you, it's way fucking over for everyone. Time to get the fuck on with your life."

"I cannot believe you're saying this to me."

"You can't? Because since you've known me, I've been pretty damn straightforward and to the point. I don't know what would've given you any indication I'd pussyfoot around something."

"You know, that's rich coming from you. You're always so quick to give it to me straight when you admit you're a man with more than a few issues. You hide behind a mask of emotional indifference and call it honesty."

"A few issues? Babe, I'm totally fucked up. Something I've admitted to you. I also explained it wasn't something I've ever shared with anyone else. I am who I am and I know exactly why I'm that way and I know exactly who made me into this person. But you know what I didn't know until just yesterday when we walked into this house? I didn't know that I didn't like that person. I didn't know everything I was missing out on, because yes, I was hiding. Though I call it protecting myself from being used and thrown away. Protecting myself from feeling anything that could remotely hurt me. Is that enough honesty for you or do you need more?"

"You're still making it harder," she whispered. "This wasn't supposed to happen."

"What wasn't?"

"This. Us. Whatever *we* are. I wasn't supposed to feel anything for you. I can't just get over things, like you suggest. I'm not wired that way. They eat at me. I dwell on them. Hell, I'm even worried about Ms. Wyman back in Florida getting her groceries since I'm not there. I overthink everything. So what happens when you're done with me? When you walk away, where does that leave me?"

Finally some truth. Some openness.

"I can't predict the future and I do not make promises I can't keep. I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, next week, or a month from now. But I can tell you that right now in this moment, I want to know you better. I want to travel a road with you I've never been on—a path that might dead-end in five feet, or it may just be a beautiful voyage. Either way, I want to walk it with you."

"I think I'm too scared to walk that path with you."

"Then I'll carry you."

"Don't say that." Eva's eyelids slowly closed and her head tilted down.

"Eva, take this chance with me." My hands moved from the edge of the countertop to the soft skin of her neck. My hands framed her pretty face and I waited for her to open her eyes.

"Max, I don't know how to. I've never had a healthy relationship with a man. I've never even had a friendship that wasn't layered with lies or dysfunction."

"Tell me the one thing you're most afraid of," I asked.

"What?" Eva's lids opened and her eyes locked with mine. "I don't understand."

"That one thing that's deep inside of you that scares the piss out of you—your greatest fear," I explained, and waited to see if she'd actually answer.

"That I'll turn into my mother," she whispered.

"What about her don't you want to be like?" I pushed.

"Everything. She's a drunk. Her and my father both. That's why I left at fifteen. Not that they noticed. The two of them had each other and their booze. I wasn't even an afterthought. I was nothing to them."

At some point, Tex had told me that when I got to know Eva better I'd find we had a lot in common. He was wrong, we didn't have a lot, we had damn near the same childhood. Hers was filled with alcohol, mine was filled with fists, but the results were the same. Both of us were the product of a horrendous environment. Neglected by the very people who should've loved us but didn't.

"So what you're telling me is, your mother's a piece of shit."

"That's putting it nicely. Why did you ask what I'm scared of?"

"Because I wanted to know something about you." I shrugged. "And people's fears tell more about them than they think. But actually, your answer plays into what we were talking about before I asked. You say you don't know how to have a healthy relationship with a man because you've never had one."

"Yet you're a great mother without having had one yourself. So just because you've never had a good example of something, doesn't mean a damn thing."

"Both of us are messed up."

"Yep."

Then the conversation I had with Declan came racing back, and with great clarity I understood why he was seeing Autumn. He'd

said it was the only time he could be himself. But it was more than that.

"Maybe we're perfect for each other," I told her. "Two people who know that life can be cruel and heartless. Two people who have lived through the savagery and made it. Two people who know enough that they'll appreciate honesty and peace and not forget to value it."

"That's awfully wise, Max."

I didn't know if it was sage or not. What I did know was it was the damn truth.

"Take a chance, Eva, give me a chance to learn to trust."

Her lips twisted and she snorted. "Is that the same as: help me, help you?"

"Huh?"

"*Jerry Maguire*."

"Who's that?"

Eva's eyes flared and she smiled. "It's not a who, *Jerry Maguire* is a movie starring Tom Cruise."

"Don't have much time to watch movies, so unless shit's blowing up, there's a high speed chase, or my belly aches from laughing, I'm not wasting my time."

"Oh, well, never mind, none of those things happen in *Jerry Maguire*."

"What do you say, Eva? You wanna see where this thing between us takes us?"

"What about the boys?"

"What about them, baby?"

"They... us... we come as a package."

I couldn't stop my smile and her declaration. I also couldn't figure out how to say what I needed to without sounding like I was trying to bullshit her.

"At the risk of revealing my mommy issues, I know better than most what it says about a woman by the way she treats her children. And the way you are with them tells me you're someone I want to know, someone I want to be around. So, Eva, I know you come with them, and I can promise you what happens between us doesn't touch them. Not in any negative way, though I don't need to even say that to you because I know you'd kick my ass before that happened."

"You never said, when you were younger, did you and your mom get away from your dad?"

"Nope. Black eyes, broken bones, fists, and fights I guess that was all she knew so she stayed and nothing was going to make her leave him. Not even when my bruises got bad enough my school could no longer ignore them and they called the authorities. Not even the police showin' up at the house. Not even when the social worker sat my mother down and explained I was being removed from the house if my mother didn't leave my father. When faced with losing her child to the foster care system or staying, she chose her abuser over her son."

Eva's face paled and softened—not in pity but understanding.

Yep, this was exactly what Declan was talking about. If I'd shared that with anyone else they would've felt sorry for me, but not Eva. She understood the hell I went through because she'd lived through her own.

"Did the social worker find you a good home?"

"Good?" I huffed. "If you equate not catching my old man's fist but instead being used as a meal ticket by my aunt and uncle who basically ignored me but enjoyed the fuck out of the money my dad was ordered to pay, then yes, I found a good home."

"That doesn't sound good, honey," Eva whispered, and I let the warmth of her voice wash over me before it settled in my chest where it burned. "Just to say, none of that sounds great, but I'd rather be ignored than hit."

Yeah, Eva got it.

None of it was great. But only someone who'd lived in shit understood that sometimes you didn't get great, you took what you could get, and made the moves you needed to make to get yourself out.

"That was the plus-side of living with the vultures," I confirmed.

"I hope your arms are strong, Max," Eva said in the same soft tone. "I don't know how far I'll be able to walk before you'll have to carry me."

Fuck. She was going to take a chance.

Now what?

I didn't think it was the right time for jokes so I bit back a retort reminding her just how strong my arms were and tried to think of something to say—something that would solidify that she made the

right choice. But I'd never done this before. I didn't know how to do romance and heart-to-hearts.

I wanted to tell her my shoulders were broad and solid. I could carry her for miles and not break a sweat. But I didn't think that was right, either.

So I settled for, "When you stumble, I promise to catch you."

CHAPTER 23

If I had thought that last night after our talk Max was going to take me back to his room, where upon entering, he would strip me naked and commence preparing me for hours of mind-blowing sex—I would've been wrong.

Not that that's what I was hoping for or anything.

What I had not expected was the slow tender kiss he gave me. I hadn't been ready for his soft touches as his thumbs grazed my jaw when he'd held my face. And when he broke the kiss and his icy blue eyes held mine, I felt more exposed than I ever had in my life.

He was searching for something. Not that he verbalized what he was looking for, but I could tell he was examining me all the same.

I allowed this to go on for a long time. Us standing in the kitchen just staring at each other. For me it was about disbelief. I'd agreed to something I didn't fully understand but I did recognize the significance. Max was offering me himself and a chance to see if our attraction to one another was more than just that—attraction. Which if I was being honest with myself, I already knew it was more, my heart had fully engaged and that scared the hell out of me.

I'd been down this road twice before. Two times I'd rolled the dice and came up a loser.

Either the third time was the charm or it would be the third strike and I'd be out.

I was absolutely crazy and I knew it.

But Max was unlike anyone I'd ever met. His sometimes brutal honesty was refreshing—it was comforting. I knew where I stood

with him. He didn't pull punches or have time for bullshit. Max Brown was who he was—through and through.

I liked that.

So last night, Max had kissed me sweetly then sent me to bed—alone.

Well, not alone, the boys were in bed with me and that was where I lay for hours wide awake. Our conversation replayed, the taste of him still on my tongue, and confusion about what I'd agreed to plagued my mind.

Now it was morning and I was sitting on the couch, my boys on either side of me and the TV was on but the volume was low because Max was still sleeping and I didn't want to wake him.

That, and I was enjoying some alone time with the kids. It felt like forever since we'd just lounged around, even though it had only been days since we left Florida.

There was so much to think about yet I didn't want to. I wanted a day where no one mentioned contract killers, explosions, or attempted murder. I also wanted a day where I wasn't worried about moving, buying a car, finding a job, or figuring out what I needed to do to enroll Liam in school when summer was over.

And then there was the issue that Eva Dawson no longer existed, so what happened to the small amount of money I'd managed to save—it was in a bank account that now belonged to no one. Was that all gone?

No, I didn't need a day, I needed a whole year.

"Babe?"

My head swung toward the sound of Max's voice. "Jeez, you scared me."

"Sorry, I thought you heard me." Damn, the man's voice was sexy.

Deep. Rumbly. Sleep rough.

Nice.

"No, I was woolgathering."

"I guessed that. You looked a million miles away."

"Not a million—just down in Florida."

Max's expression went from lazy and sleepy to high-alert.

"What about Florida?"

I gave Max a quick shake of my head and hoped he'd understand I didn't want to have that conversation in front of the boys.

When he clenched his jaw but remained silent, I turned to Elijah.
“You ready for breakfast?”

“Scrambled eggs?”

“If that’s what you want.” Eli nodded and looked over at Liam.

“That cool with you, bud?”

“Bacon, too?” he asked, smiling.

“Sure thing,” I said and returned the grin.

“Morning, boys.”

“Morning, Max,” Liam happily chirped.

“Morning, Max,” Eli parroted.

With a kiss to each of the boy’s heads I stood and made my way into the kitchen, Max hot on my heels, and suddenly I was nervous.

“You okay?” he asked as soon as we were out of the kids sight.

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” I returned.

“Why would you ask me that?”

I busied myself getting a mug out of the cabinet and poured Max some coffee. I used the creamer that was already on the counter and added a splash into the steaming cup a’ Joe before I offered it to Max.

“What’s wrong?” I asked when he stared at the mug instead of taking it.

“You know how I like my coffee,” he noted and took it from me.

“Um, yeah, I’ve watched you make it a few times now.”

Max kept staring at me like I’d built a rocket ship and not just splashed and stirred some liquids together.

“Why were you thinking about Florida?” he asked, abandoning his earlier question and the strange response to me making him coffee.

“I was just thinking about all of the stuff I *didn’t* want to think about today,” I sighed.

“Come again?”

“It would be nice to have one day where I didn’t have to think about contract killers, explosions, or attempted murder,” I echoed my thoughts. “And that made me think of something that Tex said yesterday. He wiped my identity so I was wondering what happens now and what about the money I had in the bank, is that gone? I also started thinking about the boys and how I’m going to have to enroll Liam in school in a few weeks. And what about a job? I guess I need to call my boss and quit. Then there’s the lease on—”

"Whoa, Eva. Slow down." Max stepped closer to me and I inhaled his fresh, clean scent. He must've showered. "Babe?"

"Yeah?" I blinked up at him.

"You zoned out again."

"I did?"

"Yeah. Your nose scrunched and your eyes went hazy."

"I was just thinking about you in the shower." Max's deep rumble of laughter jolted me to continue. "No, I wasn't thinking about you *in* the shower. I was thinking that you smelled good—so you must've taken a shower."

My explanation in no way calmed his amusement, if anything, he laughed harder.

"Thanks, I guess. I'm not sure if that's a backhanded way of telling me I don't smell good unless I'm freshly showered, or if I'm flattered you're thinking about me in the shower."

"Why would that flatter you?"

"Because I like that you're thinking about me naked, wet, and soapy."

My face flamed, because I hadn't gotten that far in my contemplation of him showering. But now that he mentioned it, I couldn't stop picturing him just as he'd described—naked, wet, and soapy. Then I started wondering if he'd think I was weird if I asked him to join me while I showered later because I really wanted to see him naked, wet, and soapy.

"Jesus, you're cute."

"Huh?"

Max leaned in, kissed my cheek, my forehead, then brushed his lips against mine. He didn't move away—instead, he whispered, "You're cute as hell when I know you're thinking dirty thoughts."

"I am not," I denied.

"So you weren't just thinking about me and you in the shower together?"

"Okay, I was thinking about *that*," I admitted. "But you were naked, wet, and soaping me up. So doesn't that make my thoughts clean, not dirty?"

His body started shaking and I didn't miss it because at some point, my hands had made their way to his chest and I felt him fighting back laughter.

"Well, technically, I'm right," I said, our lips still so close all it would take was the slightest move and they'd be touching.

But I didn't move. I didn't do anything but stand there and enjoy a moment of teasing.

"Yeah, baby. Technically, I'd get you clean before I got you nice and dirty."

The area between my legs started tingling, which made it hard for me to remember I needed to get breakfast for the boys.

"I need to get the boys breakfast," I voiced my thoughts.

Max closed the scant distance and gave me a long, hard, closed-mouth kiss before he stepped away.

"So... Florida," Max started and I groaned. Back to reality. "We'll call Tex later, but I'd like you to think about something."

"What's that?" I asked when he didn't continue.

Max's gaze went to the direction of the living room before it sliced back to me. All humor was gone. He wasn't frowning as such, but he certainly looked unsure.

"Tex is adamant you don't go back to Florida, which I have to tell you I agree with him. I'd like you to consider staying here."

"In Maryland?"

Hope springs eternal and all that shit.

So there I was, seriously contemplating making another huge decision. One that would affect not only me, but my boys. A move that could either be just what we needed or blow up in my face with disastrous results.

"Here in this house."

"I can't afford this house," I told him.

"Z Corps is renting the house."

"Z Corps? I don't know what that is."

"It's the company I work for."

That one sentence was like a wet blanket, reminding me I didn't know anything about the man I'd agreed to enter into some sort of relationship with.

"What's that look for?"

Max reached up and used his thumb to pull my bottom lip from between my teeth. The pad of his thumb wiped away the sting and it was then I realized how hard I'd bitten down.

"I don't know anything about you."

"What would you like to know?" he asked, not removing his hand from the side of my face, though his thumb had moved to my chin where he was now stroking.

"Everything." I shrugged.

"Everything's gonna take a while."

"Do you have something better to do today?"

"I can think of a few things that would be better, yes."

I'm sure he could.

"I think..."

"Eva, I was joking. If you want to know something, ask. But you need to know there are things I can't tell you."

"Like what?"

"Like what I did in the Navy. The missions I went on."

I nodded like I understood when I really didn't.

I wasn't a complete idiot. I'd seen action movies, I watched the news, so I had a general understanding of military operations and that those carrying out the missions weren't supposed to talk about them, but I'd never known anyone who'd actually been in the military.

Then something dawned on me. "How do you know Tex?"

"I met him when we were in the Navy."

"Oh. I didn't know he served."

"He did. He was one of the best operators the teams had ever trained."

"The teams? Is that a nickname for the Navy?"

Max tilted his head to the side and he looked downright bewildered.

"No, Eva. The SEAL teams."

"Right. You were a SEAL." Max righted his head and smiled. He was no longer looking at me *bemused* but completely *amused*. "Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Only you." He chuckled.

"Only me what?"

"You know, when I was in the teams there were women who perused bars specifically to try to nail a SEAL. Their skills for spotting a team guy are so legendary we have a name for them."

"So?"

"So, nothing. I find it comical that you're not impressed in the slightest."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Shh, Eva." Max brushed his thumb over my lips, silencing me. "You didn't offend me. I like that you don't care."

"Why do you like it?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"Because too many women in my past *only* cared about my job. All they wanted was the Hollywood dramatization—the rough and rugged bad-boy."

"They used you because you were a SEAL?" I inquired resentfully.

"Something like that." Max chuckled.

"That's not funny, Max. They used you to get you into bed."

"Yeah, honey, it's hilarious."

"I don't see how. That's kinda gross. What kind of skank only takes a man to bed because he's a SEAL?"

"A Frog Hog," he told me.

"A what?"

"That's what those women are called. And trust me, Eva, they do not use us. We're very aware of what they're good for."

"That's gross, too."

Max sobered and I wondered if now I'd offended him. It was not lost on me that Max had had a goodly amount of partners—more like a godly number of them. I bet he'd taken more than one or a hundred Frog Hogs to bed.

The thought of him in bed with another woman made my stomach sour and my jealousy surface.

"I should make the kids breakfast," I told him, needing the conversation to be over.

"First, tell me why you're frowning."

"No reason," I lied.

"If you have a question—ask. If you have something to say—say it. But don't hide from me."

"You know, people don't have to voice their every thought."

"I'm not talking about *people*. I'm talking about you and me. And if something's weighing on your mind, don't hide it from me. Because if you haven't caught on yet, I don't hold back."

That was an understatement.

"Fine," I huffed. "I was thinking that I've slept with three men."

"And?" Max's guard slammed down and his eyes turned to ice.

"And you've obviously slept with more than three."

"And?" he repeated.

"And nothing. You wanted to know what I was thinking and that was it."

Max continued to study me, and I fought not to fidget under his scrutiny.

"They meant nothing. Less than nothing. They wanted one thing from me and the feeling was entirely mutual. There was no after-sex lingering."

"Max, I don't need to know this."

"No, I think you do, Eva. You need to understand that, yes, they were using me and I was using them. And never did I allow any of them to ever cuddle up next to me. Which sure as fuck means I never pulled one close and held on because the thought of her leaving my bed made me physically ache."

My heart started thundering in my chest and the hope I'd been trying to keep at bay blossomed. No, that wasn't right—it busted open and overshadowed my doubts.

"And one last thing, there's no comparison—so get that out of your head. Everything about you is different and I don't just mean the way we are, physically. I mean *everything*. Trust me enough to know I wouldn't have asked you to take a chance on us if I didn't know with blinding clarity just how different you are from those other women."

I did trust him. Max Brown was nothing like any other man I'd ever met. Max was not a liar. He was not a crook or a drug dealer. And even though I couldn't stop myself from worrying that he'd break my heart, I knew down to my bones he'd never hurt my boys—and they were what was important.

And Tex trusted Max. That meant a great deal to me. Tex was the best person I knew. So I didn't know much about Max but I knew he was a good, decent, honest man. It wasn't a lot but it was something—and right now, something was better than nothing.

"I do trust you," I confessed. "But I'm still scared."

"I'll tell you a secret, honey." Max leaned forward, his breath fanned across my neck and goose bumps pebbled. Then he whispered, "So am I."

My knees turned to jelly and I sagged against Max.

"Will you trust me?" I asked.

There was a pregnant pause and I didn't know until after I asked how much his answer meant to me.

"Yeah, honey, you're teaching me how to trust."

It wasn't exactly the proclamation I wanted to hear, but it was a damn good start.

CHAPTER 24

Retreat and regroup.

It sounded better than run and hide, which was essentially what I was doing. That was part of why I was making myself absent during breakfast. I wasn't being a complete coward, I figured she'd enjoy some time alone with Eli and Liam, not to mention, I needed to check in with Zane.

But mostly I needed to clear my head. When Eva asked me if I trusted her, I was unprepared. I knew my answer wasn't the one she wanted but she'd still smiled and went about her business, like my lame, "I'm learning to" was enough. Maybe it was. The truth was, I didn't distrust her. Wasn't that the same thing as trusting her?

And holy hell, the woman was cute when she was pissed on my behalf. *When had that ever happened?* Add in the jealousy she didn't admit to but was written clear as day on her pretty face and my gut had clenched with some unknown feeling. All I knew was, I didn't want her to feel any sort of wariness about the many nameless women in my past. It was not the first time I'd seen jealousy aimed my way, but it was the first time I cared. The first time I felt something akin to shame that I'd made good use of what was being offered.

Frog Hogs were a dime a dozen. They were unavoidable if you went to a bar in San Diego or Virginia Beach. They could sniff out a SEAL a mile away. And when those women caught the scent—they pounced.

They only wanted you because you have a trident pinned to your chest. And those bitches were crafty, they know who they're looking

for. They know the difference between a color and a number and have no issue asking straight out if you're part of the regular teams or DEVGRU. But not Eva. She couldn't care less about my trident, or that I'd been part of Team Six. When she looked at me, she saw only one thing—me. Eva didn't even know that the teams were designated by a number, or what the Development Group known as SEAL Team Six was. She had no clue those teams are separated into colors.

DEVGRU was where I'd met Zane Lewis, my boss. He was a team leader for the Red Team, the best of the best of Team Six—the tip of the spear. The squad every SEAL wanted to be a part of, so it was only apt that Zane coded his teams as colors when he started Z Corps: Red, Gold, and Blue. With talks of adding a forth team if demand continued to be high. And unfortunately in the world we lived in—full of scumbags and criminals—business was always good, when your business was dispatching the fuckers to hell.

I sat on my bed debating how I was going to approach my boss about taking over the lease agreement on the safehouse when my phone rang.

The devil himself—like just thinking about him could summon him.

"Yo," I greeted. "I was getting ready to call you."

"Bet you were." Zane chuckled. "Let me guess, you were calling to tell me you're in love."

What the fuck?

"Have you bumped your fuckin' head? Who do you think I am, Brooks?"

"Yeah, he turned into a surly bastard when Tatiana caught him in her web."

In her web?

"Now you're talking crazy. Please tell me you're not growing soft in your old age."

"If you're not calling to tell me you're in love," he said, ignoring my jab, "then you won't mind I was talking to Tex last night. And even though he disagrees, I think Eva Dawson should reach out to the prosecutor's office."

"Hell to the fucking no," I growled.

"Christ. It's true."

"What's true?"

"When Dec told me you were in love, I didn't believe it. No fuckin' way, that's what I told him when he called to tell me to bat-ten down the hatches. I was just bustin' your balls earlier about—"

"Wait. Declan did what?"

"Don't act shocked, brother. You were there when Brooks brought Tatiana home—hell, you tried to shoot the woman." *Why in the actual fuck was everyone still bringing that up?*

"Tatiana and I are fine," I reminded him.

"Yeah, now you are. But you weren't back then."

"What does this have to do with Dec callin' you and gossiping like a fuckin' old woman?"

"My point is, you're not new. You know Dec wasn't calling to gossip. He was callin' to warn me."

Fucking hypocrite. Dec was sneaking around behind everyone's back but he called my boss to "warn" him.

"Right. Because Dec's in a position to warn you," I snapped.

"Is there something I need to know about Declan?"

"Nope. Just sayin' he shouldn't've called you because he's wrong."

"So you're not fucking Eva Dawson?"

Damn, his question was like a knife to the gut. I *was* fucking Eva, but also wasn't fucking-fucking her. I was also doing other stuff with her, that I wasn't ready to discuss with Zane or anyone else for that matter. Not that I even could when I didn't know what the hell I was doing.

After a few moments, Zane continued, "I'll take your silence as a yes."

Fuck.

"I don't care how you take it and I'll be having words with Dec later."

"Remember when Kyle brought Anaya home?"

How could I forget? I was a total asshole to her the first time I met her. Though it must be noted, she didn't let me get away with it, and rightly handed me my ass in front of both my team and the members of Red Team. Since then, I've grown to trust and respect the woman.

"Yep," I answered, not sure I wanted to know where Zane was going with his line of questioning but I was sure I wasn't going to like where it led.

"This works out perfectly," he muttered. "I told you fuckers, the next one of you brings a woman home with the intention of keeping her, I was sending you away. And I cannot believe I'm saying this, since I never thought I'd see the mighty Maximus Brown with all his trust issues in the middle of a hostile takeover, no doubt trying to formulate a battle plan to fortify his Fortress of Suspicion. My plan is perfect."

If I heard Zane say that to anyone else, I would've laughed my ass off, but since he was saying it to me, I wasn't happy. But I ignored his snarky commentary and honed in on the part I really didn't like and that was his plan.

"What plan?"

"The plan where you take Eva to Alaska."

"No fucking way—"

"I know," Zane sighed. "This is the part where you forget you're on my payroll and tell me if I don't change my mind, you'll take Eva and run. But if you step back, stow your dick, and check your heart for a second and think, you'll see I'm right. Eva going to Alaska solves everything, and it's done on our terms in a timely fashion."

I wasn't sure that, even if I were thinking clearly where Eva was concerned—which I freely could admit to myself I wasn't—that I would agree with Zane. His plan sounded easy, but it wasn't.

"You're overlooking a few things. Even if I agreed to take Eva to Alaska, you're forgetting about Liam and Elijah. The other thing is, I'm pretty sure, even though Bubba and Zoey didn't want to press charges, the Alaskan State Troopers might feel differently."

"That's where Tex and Bubba come in," Zane told me and I groaned.

Eva was going to have a shit hemorrhage if she found out Zane had reached out to Bubba again. She was adamant she didn't want to involve him. And despite what I told her yesterday, even though we needed his help, I completely understood why she didn't want to burden him.

"Brother, Eva's gonna have a conniption about Bubba being asked to help."

"Don't see—"

"You don't?" I cut him off. "Do you think she's forgotten what she did to him and Zoey? You don't think she's so fuckin' ashamed of what she had to do that she won't carry that for the rest of her

life? Now, do you really think she wants to call on the man she tried to kill and ask him for help? Fuck no, she doesn't. The last thing Eva wants is to hurt Bubba and Zoey anymore than she has, and that includes mentally by making Bubba think about what happened in Alaska and what happened that made him get in the plane with her to begin with—that being his father was murdered by his asshole brother. And if that shit's not whacked enough, Bubba then had to witness his brother, his twin, commit suicide. So no, she doesn't want anyone to call Bubba. And from here on out, we're all going to respect that and leave Bubba out of our investigation."

"That's gonna be an issue."

"The hell it will. All you have to do is call him, thank him for all his help, but he can stand down."

"That's the part that's not gonna happen. Forgot to tell you, Bubba was the one to call Tex back late last night after he'd talked to Eva and one of her boys. He told Tex he was all in, whatever Eva needed, he'd do what he could."

Fuck me. Mark "Bubba" Wright throwing down for Eva.

Christ. If I didn't know any better, I'd think that Bubba had tossed his hat in the ring for sainthood.

"Why would he do that?" I mumbled.

"Believe it or not, Max, there's this thing, it's called forgiveness. It happens when someone who fucked up shows genuine sorrow and remorse for the wrongs they've done."

"Seriously? You're gonna be a smartass?"

"I'm not being a smartass."

"Then why the hell are you talking to me about forgiveness? I'm just surprised Bubba's being so generous."

"First, Mark Wright's character is such he'd never allow a single mother to suffer, no matter what she did to him. He might hold a grudge about Zoey being there, but, that's neither here nor there." I could almost picture Zane waving his hand in front of him in a nonchalant gesture. "My point is, people forgive. They don't build walls and towers—"

"Says the man who literally lives in a penthouse high above everyone else. If that's not a tower, I don't know what is."

"Touché. Yet, I invite people up to my tower. You've decided to hate the world and not trust anyone."

"I trust you," I pointed out. "And anyway, we're way the fuck off-topic. Bubba forgiving Eva doesn't matter—"

"I bet it matters to Eva."

Well, he was damn right, it did matter to Eva, and if I was being honest, it mattered to me, too. Her reasons were pure and mine were *purely* selfish. Bubba and Zoey forgiving Eva gave me the green light to pursue whatever the hell was going on between us guilt-free. I can't say that I would've given her up if Bubba hadn't pardoned her, but it would've been a problem I'd have to figure out how to overcome.

And I wasn't sure I liked what that said about me. I was loyal to my friends and the mere fact I would've picked Eva over Bubba gave me pause. It was also something I wasn't going to dwell on. Not when there was enough shit blocking our path.

"You're right, it does. But right now, we need to talk about how Eva is not going to Alaska."

"Why would you think I was going to Alaska?"

Fucking hell. Without turning around to face Eva, who obviously had overheard my conversation, I dropped my head forward and I wrapped my free hand around the back of my neck and squeezed, trying to relieve some of the building tension.

"Fuck," I muttered.

"Didn't lock the door, did you? I see fallin' in love has made *you* soft."

Prick.

"Max?" Eva's voice sounded so unsure.

"I'll let you go. Run the plan past Eva. I'll be over in a few hours."

Before I could argue, the bastard hung up. Pure Zane Lewis, he always got the last word.

But not with this, he didn't. Just because he'd rang off before I could argue didn't mean he'd gotten his way.

No fucking way was Eva going to Alaska.

I tossed my phone on the bed and turned to find Eva standing in the doorway.

Brow furrowed, nose scrunched, but this time she didn't look cute, she looked dejected.

Fucking hell.

"Babe—"

"Who were you talking to and why were you talking about Alaska?"

"Where're Liam and Eli?"

"At the table eating. Now tell me."

"I was talking to my boss. He was discussing the possibility of you going to Alaska and talking to the prosecutor." I was so engrossed in the color seeping from her face until she was left so pale and washed out, that I missed her legs start to wobble, until she grabbed the doorframe for purchase.

"I told him you weren't going," I said as I rushed over to her and pulled her into my arms—which she willingly allowed. And when she burrowed her face into my chest, I knew there was not a chance in hell Zane was getting his way.

"You're not going anywhere."

"Why does he want me to go?"

"It doesn't matter."

We stood there, me holding Eva tightly for a long while—long enough for her to stop shaking. Long enough for her to tense in my arms and try to pull away.

"No, Eva. Just relax," I told her and held on. "How about after Zane comes over, we put on a movie, chill with the boys for a while, then we'll have that get-to-know one another talk you wanna have?"

My question did not one thing to diminish Eva's unease like I hoped. She grew stiffer in my arms. And her hands trapped between us tightened into two tiny fists. Which she used to push against my chest.

"Your boss is coming here?" she croaked out.

"You have nothing to be afraid of, honey."

"Will he..."

After a beat of silence, I prompted, "Will he what?"

"Never mind."

I lifted my head and pulled back a fraction so I could see her face and when I did, the urge to take Eva and the boys on the run hit me so damn hard it was a miracle my knees didn't buckle.

Christ, I'd turned into my brothers—the men that I'd made fun of when they'd found the women who'd turned their lives upside down. The men who vowed to protect the women they loved at all costs. But I didn't love Eva. I couldn't. I didn't believe in love and forever and all that bullshit. I lived in the here and now—moments

of pleasure and mutual satisfaction. Yet, I'd asked—no, begged—Eva to give us a shot at more. Was that love?

The longer we stood locked in an embrace I wouldn't release her from, the more pissed I was at Zane for mentioning that goddamn word.

"Will he what, honey?" I repeated.

"Will he take me and the boys? Make us leave?"

"Fuck no!" The declaration was out of my mouth before I had a chance to calm the fury her inquiry sparked. "No one is taking you or the boys anywhere."

The thought of her leaving made me absolutely felonious.

Eva Dawson was mine and so were her boys.

I didn't know jack shit about love, but I was one hell of a good SEAL. I thrived in the chaos of combat. Surely I could conquer a tiny slip of a woman and two little boys.

Couldn't I?

Fucking Zane Lewis and his big mouth.

CHAPTER 25

Max's boss, Zane, was not what I'd pictured—though maybe I should've—the man was just as good-looking as all the men he employed. Tall, black hair, and piercing blue eyes that were almost as beautiful as Max's.

He also looked like he could snap a man in half and not think twice when he dumped the body. In other words, he scared the shit out of me. Max must've sensed it because he hadn't moved from my side in the last five minutes.

What Zane did not do was scare Liam. My son took one look at the rather large, imposing Zane Lewis and asked him if he was friends with Tex, too. When Zane confirmed he indeed was, Liam commenced asking a million questions. I found it rather shocking that Zane indulged Liam and had made it a point to soften his features when talking to Elijah.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him if he had children, but after Liam's third degree, I didn't think Zane would be receptive to anymore questions.

After the introductions were made and Liam ran out of things to ask, the boys happily went into the bedroom to play with the bazillion new toys Max had bought for them. None of which I made him return.

What can I say? I was a sucker.

"Has Max talked to you about the plan?"

The ball of nervousness in my belly quickly grew into a boulder and I blindly reached out for Max, needing him to anchor me in the storm of uncertainty.

"No. He said we'd talk about it when you got here."

And that wasn't due to my lack of trying. I'd asked Max to talk about it with me but he'd clammed up and gave me his signature frown and fiery stare. When he explained he was pissed and needed a minute to get himself sorted, I stopped pushing. It wasn't like he was keeping secrets from me, and if he needed some time, I needed to give it to him. And the fact he'd been honest about being upset and didn't try to hide it made my decision to let it go easier.

Zane's gaze skidded to Max and the two men locked eyes. Icy blue to cold-hard-steel blue. If I didn't know any better, I'd say that they were united in some sort of telepathic conversation.

"The plan is solid," Zane broke the silence. "Tex and Bubba agree."

"Mark?" I asked.

Max severed the stare and looked down at me and tucked me closer to his side.

"I've asked that in the future, Bubba is left out of any further communication."

"You did?"

"You said you didn't feel comfortable with him being involved," Max unnecessarily reminded me.

"I don't," I confirmed just as needlessly.

"I'm afraid that's no longer an option," Zane cut in. "It would appear your son had quite the impact on Bubba. He's made it clear, he's down to help any way he can."

"I don't want that."

"Sometimes you don't get what you want."

"Careful, Zane," Max growled.

"I fucking hate this part," Zane shot back with the same snarly tone as Max had, only his wide smile belied his harsh words. When he was done grinning at Max, Zane turned to me. "Let me ask you something, Eva. Does it matter to you what Bubba wants?"

"Of course it does."

"Then you'll have to find a way to be okay with him providing us with intel. His job prevents him from doing more than that. He can't just take leave and go to Alaska with you, but he can deliver valuable information. He knows the players involved better than we do. So I suggest we take him up on his offer and not offend the man."

Go to Alaska with you.

My heart felt like it was going to explode out of my chest. I vowed never to go back there—bad things happened in Alaska. The whole state was bad luck—unpredictable and unfortunate things happened to me in the ice box.

"But—"

"Eva," Zane sighed, obviously losing patience. "This is something Bubba wants to do."

"You said that," I snapped. "What I was going to say was, I want to go."

"What?"

"Fuck."

Both men spoke at once so I wasn't exactly sure who said what, but I could guess it was Max who nearly shouted the expletive.

"But won't I be arrested?"

"We've already thought about the possible prosecution for your crimes. Tex is taking care of that," Zane told me.

"Eva—"

"It will have to be soon, before the boys start school."

"No!" Max interjected.

"Max brought up the boys in our earlier conversation. I was thinking—"

"Enough," Max once again interrupted. "You're not going to Alaska."

"I have to."

"What the hell, Eva? No, you don't."

So, that may've been the moment when I started to fall in love with Maximus Brown. Or maybe that was the moment when I finally admitted that I'd fallen for a man I barely knew.

It wasn't the outrage or vehemence in his tone. It wasn't the way he'd tucked me close in an effort to protect me.

It was the fear I saw in his eyes.

He was scared for me. Big, bad Max Brown was worried about me. No one had ever looked at me the way he did just then.

His anxiety gave me the strength I needed to follow through with what I needed to do. I had to go to Alaska—I owed it to Bubba and Zoey.

"Please listen to me, Max."

He started to shake his head, and when he opened his mouth in what I assumed was an attempt to argue, I cupped his cheeks and brought his face closer to mine.

"Please, Max," I whispered. "Remember when you told me I had to let it go? I had to stop dwelling and move on? Well, this is my chance. The prosecutor's office is looking for me for a reason and if they want me to testify, I'm going to do it. There's something I haven't told you."

I sucked in a breath. It was time to come clean—about everything.

"I recorded the conversations I had with Tracy Eklund and Malcom Wright."

"You did what?"

"Holy fuck," Zane sputtered.

I caught Zane's movement out of the corner of my eye but my gaze remained fixed on Max.

"I'm not a complete idiot. I thought they might come in handy. Though Malcom Wright had me refer to him and Tracy as Boss when we spoke."

"You hitchhiked to Alaska." Max's voice was vibrating with anger.

He was correct, I had. But after everything had gone down and Malcom and Tracy didn't pay me what they owed me so I could get the boys back from Jay, I had to do something to get to Alaska.

"You needed money. You could've..."

"I could've what? I had no options. I needed to be close to Liam and Elijah. I needed to start working on a plan to get them back."

"Why didn't you tell Kenneth Eklund you had the recordings?"

"What? Why would I do that?"

"For money. You could've blackmailed him." My hands dropped and I stepped away from Max, my heart shattered in a thousand pieces. "That came out wrong," he stuttered.

"No, it didn't," I whispered.

I dodged his hand as he reached for me and fled as quickly as I could down the hall. I couldn't go into my bedroom where the boys were playing with toys so I ducked into Max's room and closed the door.

Of course Max would think the worst of me, why wouldn't he?

With my back to the door, I slid down the smooth wood and landed on my ass, uncaring my rear end now throbbed from the impact.

After all, that was less than the pain that was eating my insides.

CHAPTER 26

"Well, that's one way to put your foot in your mouth," Zane said, looking down at his phone.

"Screw you!"

"I have to say, I was skeptical. Not so much anymore."

"Great," I snapped. "I'll call the—"

"Christ, you're a pain in the ass. You need to chill out, brother, before you give yourself an ulcer. Give her a minute, then you can go to her and grovel while trying to explain that your supremely idiotic statement was just that—thoughtless and stupid."

"It came out wrong."

"You said that already. But I know you, so I know you were genuinely shocked she didn't use what she had on Tracy Eklund to get her husband to pay out. I'll admit, I'm impressed she didn't when she could've—she was in a tight spot wanting to get her kids back from her ex.

"But you and I are cynical assholes, and on top of that, you generally think all women are liars and opportunists. Which, knowing how your mom, aunt, and the bitch ex treated you, I don't blame you. But it seems Eva Dawson is not what she was made to be. What she is, is a mother who loves her kids and would go to great lengths to protect them.

"And you know I got nothing but respect for Bubba, but as a father, I understand Eva. Hate that Bubba and Zoey got caught up in Eva's shit—but if someone took Eric from me, I'd scorch the earth until I had him back and I wouldn't apologize to anyone who got burned."

My jaw ached from clenching my teeth. I didn't mean to hurt Eva and Zane had it wrong. I wasn't shocked she hadn't blackmailed Kenneth, I knew she didn't have it in her. I knew she felt rotten to her core over what she'd had to do to Bubba and Zoey.

She'd put her life in danger hitchhiking from Seattle to Alaska. Anyone could've picked her up and done any number of horrific things to her. She could've been killed. Then when Tex found her, she was living in a fleabag roadside motel and working at a mother-fucking strip club trying to scrounge together three-hundred-K—like that was a possibility.

"No, Z, you got it all wrong. I trust Eva."

I would've laughed at the comical way Zane's jaw dropped open and his eyes bulged if I wasn't so pissed.

"You what?"

"Let me get this straight. Earlier you spouted some crazy bullshit about me being in love but now you're looking at me like I've cracked because I trust her."

"Ah, yeah."

"Don't you have to trust someone to love them?"

"For a normal person, yes."

"Now you're pissing me off."

My boss, who'd become a close friend over the years, stared at me in disbelief, and as much as I understood why, it was time to get back to business.

"Did you message Tex?" I asked in an effort to get back on track.

"I did. He said he wants to hear the recordings."

"Then I better get to groveling."

"Yeah, you better get on that." Zane smiled. "Should I have Rena charter a jet?"

Rena was Zane's assistant. She was scary efficient, and before Zane's wife Ivy came along, Rena managed every aspect of Zane's life both personal and private. Now the two women split the herculean chore of keeping Zane straight.

"As long as Tex can clear the path for Eva, I don't want any surprises. We'll fly up, meet with the prosecutor, and fly back. Eva doesn't need to be in Alaska for one second longer than necessary."

"Didn't think it would be this easy," Zane mumbled.

"Come again?"

"Everyone else fought it, you're not. I never actually thought I'd see the day a woman caught your attention, but I figured if it did happen, we'd need to hit the bomb shelter. I don't know if I'm relieved or disappointed you're depriving me of the pleasure of threatening to kick your ass and fire you."

"What can I say, boss? I'm smarter than everyone else. Why the hell am I going to fight against it when I need to be fighting for it? Hasn't she had enough assholes in her past that put her through enough? Haven't those kids? She understands me in a way that no one else does, because she's been there. She knows what it's like to have nothing, then lose more."

"Fucking hell, Tex was right."

Before I could ask Zane what he was talking about, I caught Elijah walking down the hall.

"Hey, bud."

"Where's Mommy?"

"I think she's in the bathroom," I lied.

No way in hell was I going to tell the boy I'd hurt his mother's feelings and she'd run from me.

"I'm thirsty."

"Come on, let's get you something to drink then."

It was a crapshoot whether Eli would follow me into the kitchen or retreat to the bedroom. The four-year-old had warmed up to me but he wasn't overly friendly, not like Liam was. I found it astounding that after all of the abuse Liam had endured at the hands of a man who was supposed to love him and protect him, the kid could be as sociable as he was. I credited Eva for Liam's progress. She was open and loving with both of them. She'd done a great job putting her life back together.

I found the plastic cups Eva had been using for the boys and poured Eli some apple juice. The sweet scent filled my nostrils, making the ache in my chest intensify. I'd forever associate apples with Eva—the smell, the sugary flavor on her tongue the first time I kissed her.

"Max?"

"Yeah?"

"Are we going to live here now?"

I looked down at Eli and smiled.

If someone had told me I would be standing in a kitchen with a little boy, pouring him a drink, ready to take a leap into an unknown situation full of land mines that could obliterate my heart, I would've called them stupid. And if I was told that I'd find a woman who I could trust to guide me through those explosives, a woman who could teach me how to love and be loved, I would've called them a liar—right before the yearning to have just that set in.

Eva was everything I never allowed myself to have.

"That's up to your mom," I told him, then asked. "Do you like it here?"

The boy shrugged his shoulders.

"You don't know?" I teased.

"I like the swings."

Eli put his cup on the counter and rushed off before I could offer to take him out to the backyard. Which was probably for the best because I needed to finish up with Zane and talk things out with Eva.

Then after that, I was going to give her the day she wanted—the one free of drama, hitmen, and impending trips to Alaska.

I still didn't agree with her talking to the authorities. I seriously hated the idea of taking her back to a place I knew would cause her pain. But none of this was about me and it didn't matter what I wanted—this was about Eva and what she needed to do. All she needed from me was for me to trust she knew her own mind and to support her by way of protection. I'd make her safe while she did what she had to do in order to move on with her life.

I just hoped she was moving on with me.

CHAPTER 27

There was a tap on the door, and since I was still sitting on the floor sulking, I felt the vibration against my back.

"Eva. It's Zane."

Zane?

As quick as I could, I scrambled to my feet and stepped away from the door. Then I stared at it because I didn't know what else to do.

It wasn't that I was afraid of Zane. Once I'd gotten over the initial shock of how menacing he looked—and I suspected he did it on purpose—Zane Lewis seemed like a man who liked to have the upper hand—be in charge, if you will.

And even if he'd softened when he met the boys, I wasn't fooled. Zane had the same lethal, self-assured presence about him that Max had.

The door creaked open and my annoyance spiked.

"Can I help you?" I snapped at the audacity.

Who opens a door without being invited to do so?

"You done?"

Jeez, that sounded familiar.

"Done with what?"

"Your..."

"My what?" I prompted.

"I don't know what to call it. I would say your tantrum, but my wife tells me I need to work on my people skills and has informed me that most of the time I'm a dick." Zane shrugged and stepped farther into the room. "Since I love my wife, and Ivy's normally

right, I find myself trying to... be *nice*." The man looked positively ill.

"And this is what? You trying to be nice? Walking into a room uninvited and asking me if I'm over my tantrum."

"Pretty much."

"And you're married?"

"Yep."

Zane smiled and it transformed his whole appearance. His blue eyes danced with what couldn't be misinterpreted as anything but love. And he had dimples. Holy shit.

"Well, I'd say your wife has taken on one hell of a task if she's attempting to coach you into being a pleasant person."

Unfortunately, my jab had the opposite effect I was going for and Zane tossed his head back and roared with laughter.

"I don't see what's funny," I huffed.

"No, you wouldn't," he said when his laughter died down.

If I'd thought Max had the scrutinizing gaze down to a science, Zane had him beat by a mile. It was totally unnerving the way Zane's inspection was more of a thorough examination of my soul. I was pretty sure he had super-human powers and now knew all of my secrets.

After his dissection, he weirdly nodded his head and said, "Max's comment wasn't meant to hurt you."

"Well, it did all the same."

"He trusts you."

"Could've fooled me."

Suddenly the sure and confident demeanor that Zane projected faltered.

"Go easy on him, Eva."

"Go easy?"

"I'm not speaking out of turn or betraying him when I tell you, Max doesn't trust anyone."

"I'm painfully aware of that."

"No, I don't think you are. He trusts you. And for a man who has spent his entire adult life avoiding exactly what he wants from you, I'd say that's a damn compliment. It also says a lot about you that he's willing to put himself out there and risk getting his heart shredded. Something he has never, *ever*, done before. And since he's never done it, he's gonna stumble and fuck up. Go easy—he's worth it."

By the time Zane was done speaking, I was finding it hard to breathe and every insecurity I had barreled to the surface.

"But what if I'm not worth it? He should—"

"That's not up to you to determine. That's for Max to discover, and he has. He thinks you're worth it and since he does, he's decided to take a chance on you. Don't let him down, Eva. Once you get past all his barbs and thorns, you'll never find a better man."

"There weren't all that many," I whispered.

"No, Eva, Maximus Brown has made an art out of being cantankerous. The mere fact that you've never seen that side of him tells me everything I need to know. So, please, go easy."

Of course I already knew who Max was, Zane hadn't told me anything new. But hearing Max's friend confirm it made my heartrate spike.

"I wasn't mad at Max," I admitted. "I just needed a minute to get my thoughts in order. I know he was just curious—"

"No, Eva. I think Max was actually pissed that you were sitting on information that could've possibly made you a lot of money. For whatever reason, Kenneth Eklund still loves his wife even after she had an affair and conspired to commit murder. The woman is positively venomous. But he would've paid you to keep those recordings from the authorities."

"Why in the world would he be mad I didn't blackmail someone?"

"Because it guts him to know you were suffering without your kids. Not to mention, we all know where you were working to survive. Something you don't understand is, even though Max didn't know you then, now that you are his—the very thought of you living in a seedy motel taking your clothes off to make money makes men like us murderous."

"That's crazy."

"Crazy or not, that's just how we're wired."

Before I could tell Zane how insane he sounded, Max's frame filled the doorway.

"Thought you had a plane to arrange."

Zane's mouth curved up into a smile, his dimples popped out, and his eyes danced with mischief.

Oh, no.

"I can multitask," Zane shot back.

"Go multitask somewhere else."

"Wouldn't be multitasking if I wasn't simultaneously chartering a jet and saving your ass, now would it? That'd be single-tasking or some shit."

Chartering a jet?

"Then go single-task somewhere that isn't in my bedroom with my woman."

I didn't have time to process Max calling me his woman and what his declaration was doing to my insides, not when Zane's body started to shake with humor and he dazzled me with a playful wink.

I now totally understand why his wife puts up with him and his surly attitude.

"The Gladiator has spoken, I better be on my way," Zane teased.

Zane strolled out of the room like he didn't have a care in the world. It was the polar opposite of how Max trudged his way to me. His shoulder muscles were bunched, biceps swollen, his pulse throbbed on the side of his neck.

"Why are you smiling?" he probed.

"I didn't realize I was. But I guess it's because Zane's funny."

"Funny, *haha*? Or funny as in he's a nosy prick?"

This time when I grinned, even if I hadn't felt the muscles in my face tighten, I wouldn't have missed the way Max's gaze dropped to my mouth. And there was certainly no missing the lust in his eyes.

One passionate look from him had my panties on fire, and wasn't that some cliché romance shit? But it was true nonetheless.

"Gladiator?" I started to giggle.

"My name," he mumbled disgruntledly.

"I gathered that."

"The story goes, my father wanted me to have a strong name, one that was fit for the heir that would one day take over his business. What he did was saddle me with a name that gave every asshole in high school something to make fun of."

The darkness that invaded his features made my heart hurt for him. A sudden change in him, I understood all too well. There was nothing that could dampen my mood like thinking about my parents.

"What's your name?"

"Maximus."

"Your full name," I pressed.

"Maximus Brown."

"You're being purposefully obtuse," I sighed. "What's your middle name?"

Max's silence made it increasingly harder not to laugh. His facial expressions weren't helping either—he looked like he'd chugged a gallon of lemon juice and the tart flavor wasn't his favorite.

"Please tell me it's not Spartacus."

Max shook his head in the negative but still didn't speak.

I tried to remember the Russell Crowe classic, *Gladiator*, but there were so many Roman names, most of which I couldn't pronounce, let alone recall. I was at a loss for more suggestions.

"Come on, just tell me," I begged.

"Ragnar."

"Maximus Ragnar?"

"Yes," he ground out. "I'm named after a Roman Emperor and a Viking that died in a pit of vipers. Lucky me."

"I swear I'm not laughing at your name." I waved my hands in front of me as hilarity bubbled. "It's just... it's the way you're grinding your teeth like you'd rather have your toenails pulled out than say your name."

"I would. It's a stupid name. But then, if you knew my pompous, dick of a father you'd understand why he was so proud to introduce me as Maximus Ragnar to his associates. I was barely out of diapers when he started his rhetoric about how he gave me the name of a king. Of course something normal like John or Peter weren't good enough for his son."

All my humor fled at the tone of his voice. It wasn't anger I heard, it was soul-deep pain.

"Fuck him," I blurted out. "He may've given you your name for some arrogant reason, but he's right about one thing, your name is strong and it fits the man you grew to be. A leader, a loyal friend, a protector. The best part is, *you* became that man. *You*—not him. And you did it on your own, despite his best efforts to turn you into the kind of man he is. Malicious and broken."

I watched with laser focus as Max went solid. Every feature frozen, his arctic stare turned into a blaze of agony.

And when a rumble started from somewhere deep inside of him until the vibration finally verbalized in a single word, I thought I'd made a huge mistake.

"Fuck."

"I'm—"

Max's hands came up, one tucked a piece of hair behind my ear, the other curled around the back of my neck then he yanked me to him, and he smashed me against his chest.

"I'm so sorry I hurt your feelings. I didn't mean for what I said to sound like I didn't believe you're a good person."

Looking back, that was the moment I fell head-over-heels in love with Maximus Ragnar Brown. A mistrusting, cantankerous, mercurial, strong, beautiful man. A man who believed—in spite of what I'd done—*believed* I was a good person. A man who trusted no one, yet trusted me.

Yeah, I was in love with Max.

CHAPTER 28

It was not the words that Eva said that had set me on fire. It was the vehemence behind those words. The fierceness, the indignation on my behalf.

No one, not even my brothers-in-arms, had ever been so offended in defense of me.

There was no way I could tell her what her outrage meant to me, how it stirred something in my soul that I never knew existed. That by simply uttering two words, she'd sealed her fate.

Eva Dawson was mine.

She owned me.

As I held her, I waited for some sort of fear or apprehension to take over, but those feelings were absent. There was desire and longing and those two emotions flooded until there was nothing else.

"Sorry to interrupt."

My arms tightened around Eva, not wanting her to pull away.

"Yeah?" I asked, irritated at Zane's intrusion.

"Tex called."

Fucking hell.

"He's cleared the way for Eva to talk to the prosecutor but he still would like to hear what she has."

"Now?"

"They'd like to meet with her tomorrow."

Christ.

My chin rested on Eva's head and she clung to me tighter. That was the only thing that made the situation bearable—Eva wrapping herself around me looking for comfort.

"The boys," she whispered.

"I thought Anaya could go with you to help with the kids," Zane offered.

"Babe?" I gave Eva a squeeze and waited for her to lift her head off my chest. "Anaya used to work with Missing and Exploited. What I'm trying to say is, I know you've only met her briefly but she's good and knows how to handle delicate situations. She'll be good with the boys."

"I'm not leaving—"

"No, honey, we're not leaving them. But Anaya can go with us and either she and the boys can stay at the hotel or they can come with us to the prosecutor's office and wait there. But I'm not leaving your side, so they'll need someone to watch over them while we're behind closed doors."

I really wished my team could go with us to Alaska—not that I thought we'd need backup, but extra eyes are always welcomed.

"Okay. We'll talk to Liam and Eli."

Eva started to pull away and I begrudgingly let her. When she reached for my hand and threaded our fingers together, a peace that only she could provide settled over me.

"I'll give you my cloud information for you to give to Tex."

Zane made a noise like he was stifling a laugh, and sure enough, when I glanced from Eva to him, he was wearing a smirk.

There were a few options as to what put the annoying grin on his face. My first guess was because I was holding hands with Eva. My second guess was because Eva had offered to give Tex the login information to her cloud.

Which was cute she'd offer, but Tex didn't need her password to get into her online storage.

Zane's gaze dropped to our connected hands, then his eyes came back to mine. The smile dimmed and I braced.

"We'll get this shit done and out of the way as quickly as possible." And with a jerk of his chin, he turned to leave but stopped and looked back over his shoulder. "Kyle packed your shit up from the other house. He and Anaya will be over later, he said he'd bring it. And you should know this place is available to you for as long as you want it."

"Actually, that was what I called you about this morning. I wanted to get the lease moved—"

"No need. Call it a job perk."

"Preciate it."

"Don't mention it."

Zane was already out the door when Eva called his name.

"Yeah?" he asked and leaned back so he could look back into the room.

"Tell your wife to keep up the good work," Eva told him.

And that was when I knew the hard-as-nails Zane Lewis liked Eva. His tough-guy exterior melted away, his head tipped back and he laughed. Which still wasn't something I was used to seeing, and it had been years since he'd met his wife and she'd done the unimaginable—proved my boss was human, not just the animatronic warfighter we'd all thought he was.

"Yeah, Eva, I'll tell her."

"What was that about?" I asked.

"Let me check on the boys, then I'll tell you."

Eva rolled up on her toes, and in an all-too-brief press of her lips, she kissed me before I let go of her hand and she strutted out the door.

I didn't follow.

Not because I thought she'd be coming back, but because I needed a moment alone.

There was still no fear. No apprehension. No second thoughts.

This was happening.

* * *

THANKFULLY, ZANE LEFT NOT TOO LONG AFTER TEX CALLED TO TELL US he'd listened to the recordings Eva had made of her conversations with Tracy and Malcom. I couldn't remember a time I'd ever heard Tex so excited, but he sounded downright ecstatic when he announced, "Tracy's fucked." He also told us he'd been in contact with the authorities in Alaska and they'd offered Eva immunity.

The second piece of good news Tex had to offer was, he'd found the private investigator Kenneth Eklund had hired. And since Kenneth was an attorney and not a world-class hacker like Tex, Eklund's network security was no match for my friend. Tex had found Kenneth's client list.

Other than Heritage Plastics, which included Kenneth's representation of Colin Wright and Sean Kassamali, the rest of his client list was a who's who of Juneau's criminal underbelly. Strange bedfellows—Juneau's largest corporation, drug dealers, prostitutes, and even a rapist.

It didn't take long for Tex to connect the dots—James George was awaiting trial for manufacturing and distribution of narcotics. At the time of James's arrest, he also had a small stable of women. He was looking at some serious time. Tex had found that the drug dealer wasn't business savvy and hadn't laundered money, therefore when the government seized his assets he was left penniless. Yet Kenneth Eklund was named as counsel on the court documents, not a public defender.

Finding one criminal led Tex down the scumbag rabbit hole, and from there he found the source of the contract to put an end to Eva's life. Tex being a man of action already had one of the many teams of mercenaries he had in his back pocket en route to intercept the hitman.

All of this would be over in a few days and Eva and her boys would be safe. Things could go back to normal and we could get down to the business of moving on.

Now that she'd agreed to stay in Maryland, I was looking forward to normal. Not that I had a clue what that actually meant, but it sounded good.

"What was it like being a SEAL?" Eva asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

I shifted in the uncomfortable chair and toyed with the bottle of water that sat in front of me. We were sitting in the dining room, Eva on one side of the table facing the room so she could watch the boys as they played in the living room, and I sat on the other which gave me a view of the nice-sized backyard.

We'd talked about a variety of things since Zane had left; favorite movies, books, places we lived. Light topics that were easy to discuss. She hadn't touched on my military service—until now—and I hadn't asked about anything that would make her uncomfortable. Besides, I didn't care much about the past, I was more concerned about the present.

"It was hard," I answered.

"Physically?"

"Physically painful and mentally challenging."

"You don't like to talk about it," she guessed.

It wasn't that I didn't like to talk about it, I just never had.

"Never had the occasion to discuss what it was like being a SEAL," I started. "I'm not trying to dodge your question. I've just haven't thought about how to explain it."

"It's okay, forget I asked."

"No, Eva, I want to tell you."

It took a few minutes for me to explain what Basic Underwater Demolition SEAL school was and the selection process to get there, but thanks to the many documentaries and movies made, Eva knew the basics of BUD/s.

"So what you're telling me is, the movies have it wrong?" Eva asked when I was done.

"A two hour movie cannot begin to encompass the physical, emotional, and spiritual toll of training. Personally, I think some films portray war better than others but unless you've smelled the devastation, you can't imagine what it's like."

"Smell it?" Eva's nose crinkled.

"It's not something I can begin to describe. It's a scent that clogs your nostrils—a smell you can never forget. And when you're in the thick of a firefight, I swear, you taste it. But it's not something you can define—it's simply death and destruction, fear and desperation. And it's not something that goes away, it lingers forever."

A knock at the door brought me palpable relief. Now that I'd done it, I found that I was wrong—I didn't like talking about the devastating aftermath of war.

"That's Kyle and Anaya," I reminded Eva when she startled in her seat.

"Oh, right." Her cheeks tinged pink and I wished the boys weren't in the next room so I could touch her.

So close, yet so far away.

I got up and made my way to the front door and checked the peephole. If the boys weren't watching me, I would've had my weapon unholstered and at the ready even though I could clearly see Kyle's smirking face as he held his middle finger up for good measure.

Idiot.

I shook my head at his antics and opened the door.

"What are you, ten?"

"I see you've lost your sense of humor."

I hadn't, but ever since Kyle had fallen in love with Anaya, he seemed different, livelier—always cracking a joke and fooling around.

Was that how love made you behave?

"Hi, Eva," Anaya said, causing me to look over my shoulder.

Sure enough, there Eva stood in front of the coffee table, blocking the path to the living room where the boys looked up from putting together a puzzle.

The gesture wasn't needed, but it was one more way Eva protected her kids.

"Hey," Eva greeted.

"Have you guys eaten?" Anaya bypassed me and moved toward Eva. "Hey, boys."

Anaya received two mumbled 'heys' but otherwise, the boys went back to their puzzle. They'd been going at it for hours.

"Liam. Elijah. Manners please."

Both boys studiously stood and properly greeted Anaya and said hello to Kyle.

Once Eva gave them the go-ahead, they were both back in front of the puzzle. I glanced at my watch, surprised to find it was indeed almost time for dinner.

How long have Eva and I been talking? Hours had slipped by unnoticed and I couldn't remember a time, ever, when I'd simply sat and spoken to a woman for so long.

"What did you have in mind for dinner?" I asked Anaya.

"We thought we'd order in."

"Babe?" I turned to Eva.

"Um... sure. Whatever you guys want."

It took a few minutes to hash out what to order, deciding pizza would be easiest, and Kyle called it in. It didn't take long for Kyle to pounce as soon as the women made their way into the kitchen.

"Glad to see you worked out whatever was troubling you."

I glared at my friend then made a decision to do something else I rarely did—I shared.

"Never saw myself settling for a woman. After the bullshit Pam pulled, I never wanted to open myself up to that kind of pain again."

I'm still not sure how it happened, but there's just something about her."

"And the boys?"

"That's gonna take time. Dawkins was a dick and put them through hell. Especially Liam. Fuck, brother, every time I see the scars on his arms, I wish the man was alive so I could kill him myself. Elijah is so shy it might take me years to get in there with him."

"Have you shown Liam your scars? Talked to him about what your old man did to you?"

"No, not sure if I should."

"You absolutely should. He needs to know you understand. I bet after you show him, he'll open up. And once Elijah sees he can trust you, he'll feel safe and he'll do the same. But I think you're right, it's gonna take time. But if anyone can heal that family, it's you."

Damn, my friend's confidence in me felt good, but it did nothing to alleviate the rock in my gut when it came to the boys. They scared me even more than Eva did. I didn't have the first clue how to be a father, and if this worked out with Eva, that's exactly what I would be. And those two kids deserved a good one.

"What makes you so sure I can heal them?"

The tone of my voice sounded foreign to my ears—it was unlike me to be so unsure. Hell, I wasn't unsure about anything—ever. I made a decision and didn't deviate. But with Eva and the boys, I was off-kilter.

"Because you understand them. The four of you are all the same. And if you let them, they'll heal you, too."

"I don't need—"

"Brother, don't feed me a line of bullshit. You must've forgotten who you're talking to. I know you. You've got decades worth of shit bottled up. Let Eva sort that for you."

"The last thing that woman needs is to take on my baggage."

"You're wrong. She needs all of you."

All of me?

That wasn't part of the plan. Surely, I could give us a shot at happiness and still hold parts of me at bay.

"Everything okay?" Eva asked when she stopped at my side.

Without thought my arm went around her waist and I tucked her close.

"Yeah, babe, everything's great."

At least, I hoped it was.

CHAPTER 29

Something was different.

I couldn't put my finger on it, but Max was *off*.

Throughout dinner, he talked to his friends, he even made it a point to include Liam and Elijah. By the end of the meal, Eli was actually talking and smiling. Anaya was great with the boys, too, not that I thought she wouldn't be nice to them, but they seemed at ease with her. Which seriously put my mind at ease about her going to Alaska with us tomorrow. Thankfully, no one mentioned the trip. I had to find a way to put a positive spin on it for the boys and that would be difficult.

By the time Anaya and Kyle were ready to go, the boys were nonstop yawning. They fist-bumped Kyle, and much to my shock and amazement, they hugged Anaya.

Max walked his friends out, leaving me alone with the boys.

It's now or never.

"Before you guys go to bed, I need to tell you something." I waited until they looked up from the puzzle they'd gone back to and I had their attention. "Tomorrow, we're going to go on a trip."

In a bizarre turn, Elijah smiled and looked totally excited to be going somewhere while it was Liam who frowned. Normally, Eli would be leery, he was the shy and quiet one who didn't like change. But Liam, even after what happened to him, seemed to roll with the program.

"Where are we going?"

"Alaska." Liam's scowl deepened and he looked like he was getting ready to cry. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Are we coming back here?"

"Of course we are. Tomorrow, we'll fly up there and then we're coming straight back here."

"Why are we going?"

"I have a... there's someone I need to meet with."

Shit. I was making a total mess of this, and now Elijah looked like he was getting ready to freak out.

"Is Max coming with us?" Eli probed.

His question broke my heart yet simultaneously filled me with joy. I hated that my boy sounded so unsure, but his eyes held hope—he wanted Max with us. More progress.

"Yeah, honey, he's coming. So is Anaya."

The front door opened and I lost the boys' attention as they watched Max enter the room.

"We're going to Alaska," Liam announced. The accusatory tone took both Max and me by surprise. "And you're going."

"Yeah, little man, we're going to Alaska. Your mom has a meeting so we're all going with her."

"Why is Anaya going?" Liam continued to push.

Before I could explain, Max jumped in.

"Because I'm going to sit in the meeting with your mom and the two of you can't be left alone so Anaya's gonna come so she can watch you."

"We don't need a babysitter," Liam snapped.

My breath seized in my lungs at my son's harsh response.

"Bud, I know you—"

"You don't know anything!" Liam shouted. "I can watch Eli. We don't need a babysitter."

"Liam, baby, why are you so upset? And don't talk to Max like that."

I glanced from Liam to Max, my heart beating a mile a minute, my mind reeling from Liam's out-of-character outburst, but the fire blazing in Max's eyes turned me inside out.

"Why does it matter? He's gonna leave. Who cares how I talk to him?"

"I do, Liam. It's not—"

"Liam, look at me," Max ordered. When Liam turned his glare to Max, I held my breath wondering if I should intervene and take the

boys into the other room so we could work out whatever was bothering my son so deeply he'd lashed out.

But I didn't have the chance, Max started speaking and when he did, my already broken heart splintered into a bazillion jagged pieces. "First, I'm not going anywhere. And second, I *know*."

Max slowly walked toward Liam, then knelt in front of him and held out his right arm, turning it to show Liam a series of small, faded scars on the inside of his forearm. "I know, bud. I have the same marks you have. I got mine the same way you did."

Excruciating silence ensued.

Max and Liam's eyes locked in the most agonizing battle I'd ever witnessed. If my son's tears weren't my undoing, the wetness beneath Max's eyelids would've done it.

"Your dad burned you, too?" Liam whispered.

"He did," Max confirmed.

"Why?"

A sob tore from my soul.

Why?

That one loaded word really asked a thousand questions my boy didn't know how to articulate.

"There's no answer to that, Liam. There's never a reason for a father to hurt his son. There's no excuse for a man to harm those in his care. The only thing you need to know is, Jay was absolutely wrong and it will never happen again. No one will ever hurt you or your brother again."

Elijah's little body collided with my legs and I quickly scooped him up. His legs wrapped around my waist and he shoved his face in my neck.

The room was stifling, my skin crawled with more hatred than I knew I could possess. I actually itched with it. Jay Dawkins was the devil, I despised him with every cell in my body. I hated him so badly I thought I was going to explode with it.

Then Max changed everything.

He placed his hand on my son's shoulder, leaned in close to Liam, and in that moment, all pretense was gone—and the real Max Brown spoke.

"You're gonna be okay," he whispered. "I know it doesn't feel like it right now. And it won't feel like it tomorrow. It may take months, but one day you won't feel it anymore. The pain will be

gone. But until that happens, until the pain fades, you can't bottle up all the anger. It's okay to be mad about what your dad did. It's okay to be angry he hurt you and your brother. It's okay to be upset he took you guys away from your mom. You get to feel anything you want to feel. But, bud, you don't get to yell *at* your mom. You can yell *about* what he did to you. You can cry, you can shout, you can sit quietly and think about it, anything you want except raising your voice *at* your mom. She loves you and Eli. What your dad did, he did to all three of you. She hurts just as bad as you do. So does your brother, he just shows it differently."

"I don't want him to be my dad."

"I don't blame you."

"I hate him."

"I bet you do and that's okay."

"I don't ever want to see him again."

"Good, because you never will."

Max patiently waited for Liam to continue his tirade.

Unmoving, unwavering support.

Something that me and my boys had never had before.

And suddenly, something inexplicable happened—the loathing slipped away.

Jay was gone. He'd never hurt my boys again.

We made it.

I made it.

Max was not Jay. He wasn't my father. He wasn't the man who'd duped me when I was a teenager, knocked me up, then bailed.

Max was Max.

It was as simple as that. I could list a hundred reasons why he was different but I didn't need to. I didn't need to convince myself I was doing the right thing by taking a chance with him. I didn't need to ignore red flags and excuse away bad behavior because I was too fucking weak to walk away. Because there were no flags waving, no neon signs flashing, or anything else. And that was because Maximus Brown was a good, honest, fearless man.

And we were keeping him.

He was ours.

I would fight and die so my kids could have a strong, decent man in their lives. No, not just any man—Max.

"Are we going to live here?" Liam asked Max.

"Yes."

"Will you live here, too?"

"Yes."

"And when we're in Alaska, my dad's not going to take us?"

"I swear on my life, you will never see him again."

Somewhere in a dark corner of my mind, I wondered if Max could make that solemn oath because Jay was dead. Tex never told me what happened, the only thing he said to me was that Jay would never be a problem again. When I asked how he knew that for sure, Tex's response was "trust me" and since I already trusted him, I stopped pushing for answers I knew I'd never get.

I wondered what it said about me that I felt relief at the prospect of him being dead. As fast as the thought flitted into my mind, it fled just as quickly. I wouldn't feel guilt over being relieved my kids were safe and I refused to give Jay anymore headspace than he'd already taken.

"You won't let anyone take us?"

"Correct, Liam. I won't ever let anyone take you and your brother from your mom—not ever again."

"Okay."

Okay?

After all of that, Liam's only response was, okay?

"Okay," Max repeated. "Then tomorrow, we fly to Alaska."

Liam severed their connection and his gaze slid to me. "Sorry, Mama."

God, I missed Liam calling me Mama. He'd graduated to calling me Mom and anything Liam does, Eli parrots, so now Eli mostly called me Mom, too. But I missed Mama.

"I know you are, sweetheart. And Max is right, I don't want you holding all that anger inside of you. If you have something you need to say, say it, I promise I'll listen. I want you to know, you and Elijah are my two most precious people and I will do anything for you."

"I know."

Man, I hope he knows. Down to my soul, I hope he knows I love him more than anything.

"We have a big day tomorrow. Is there anything else you want to talk about or are you ready to hit the sack?"

Liam didn't say anything but he kept staring at me so I prompted, "Liam?"

"I know this sounds stupid because Max already said he was staying, but I want you to know I want him to live here with us."

Not trusting my voice, I gave Liam a sharp nod of understanding and brushed my hand over Elijah's hair. When I finally pulled my shit together enough to speak, I asked, "Elijah, honey, is that okay with you, too? If Max lives here with us?"

"He makes me safe," Eli whispered.

"He makes you safe?" I repeated.

My son didn't respond, not verbally anyway. But his little arms around my neck squeezed and I knew that was his answer.

Max made him safe.

"Yeah, Eli." I kissed his forehead. "Max makes all of us safe."

My head lifted from my son's, and as if a magnetic force surrounded us, my eyes snapped to Max's. And when they did, I found his eyes sparking—not with anger, but with something else far more dangerous.

* * *

IT TOOK LESS TIME THAN I'D THOUGHT FOR LIAM AND ELIJAH TO NOD off. But even after they were asleep, I stayed. I needed the comfort only my boys could give me.

They're here. They're safe. And we'll be all right.

Everything had changed with Max. And it had happened so fast, my head was having a hard time keeping up with my heart. I didn't believe in love at first sight, and what was happening between us, certainly didn't happen at first sight.

I barely suppressed the giggle threatening to bubble up when I thought about that first day I met Max—the first time I heard his deep, rough voice from behind my front door. And when I let him in, *good Lord*.

No, it was not love at first sight, but it was *something*, maybe lust, maybe awareness. But there was no denying that I'd felt something when his icy blue eyes took me in. Just like now, I'd been drawn to him.

On that thought, I slowly rolled out of bed, leaned down and kissed Elijah's cheek, walked to the other side and kissed Liam's head. I couldn't get Max's words out of my head. *You're gonna be*

okay. God, I hoped he was right. Liam had taken the brunt of Jay's abuse—my little boy had done his best to protect his little brother. Love and pride swelled in my chest as I forced myself to forget all the reasons why Liam had needed to protect Elijah.

I quietly slipped out of the room to find Max waiting for me in the hall.

"Hey," I whispered.

Max didn't return my greeting, not with words anyway. His gaze took me in, but this time it was different. It wasn't contemplative, it was heated.

He tagged my hand and led me to the bedroom, closing the door and locking it behind us. Then he walked us to the bed and quietly undressed me.

This was different, too. Gone was the frantic need. This was reverent, slow, gentle. But once my clothes were in a heap on the floor, he shucked his at a much faster pace.

Max eased us onto the mattress and settled over me, his hips cradled between my thighs, my arms wound around his neck. I'd never wanted a man so badly in my life. Never needed to feel a man's touch so desperately. But he didn't move, he just stared down at me.

"God, you are so beautiful," he told me.

"So are you."

His mouth curved into a smile before he lowered it to mine. Our lips touched, and much like the way he'd undressed me, he kept the kiss gentle—coaxing, teasing, light.

My legs tightened and my heels dug into his ass trying to get him closer but he wouldn't budge.

"More," I mumbled against his lips.

"Slow."

"Max."

"Slow, honey. I want to savor you."

Well, who am I to argue with that?

And slow he went.

Max licked and nipped my neck, down to my breasts where he paid an ungodly amount of time teasing my nipples until they ached. Only when I started lifting my hips, trying to find friction did he move lower, kissing over my belly, stopping to dip his tongue into my belly button. Who knew *that* could feel so good? As much as I wanted him to go faster, I finally got to explore unrushed. My

hands traveled over his broad shoulders, his muscled back, relishing his smooth skin. I loved the feel of all his strength under my palms. Loved how his muscles twitched and bunched under my touch.

By the time Max's mouth made its way between my legs, I was a quivering mess. My hips lifted off the bed when his tongue flicked my clit.

"Stay still."

"I don't think I can."

"Try, honey." One strong arm went over my belly holding me in place, the other went to my thigh, pushing my leg farther open, and his tongue went back to my clit.

Holy sweet Jesus. If Max wild, quick, and dirty was hot, Max taking his time was scorching. I burned from the inside out. His tongue worked magic, edging me closer and closer to release. His hand holding me open skimmed closer to my center and I lost the battle, the anticipation was too much. I knew where that hand was going and I squirmed in excitement.

"Hurry."

"Slow," he reminded me.

I hadn't recovered from the vibration of his word on my clit when he filled me with two thick fingers. Then he curved them up, found the place inside of me that drove me crazy, and I shattered.

On and on, my orgasm rolled through me. His fingers relentlessly kept rubbing and one orgasm slid into two.

Impossible, but nonetheless, it happened.

Max Brown pulled off a double with nothing more than gently flicking my clit with his tongue and his fingers.

Genius.

Then he was over me, kissing me senseless with the taste of me on his lips. A deep rumbling moan filled the room and I wasn't sure if it'd come from me or him. Either way, the sound fueled my desire.

I needed him now.

Right now.

"Max, please."

The head of his cock nudged my opening and he stilled. "Slow, honey."

"You keep saying that," I whined. "But I *need* you."

Max leaned back, giving me a clear view of his beautiful face, and my breath caught in my throat. There was no chill in his eyes, no

hard lines on his face—he looked at peace. Which, due to our position and the proximity of his cock, was a strange thing to think. But there it was—Max didn't look like he had a care in the world. His blue eyes were serene and my heart constricted at the sight.

It was just him and me in this bed, and no one else mattered.

Three life-changing words were on the tip of my tongue. They desperately wanted to break free, but now wasn't the time. Not when I was so exposed—if he didn't return the feeling, I'd be crushed.

"I can't get enough of you. Not your taste, not your scent, not your needy sounds. Not the way you look at me, not the way you touch me, not the way you make me feel." Max's gaze went from sweet to blazing as he pushed inside of me. "I'll give you everything you need, honey, but I'm taking my time."

"Will you let me give you everything you need?"

Max froze mid-thrust, his body went solid, and my hands stilled on his back. His muscles twitched under my palms and I waited.

"Eva." My name sounded rough, like it had been pulled from the depths of his soul.

"You've already given me the one thing that no one else ever has. You make me feel protected. You don't hide that you care about me. You're honest with me. But more than any of that, one thing I've never had, not ever, is hope. You give me that, so you've given me everything I could ever need. Will you trust me to give that back?"

"I do trust you."

Four words that made me want to weep in happiness and fist bump the air in excitement. Thankfully, I did neither.

"If you trust me, then why do I feel like if I make one move, you'll shatter?"

"Because until this very moment, I'd never known what it felt like to be cared about."

"I care," I whispered, too overcome with emotion to say anything else.

His eyes closed and his forehead dropped to mine and his lips nibbled on mine, effectively cutting off our talk. Because when his tongue lashed out and licked my bottom lip, every part of me quivered from my toes to my fingertips.

"Tighten your legs around me and tip your hips." Gone was my sweet Max and back was the master and commander of my body.

I did as he asked and his dick slid deeper.

"Goddamn, Eva, so fucking tight." His hoarse, rough voice sent zaps of electricity through my body, making my hands tighten in his hair and my hips thrust up to meet his strokes.

"Harder."

"Oh, no, baby, we're taking our time. By the time I'm ready, you'll be begging."

"I'll beg now."

Max shoved his face in my neck and I would've mourned the loss of his gorgeous blue eyes staring into mine, except then I would've missed it when his body started shaking and his laughter danced across my skin.

"Baby, we're nowhere near you begging yet. But you will be."

And beg I did.

I begged him every time he brought me to the brink of release then slowed, only to start the climb all over again. And by the time he finally let my orgasm break free, I was a sobbing mess.

Completely wrecked—drenched in sweat, limbs limp, and out of breath. But mostly my chest burned with so many emotions I didn't know what to do with them.

"I..."

"You what, honey?" Max asked against my throat where his mouth was still causing havoc on my senses, making it hard to concentrate.

"Nothing."

Max lifted his head and our eyes locked.

God, I could spend the rest of my life just like this and die happy.

"Do you feel it?" he whispered.

My throat clogged, leaving me speechless, so I just nodded.

"Good. I do, too."

His thumb brushed away the tears as they rolled down my cheek. This was a whole new side of Max, and I couldn't decide which I liked best—his hard-edge, tough exterior or this sweet, gentle side. The truth was, I just plain loved Max and all of his many facets.

"So beautiful," he murmured. "When we get home from Alaska, there's a lot we need to talk about."

I wasn't sure what his talk would entail, but with Max still hard inside of me, his body cocooning mine, I was too relaxed to ask.

"Okay."

"You feeling okay?"

"Yeah."

"Good. You ready for round two?"

A thrill raced up my spine and my pussy spasmed.

"Oh, yeah, you're ready. Flip over, Eva. I want you on your hands and knees."

His growled demand did crazy things to my insides—soft, sweet, hard, rough—I'd take Max Brown any way he wanted to give himself to me.

CHAPTER 30

After travelling almost ten hours, I wasn't surprised the boys were exhausted. By the time we touched down in Anchorage, everyone was ready to call it a night. The excitement of flying on a private jet had worn off approximately one hour after takeoff—*thank God for video games*.

During the flight Anaya had been a godsend. She'd picked up on Eva's apprehension and immediately went to work putting Eva at ease. I was unapologetically listening to their conversation even though I had a metric shit ton of intel reports to go over. My team had been busy gathering information on Icon and Madeleine Strotherby. The woman was in her eighties now. She worked as a fashion model, then went into acting and fashion design.

The world viewed Madeleine Strotherby as some sort of a saint, and with all of the money she'd publicly donated to charities around the world, I fully understood why people would think that. Personally, I found it distasteful, it looked to be more of a publicity stunt than an honest to God heartfelt giving.

Either way, Garrett had found what he'd been diligently looking for—Icon was indeed tied to Omni. And not only that, they were at the top of the pyramid so to speak.

So, with all of this new information, I should've been combing over the reports. But I hadn't been. Instead, I'd listened to Anaya talk about Emerson and Tatiana. Anaya had been thorough in her recounting of how she'd met Kyle and the rest of us. She'd also filled Eva in on how Brooks met Tatiana and how Thad and Emerson had gotten back together after a decade's long separation.

It felt odd listening to Anaya. I'd lived those missions—hell, Anaya wasn't around when Brooks and Thad had hooked up with their wives, yet her perspective reminded me how strong the women were—how close they'd all become. The longer I'd listened, the more I wanted that for Eva and her boys and I was grateful Anaya was doing her part to welcome Eva into the women's friendship. She was trusting Eva with a hell of a lot of personal information.

When they'd moved on to shopping and other shit to do in the Annapolis area, I'd quit listening. But not before I vowed to make an effort to get everyone over to the house so Eva could start bonding with Emerson and Tatiana.

Now we were lying in bed after Eva had tucked in the boys in the adjoining room. Her soft body was curled into mine and I couldn't remember a time I'd been so content doing nothing more than holding a woman. Hell, I couldn't remember a time being content, period. But with Eva tucked close, her hand on my chest, mine on her hip, I was just that.

"I still can't believe the stories Anaya told me," Eva murmured. "It makes what happened to me sound tame."

There was nothing tame about having your children kidnapped and harmed, forced to commit a felony, then dodging a hitman hired to take you out. But I wasn't going to bring her ex into our bed. She had enough on her mind with our meeting scheduled first thing in the morning.

Tex was one step closer to tracking down the man who'd set her house to explode and had successfully detonated her car, but he was still out there somewhere. Thankfully, we were in a hotel in Alaska and he was not. One less thing to worry about, though I still wished my team had been able to come along.

Eva's hand started to wander and my all-too-eager cock lengthened in my sweats. Her fingertips trailed down to my waistband and my muscles involuntarily bunched as she got closer to the one mark on my body that still burned my soul.

"Sorry," she mumbled and quickly moved higher.

Before I could think better of it, I grabbed her hand and placed it back where she had it.

"I got it in Afghanistan," I told her.

"Sweetheart," she murmured.

My eyes drifted closed and I let her soft, sweet voice seep down deep to my core.

"We cleaned a house and there was a woman, she was crying and carrying on about her son being taken. Her English was horrible and the interpreter was translating, trying to calm her down. When suddenly she stood and started yelling that her son was dead. I stepped closer to calm her down and missed it when she pulled a knife from her abaya. Before I could step back, she stabbed me. The woman had impeccable aim, she got me under my plate carrier. Thankfully, when she hit my belt, she couldn't see through that."

"Oh my God," Eva gasped.

"I got incredibly lucky that day. She did just enough damage I had to be medivacted out."

"What happened to the woman? Did someone arrest her?"

"Arrest her?"

"She tried to kill you." The abhorrence in her tone would've made me grin any other time. But right then acid burned my gut.

"No, honey, she wasn't arrested."

Eva shot up to sitting, her back ram-rod straight, a fierce look of indignation, and more hostility than I'd ever seen pulsed from her body.

"Why not? She tried to kill you. Something had to be done. That's insane."

Oh, yeah, Eva wasn't hostile—she was downright shaking with disdain.

That made the next part easier to admit.

"Because I killed her."

Eva's shoulders jerked before they slumped forward. "Good."

"Good?" I felt my brows hit my hairline in shock.

"Yes. Good. She shouldn't have tried to kill you. You were trying to help her. And if she pulled that sneak attack with you, she would've done it again to someone else. And what if she killed them?"

Damn, that felt good. But I didn't think she understood.

"Eva, honey, you get that my job was dangerous. Hell, it still is. I'm telling you this not to boast but to be honest. I've taken lives. That's not something I'm proud of, but I don't regret protecting myself or my team."

"I'm sorry. I'm sure that's really hard on you." Her lips pinched together and twisted. "I hate that you have to live with that, but I hope you also know the rest of us are thankful for your sacrifice."

Something that had been lodged in my heart broke free. And for the first time in my life, I could breathe—an actual clean breath that wasn't full of scorn and venom.

"Probably should've had this conversation before now."

"What conversation?"

I took a deep breath. I'd never had this conversation with anyone—never needed to—so I didn't know where to start. I just knew she needed to understand what she'd gotten herself into.

"The one where I tell you about my job and what we do. I think you have a general idea what Z Corps does. But you need to know, the company has just as many on-the-books contracts as we do off the books. There are some missions that fall into a gray area. We're not always on the right side of the law, but we're always on the right side of good."

"Max, honey, I'm gonna stop you right there." Eva's stormy gaze was like a punch to the gut.

I was asking too much. Eva had been through enough and deserved so much better than an asshole like me, with more hashmarks on his soul than he could remember.

Her soft hand landed over my heart and I bet she could feel my heart thumping under her palm.

"I understand—"

"No, I don't think you do." She cut me off mid-sentence. "I don't need you to tell me you're on the side of righteousness. The Max Brown I know is a protector, a champion of the truth. Thank you for sharing something I know you'd rather have kept locked away. I know how painful memories can be. Thank you for trusting me with that, it's not something I take lightly."

"As for your job, I've had an up-close glimpse of how dangerous it is. I also know what you do is important. So if you're worried I have a problem with it, you shouldn't be. I can't say I'm thrilled to think about you putting your life on the line. I can't say the thought doesn't scare the ever-loving hell out of me. But I also know the world needs men like you, and if you'll let me, I'd be damn proud to be the woman waiting for you back home."

The sweetest burn ignited in the deepest recesses of my very being. A part of me that I wouldn't have ever believed could be reached. But Eva had, and as that burn scorched a fiery trail of clarity, I knew there was nothing I couldn't trust Eva with. There was nothing I needed to keep hidden.

My hand shot up and hooked around the back of her neck and I pulled her down until our mouths collided. I was beyond words, and when her tongue swept against mine with the same fervor I knew she was, too. I wanted to devour her, consume all the understanding she'd offered—so that's exactly what I did. And fuck me, she just kept offering more.

Minutes later when I broke the kiss, we both struggled for oxygen. Hands down, best kiss of my life.

"I'm totally falling for you, Max Brown," she murmured against my lips.

"That's good, honey, because I'm falling for you, too."

"Thank you for believing in me."

Christ, she was killing me. Before I could say anything or kiss the hell out of her—which seemed to be a better option since I couldn't find the words to explain all the ways her belief in me set off a chain reaction of emotions—she settled back down next to me. Eva's head rested over my heart, which was appropriate since she'd snuck into my life and stolen it. Her hand went to my flank.

"Can I ask you something?" she whispered.

"You can ask me anything."

"Why did you change your mind about me talking to the authorities?"

Eva's change of topic had me reeling. "What?"

"Well, when Zane first brought it up, you were adamant we not come. What made you change your mind?"

"You did. What you said about needing to do this so you could move on and put the past where it belongs, in the past. I remembered that you're not some damsel in distress, you're strong, resourceful. And I admit, there's a part of me that likes that you want to step up for Bubba and Zoey so they can put this behind them, too. But mostly, I've come to the realization that I can't say no to you. I want to give you and the boys the life you deserve and to do that I have to let you be you. So, if that meant coming back to Alaska, a

place I want you nowhere near, I'll suck it up, be here with you, and make sure you're safe to do what you need to do."

If it was possible for a person to melt into another human, Eva nearly accomplished it. Her body had gone soft and pliant as she gave me more of her weight, snuggling so close we were damn near fused together.

This isn't contentment, it's goddamn euphoria.

"I..."

Eva started then stopped again, just like she'd done last night. So I prompted her the same way, hoping she'd finally say what I wanted to hear.

"You what, honey?"

"Nothing," she mumbled, and disappointment ached in my chest.

I wanted to hear her say the words, so I could say them back.

"Thank you," she continued.

"For what?"

"For understanding I have to talk to the authorities. For believing I'm strong. For taking care of me while I do this. I want it all behind me so we can move on. I need to be free of all my guilt, so I can come to you with a clear conscience."

"You never have to thank me for taking care of you, Eva."

"Well, I am all the same."

I could barely speak past the tidal wave of emotions or the swelling in my chest. I'd given up trying to figure out what was so different about Eva that made me go from a cynic to a lovesick idiot. The fuck of it was, it had only taken her hours from the time I met her to start the transformation.

And every day since I first laid eyes on her, it was like I was re-born, reshaped, molded into this new man who I didn't recognize but liked.

Eva's breathing evened out and when I knew she was sound asleep, I kissed the top of her head and said the words I'd been fighting to keep under wraps.

"I think I'm in love with you, Eva," I whispered.

Eva didn't respond.

* * *

THE NESBETT COURTHOUSE LOOKED LIKE ANY OTHER MUNICIPAL building. There was nothing particularly noteworthy or impressive as we rode the elevator up to the top floor. That morning after Eva had gotten ready for her meeting, she'd asked me my preference on what she did with the boys. I was torn. I wanted them with us so they were close but I also wanted them safely locked behind closed doors where no one would see them. After discussing it with Eva, she decided to leave them at the hotel.

I trusted they were in good hands with Anaya, but the rock in my gut became heavier the longer we were away from them.

"You know they're gonna be fine," Eva told me when we stepped off the elevator. "They like Anaya and she's great with them."

I could not believe Eva was consoling *me* about the boys.

So much for concealing my worry.

"I know. I just want this over and all of us back on the plane headed home."

"Home," she mumbled. "I like the sound of that."

Fucking hell yeah.

"Wait." I stopped us outside of the ADA's office. "Are you positive you want to do this?"

"Yeah." She nodded and smiled.

"You don't—"

"I know I don't have to do anything. I *want* to do this. I'm ready to do it. Besides, you'll be next to me the whole time, what can go wrong?"

She shrugged her shoulder, completely oblivious to what her trust meant to me—how desperately I needed her to know that I would protect her with my last breath.

"Nothing will go wrong," I confirmed. "Let's do this."

A legal secretary offered a rushed greeting and she quickly ushered us into a large conference room where a woman sat until she saw us enter. She stood, walked around the large table, and thrust her hand toward a startled Eva.

The women shook hands and made introductions. "Eva, I'm ADA Bernard. Thank you so much for making the trip. My office received the audio files your representative sent. We've already reviewed them, however I need you to listen to them with me, so you can swear to the authenticity."

"I understand," Eva replied.

"Mr. Brown." The ADA turned her gaze to me but didn't offer to shake my hand.

I wasn't sure what that said and I didn't care to contemplate the slight. I simply wanted this meeting over so we could be on our way.

"Before we begin, I'd like to review the immunity deal," I told ADA Bernard.

"Of course." The woman turned to the legal secretary still standing in the doorway. "Melissa, if you wouldn't mind closing the door on your way out," she said, dismissing the other woman.

Wordlessly, the door clicked shut and the ADA walked to the table, then opened a file folder, spreading several pieces of paper out. "Here you are. As you can see, we're offering transactional immunity. As it is clearly written, Eva Dawkins, AKA Eva Dawson, is protected from future prosecution in regard to this case. We'd normally offer relocation and a new identity after testimony, however your representative declined."

I bet Tex did. He could hide Eva better than the state of Alaska could. However, she wasn't going into hiding—I'd be the one providing all future protection.

After I read and reread the documents, I collected them off the table and folded them in half.

"Eva? Are you ready?"

With a twitch of her lips, she nodded.

"Yeah, I'm ready."

ADA Bernard fired up the laptop and a few moments later, a woman's annoying, high-pitched voice filled the room.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Boss, it's me. The job is done. Now I need the money you promised me."

"Not so fast. I need details. Where'd you leave them?"

"Mark fell asleep right after I took off, thank goodness. If he'd been as hyperaware as you said he was, he would've known we weren't flying southwest toward Juneau. I flew straight west and circled a bit before heading down into the Lake Clark Preserve and Wilderness. I went down between two mountain ranges and landed on a tributary of Two Lakes."

My stomach roiled hearing Eva's soft sad voice as she explained what she'd done.

"And he didn't suspect anything?"

"No. I don't think so. Not until it was too late to do anything. I cut the fuel to the engine and made it seem as if we were crash landing. They went into brace position. I landed on the lake and told them I had to check things out. I had them get out, then when they were on shore, I backed up and flew away."

Eva's voice paused and I clearly heard the audible gulp of oxygen as she tried to gain her composure. *"The looks on their faces will haunt me forever, if I'm being honest. Mark knew what was happening immediately, and wasn't happy at all. Zoey simply looked confused. But after I turned the plane around, I looked back. She had a look of utter disbelief and terror on her face."*

Christ, the sorrow in her voice was killing me.

"And you didn't leave them with anything that might help them survive, right?"

"No." Eva's voice cracked and it was clear she was crying. Fuck-ing hell. "All they had were the clothes they were wearing. But, I have to tell you, Mark had approval to carry a knife on the plane, and I'm pretty sure the pockets of his cargo pants were full, but I don't know with what. Otherwise, all they had were the clothes on their backs."

"Good. You're sure no one knows where you went and where you are now?"

I tuned out the rest of the recording and pulled a sobbing Eva into my arms. This, right here, was why I didn't want her to come to Alaska. I didn't want her to relive something she was so ashamed of. I knew it would bring everything to the forefront—not only what she'd done to Bubba and Zoey, but the reason behind why she'd been forced to do it in the first place.

"Can you please tell me who is on that recording?" the ADA asked.

"That's Tracy Eklund," Eva muttered as she sniffed back tears. "Me and Tracy talking."

"You referred to her by the moniker, 'Boss'. How do you know it's Tracy?"

"Because I've met Tracy. She worked at her husband Kenneth Eklund's law practice as his assistant."

"How did you meet the Eklunds?"

"When my father was arrested on his third DUI, Kenneth Eklund was his attorney. You heard the recording so you tell me, even ten

years later, wouldn't you remember that woman's high-pitched, nasally voice? That's Tracy Eklund. One hundred percent."

Eva was correct. Tracy had a very distinct voice that no one could forget.

"I believe you, but you will be cross-examined and the defense will ask. Though I think it will be moot once Mrs. Eklund speaks."

Several hours and three more recorded phone calls later, we were finally back in the elevator on the way down.

"You did great," I told her. "How do you feel?"

"Free."

"That's good, honey."

"I can't wait to get home and start living."

Good Lord, her statement sent an ache over my body.

Home—I'd never had one of those and I couldn't fucking wait to make one with her and the kids. Now, if I could manage to summon up the courage to tell her how I felt when she was awake, we'd be on our way to making a future.

CHAPTER 31

Time sure does go fast when you're trying to sort your life—the previous week had gone by in a blink.

Max helped me sort my house in Florida. And after I consulted Tex, since he'd been the one to set me up and purchase my furniture, we decided to donate all of it to a battered women's shelter. His generosity knew no bounds and I got a little teary eyed when Tex told me he knew what it was like to need help. I couldn't imagine someone as capable as Tex needing anything from anyone—and I didn't ask for him to elaborate.

Anaya came over and we found the perfect organization to give my belongings to. She'd been wonderful. Not only to me but to the kids as well—they adored her and Kyle, too. The couple had been over several times in the last week, and not just so Anaya could help me, but just to keep me company while Kyle and Max worked.

Tex had also given me a new identity and I prayed this would be the last time I'd have to change my name. It was getting a little ridiculous at this point. So now I was Mary Eva Deward. I would still go by Eva because, seriously, I'd never remember I was supposed to answer to Mary. Tex had also transferred my meager savings and checking accounts into my new name.

Things were coming together.

Max and I still hadn't had our talk, but I thought after the Alaska trip we both needed to breathe and decompress. Not to mention, we weren't out of the woods yet, not when there was still a hitman out there somewhere trying to track me down.

A man called Garrett who worked with Max and his team and was supposed to be a computer genius guy much like Tex, had spread the information all over the dark web, *whatever that was*, that Kenneth Eklund had been arrested for conspiracy to commit murder, witness tampering, and witness intimidation. I thought tampering and intimidation were pretty much the same thing, but apparently ADA Bernard wanted to throw the proverbial book at both Eklunds.

Tracy was screwed and her lawyer was now scrambling trying to make a deal. Which meant Alaska was almost behind me. I hadn't told Max yet, but I had one more thing to do before I could move on and Tex had been more than happy to set it up. Now I just had to find a way to actually go through with it.

But for now, I didn't have time to freak out about the call I would be making later. Max had invited his team over this afternoon for a barbeque so I had bigger things to *freak* the fuck out about. I'd met the team, of course, and over the last few days I'd gotten used to them coming over to have a word with Max. Sometimes they'd stay a while and work at the dining room table. I heard words like: *mission strategy, SITREP, tango, Omni*. I'd also heard things that scared the hell out of me like: *take out, put to ground, and, kill the fucker*.

My list of things I needed to do was long, but I moved talking to Max to the top of the list when Declan said they were close to closing in on Omni and the team would be deploying soon. However, after Declan left, the boys needed my help, and now we were T-minus five minutes until everyone arrived and there'd been no time to ask Max if he was leaving.

Besides, my freak-out had commenced. Tatiana and Emerson were coming over with Brooks and Thad.

Max had declared that today was about relaxing and family, but I felt anything but relaxed. This was a big deal. These were the people closest to him. I'd been around the men dozens of times, I should have been comfortable, but for some reason, this just felt different. And I'd never met Emerson and Tatiana.

"Babe?"

"Huh?" I turned from the iced tea I was making and found Max watching me.

"What are you thinking about?"

"All the things I..." I started to lie but quickly changed my mind. This was Max I was talking to and we didn't hide things from each

other. "I'm nervous."

"Why? You know everyone coming over."

"I don't know Tatiana and Emerson. And this feels different."

"Different how?" he asked but made no move to come closer.

"I don't know. Just different. These are your people, your family; I feel like I need to impress them or something. Or maybe I need their approval."

Max's expression softened, and just like every time he looked at me that way, my insides melted. He was the sexiest man I'd ever seen, but when he stared at me like that, I swear I saw love in his eyes. It was something he did a lot with the boys, too.

"First, you don't need anyone's approval, but just so you know, you already have it. My team's not stupid, Eva, they know who you are to me. And even if they hadn't seen it for themselves, they trust my judgement. They know you're a good person. Brooks and Thad both told me that Emmy and Tatiana can't wait to meet you."

"Why?"

"Because Anaya loves spending time with you. She brags about the boys all the time. And they're jealous she's gotten to know you and they haven't. I'm gonna warn you now, when they get here, they're gonna whisk you away and talk your ear off. They're gonna ask you all sorts of questions, and it's not because they're being nosy, it's just who they are. It's what they do—they'll want to pull you into their tribe and make sure you're comfortable."

"I've never really had friends, Max. I don't know how to do the whole sisterhood thing."

His lips curved up into a smile that made him look deliciously sexy. He pushed off the cabinet he'd been leaning against and moved to me. Once he got close, he pulled me into his arms and kissed the top of my head.

"Sisterhood?" He chuckled.

"You know what I mean. Anaya tells me they're all as close as sisters. Hell, they all live in the same house."

"They are close," Max confirmed. "Though Brooks and Tatiana found a house, so they're moving into their own place soon so they can get everything ready for the baby."

We stood in silence for a long moment. Now that his arms were wrapped around me and working their magic I was starting to relax.

"I want you to enjoy today," he muttered. "I want the boys to have a good time. Since we've been home from Alaska, they seem to be settling in, especially Eli. But I'd like for them both to feel comfortable around my family."

"Okay," I agreed.

How could I not? These people were the only family Max had, and if he wanted me and the boys to get to know them, then that's what we'd do. I'd shove all my insecurities aside and gratefully take the boon Max gave us.

* * *

"Wow, EVA. I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY. THE BOYS ARE ADJUSTING okay?" That was Tatiana's response to me filling in all the details of my ordeal.

"They are. When we were in Florida, they saw a counselor. She was great with them and me. She taught me how to ask questions without the boys knowing I was asking—if that makes sense. It really helped me learn how to communicate with the boys and how to get them to open up to me. I think the move up here caused a setback with Elijah, but he's certainly coming around. It helps that Max is great with him. And Liam had an outburst, but Max handled that like a pro and since then, Liam is glued to Max."

All the women smiled and suddenly I felt like I was under a microscope.

"What'd I say?" I blurted out. "You all are looking at me strange."

"We don't mean to. It's just that Max... We're real happy for him. And you," Emerson rushed out. "He can be..."

"Difficult," I supplied.

"I was gonna say, withdrawn. But difficult works, too." She giggled. "We're so glad you decided to stay."

"I am, too," I confessed. But I wasn't ready to explain all the reasons I was happy to be staying in Maryland. Maybe when I got to know them better, I would admit I couldn't imagine going back to Florida and leaving Max. "But now there's so much to do. School starts in a few weeks and I have to enroll Liam. Find a new pediatrician. Figure out daycare for Eli so I can find a job."

"What's this about a job?" Max's voice startled me.

Anaya's eyes rounded as her gaze slid to the other women.

We were out back watching the boys on the play set and I hadn't heard Max come outside—not that I was trying to hide my plans from him, but his presence was unexpected.

"Huh?" I glanced over my shoulder.

"A job?"

"What about it?"

In a split second, Max's guard slammed down, leaving the mask I hadn't seen since the dinner where my car had exploded firmly in place.

What in the world?

"What's wrong?" I probed.

"Nothing." The snappy answer told me he wasn't telling the truth but I didn't want to push him in front of company. "I was coming out to tell you that Tex called."

"He did?" I stood and faced Max.

Tex had called a few hours ago to tell us that the team he had tracking down the hitman was moving in. I wasn't sure what that meant exactly, but Max told me it was a good thing and we should be getting good news by the end of the day that the threat was eliminated. I didn't think that was good news, I thought that was the best news.

"The team took him out."

"The hitman?"

"Yes. It's over."

It's over.

My legs buckled and suddenly Max was there and I was in his arms. The relief was so overwhelming I couldn't stop my body from trembling.

It was over. We were safe. Finally.

* * *

A FEW HOURS AFTER MAX HAD DELIVERED THE NEWS THAT MY LIFE WAS no longer in danger, everyone left. But not before we celebrated my new status. I was no longer marked for death. Now anything was possible.

That was why I snuck off to my bedroom with my phone.

Now I was pacing. I had to do this. I'd practiced what I wanted to say a hundred times in my head. But now that I had the phone number dialed and all I had to do was hit send, I wasn't so sure I should make this call.

What if they didn't want to hear from me? What if I should just let bygones be bygones?

I couldn't stop pacing. I was wrought with indecision, my stomach twisted, and my hands shook as I stared at my phone.

Pull it together.

Before I could change my mind, I tapped the green button and slowly lifted my phone to my ear.

"Hello?"

My head spun as a sweet, soft voice answered the phone.

"Zoey?"

"Eva?"

"Yeah. Tex told me he cleared it with you and Mark. I mean, he asked you guys if it was okay to call you."

Zoey's giggle took me off-guard until she explained, "It's strange hearing someone call Mark, Mark. I'm so used to everyone calling him Bubba. And, yes, I'm glad you called. How are your boys?"

Whoa. This was not how I expected this conversation to start. Zoey being pissed as hell at me and telling me what a horrible person I was, was more along the lines of what I'd thought was going to happen.

"They're safe and doing well. Thank you for asking. Listen, I wanted to apologize for what I did. I... I... there's not a single day I don't think about it. I'll never forget—"

"You *need* to forget, Eva. We've forgiven you and moved on. It's time to forgive yourself and do the same. I can't lie and say I wasn't scared I was going to die, because there were a few times when I was sure I wasn't going to make it. But you know what? I did—we did—Mark and I. And because of what happened, I learned a few things about myself—I'm stronger than I thought. And, well, Mark and I have chosen to see the silver lining. We found each other because of what happened. I'm marrying the best man I've ever known and I can't find it in me to be upset about that."

"Thank you."

"No, thank you. Mark told me you went to Alaska and talked to the ADA. Because of the recordings and your testimony, Mark doesn't have to face a trial. I can't tell you how much that means to me—I hate that he's had to continually talk about what happened with Malcom. I know it's hard for him to reconcile what his brother—his twin—did to their dad. And the ending... well, that's something that will stick with him for the rest of his life. So, him not having to go back and testify is a huge relief."

"I did it because it was the right thing," I told her. "I deserved to be punished and I wasn't."

"Eva," Zoey sighed. "I think you've punished yourself enough. Live your life and be happy. Mark and I are."

"I don't know what to say."

"I don't think there's anything left to say, Eva. Seriously, be happy."

"Thanks, Zoey. And again, I'm so, so—"

"No need. We know you are. Take care."

"You, too."

Zoey disconnected and I collapsed on the bed in a heap of mangled emotions and nerves. I was damn near hyperventilating.

She'd forgiven me.

She'd told me to be happy.

Strong arms wrapped around my body and turned me over. I burrowed my face in Max's neck and breathed him in.

"What the fuck, honey?"

"I talked to Zoey," I sobbed. Max went solid and I loved him even more for being concerned. "She said she and Mark forgive me."

I could feel some of the tension wane as his hands roamed my back, petting me, soothing me, but nothing could calm my racing thoughts.

"I'll be okay," I told him. "I just need a few minutes to wrap my head around everything."

"Tell me what you need."

I sagged into him, not wanting to lose him, but needing to ask.

"Would you mind keeping an eye on the kids so I can get myself together?"

If Max's arms flexing around me was any indication, he wasn't thrilled with my request, but I was fast learning there wasn't much Max would deny me.

"If you're not out in twenty minutes, I'm coming back to check on you."

"I..."

"You what, honey?"

"Thank you."

Max sighed and kissed my head before he got up.

"Tonight, after the boys go down, we're having our talk."

"Okay," I whispered and rolled to my side, bringing my knees to my chest.

Max took in my position on the bed and his face went tight.

"Not a fan of you curling into a protective ball, Eva. Nothing's gonna hurt you. Not ever again."

"I'm not trying to protect myself," I denied.

Max looked like he had more to say but thankfully he left me to sort my head.

Could it really be this easy?

No more crazy contract killers.

The boys were safe.

I no longer had to live in fear my past transgressions would catch up with me.

Zoey and Mark had forgiven me.

Was it as easy—as simply being happy?

CHAPTER 32

The last thing I wanted to do was leave Eva alone in the bedroom. I had a million questions, the first being why in the hell did she call Zoey. I didn't need to ask how she'd gotten the number. That was easy—Tex.

But I couldn't fathom why she'd call.

That wasn't true—I knew why she'd called.

Eva was making amends.

Fuck.

Now she was curled up in bed, undoubtedly crying, since she was barely holding it together when I'd gone back there to check what she was doing.

"Can we watch one more episode, Max?" Eli asked.

"Sure, bud," I answered as I sat down on the couch next to him.

If I couldn't be in the bedroom taking care of Eva, at least I could take care of the boys.

"Is Mom all right?" Liam asked.

"Yep. I think all of the excitement of the day wore her out."

"Can your friends come over again?"

"Sure. Did you have a good time?" I asked even though I knew he did.

Since we'd gotten home from Alaska, the vibe in the house had shifted. Eva had changed, she relaxed, the tension she'd carried had diminished, and because of that, the boys had changed, too. All of us had fallen into an easy routine, but what was most noticeable was Elijah had come out of his shell. He talked all the time. Liam was still

watchful, but I figured the trauma the kid had endured would take longer than a week to dissipate.

"Yeah, I like seeing Mom smile," Liam told me.

Christ. Some of the things the kid said undid me.

Always looking out for his mom and brother.

I was torn between wishing Liam was a regular kid thinking about what video games were coming out and proud as hell that at six he understood what it meant to look after those he loved.

The next thirty minutes went by in silence. Liam and Eli's attention on the TV and my mind filled with Tex's call.

His team had tracked Joshua Lemont—the second man Kenneth had contracted to kill Eva, and it had taken them less than an hour to get him to talk. The Eklunds were well and truly fucked. I wasn't sure if Bubba would be relieved the ordeal was over, or if the news his father's longtime friend and attorney was a dirty asshole would be another hit in a long line of shitty events. Either way, he had Zoey, and I was fast learning with the right woman by your side, there wasn't anything you couldn't survive.

I heard Eva's footsteps and I craned my neck to watch her walk into the room. She stopped near the couch and took the three of us in with a megawatt smile that stole my breath.

Damn, she was stunning. There was nothing average about her, and looking back to the first day I saw her walking out of the grocery store, I can't for the life of me remember why I'd thought that.

She'd pulled her hair up into a ponytail which gave me a clear and unobstructed view of her slender neck. The sight of it never failed to conjure up memories of the sounds she made when I kissed the sensitive skin there. Eva didn't have a "spot" or even a few of them that turned her on. It didn't matter where I touched or licked or nibbled, her body responded in a way that had me harder than I'd ever been in my life. Everything about her was perfect.

"Why are you smilin'?"

"Just looking at my guys."

My gaze slid from her so I could take in what she saw. Elijah had fitted himself to my side, his little boy body pressed against mine, Liam had scooted closer to his brother. The three of us only took up half the couch instead of sprawling out, which there was plenty of room to do.

This was what I'd been missing all my life.

Hell, I hadn't even known I was missing it all those years because I hadn't known it existed.

Until Eva and the boys.

"Bedtime when this is over," she told her sons.

"Okay, Mom," Liam muttered.

I turned back to Eva, happy to see all earlier traces of worry were now gone.

No anxiety, stress, apprehension.

The longer I studied her, the more realization dawned—this was us.

This would be our life. Lazy Saturday afternoons hanging with our friends, the boys running around out back, lounging on the couch doing nothing but enjoying each other's company.

Fuck yeah.

This was the very definition of nirvana.

* * *

"THE BOYS GO DOWN OKAY?" I ASKED WHEN EVA CLOSED THE BEDROOM door behind her.

"Yeah."

I watched her walk toward the bed and tamped down my desire to demand she strip naked before she joined me under the covers. Yet, I held my tongue—we had things to talk about and if she got into bed undressed, there would be no talking.

The determination and resolve that had served me well over the years was nonexistent when it came to Eva. The slightest press of her silky skin against me would chuck all of my good intentions out the window and I'd have her on her back, my cock buried deep, and her moaning in two-point-five seconds.

"Did you ask them about switching rooms?" I asked in an effort to keep my dick under control.

"Liam was excited to have his own room. Elijah not so much. They've always shared, so I think Eli's just nervous."

"Then they'll share for a while. Liam won't mind."

"I know," she sighed. "I just hate that Liam always has to sacrifice for his brother."

"Come here, Eva."

I pulled back the comforter and waited for her to climb in next to me before I dropped the covers and settled her on my chest.

"I was just thinking the same thing earlier when I was watchin' TV with the boys. I'm torn because I want him to just be a worry-free kid. But he does worry, he wants to take care of his mom and brother. Which I have to tell you makes me proud. Maybe one day, that will change and he'll turn into a self-centered teenager." I gave her a soft squeeze. "But for now, I think you have to let Liam be who he is—a really great kid who's already showing signs of growing up to be a great man. We'll keep an eye on him and if need be, step in."

"I agree. I think once their stuff gets here and Elijah gets a little more comfortable, he'll want his own space."

Now that the topic of the boys getting their own rooms was settled, it was time to move on to something that we needed to hash out.

"We need to talk about you sleeping here in bed with me and not sneaking out in the middle of the night."

Every night, we started in this bed, but after we'd made love, she'd leave and I'd sleep alone. Not only did I hate her not being with me, I was worried about why she was doing it.

"Just a few more weeks."

"Explain to me why you leave."

Jesus, could I sound anymore pussy?

"I just think it's the right thing to do. This is moving really fast, Max. Like at warp-speed. I mean, we're already living together but I don't want the boys to see me sleeping in here with you—not yet. I think they need more time to adjust."

"Are you having second thoughts?"

Fuck, now I sounded like a desperate pussy.

"What? No. Of course not." Eva picked her head up off my chest, her yellowish-green eyes full of concern. "Are you?"

"Fuck, no. Why do you stop yourself before you tell me you love me?"

Yep, I just threw that right out there.

Smooth, asshole, real smooth.

"Wha'?" Her question was more a swoosh of oxygen on an exhale.

"You start to say it, but then you stop."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I can see it. Hell, Eva, I can *feel* it. You get ready to say it and my heart starts thundering in my chest preparing to finally hear what I've been waiting for, then you close down."

"You want to hear it?"

"Jesus, woman, what do you think we're doing here? I'm not playin' house, passin' time, twiddling my thumbs. I want this—not for a while—forever. Of course I want to know if you love me."

"Well, you haven't said it. Do you love me?"

"Hell, yes, I love you."

I seriously needed to work on my delivery.

Eva's eyes widened. She gave a choked gasp before she stopped breathing altogether.

"Take a breath, honey."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

How was I supposed to answer that? Admit I was too much of a coward to say it first? Tell her I'd never in my whole life said those words to anyone—not even to Pam and I'd asked her to marry me? Confess that I was a chicken-shit and if she didn't return the feeling, it would crush me?

Yeah, no. I wasn't telling her any of that.

"I was worried it was too soon." I settled on something that didn't make me sound like a total tool.

"That's why I didn't say it. I was afraid you weren't ready to hear it and you'd run a mile."

"I'm not gonna run a mile and I'm ready to hear it. Hell, I've been ready."

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion, even though Eva moved quickly. She scrambled to sit astride me, her hands going to my face, capturing not only my eyes but my soul.

"I love you, Maximus Brown."

Fuck.

My eyes closed as I soaked in the words.

"Say it again."

"I love you."

Christ, fucking hell. The sweetest pain sliced through me, a thousand tiny blades pierced my heart. In the space of a few seconds, Eva had decimated me only to put me back together.

Reborn.

"Never heard those words," I choked.

"How is that possible?" My eyes snapped open at the anguish I heard.

No pity, only disbelief.

"I think you understand how I grew up," I reminded her. "When your father's an abusive drunk and your mother's cowed and more worried about fending off her next beating than about protecting her child, there's not much time for hugs, kisses, and declarations of love. My aunt and uncle didn't love me nor did they pretend to."

"But Pam... You asked—"

"Babe, it kills me to admit this, because I'm gonna sound like a prick. I didn't love her. I knew it then and never lied and said the words. Neither did she. I asked her to marry me because I was scared of losing the only thing that was familiar."

"I hate that for you."

"Can't change the past."

"Nope, we can't." The heaviness of our exchange lifted and back was Eva's bright smile. Her tiny hands grasped my face and she leaned forward, smacking her lips against mine in a playful kiss that had my heart thundering. "But we have the future."

"That we do." I returned her smile because there was no way I couldn't. It was infectious—a beacon of hope I wanted to get lost in.

"One last thing before I show you how much it means to me that you love me."

"Show me?" Her lips twitched and she wiggled her ass on my already semi-hard cock.

"Yeah, honey, show you. And fair warning, you're gonna be boneless when I'm done, so I'm gonna need to carry you out of here."

I flexed my ass, pushing my hard-on against her center, cursing the layers of clothes between us.

"Hm... you think you have it in you to render me unable to walk?"

I didn't bother to answer her ridiculous taunt—she knew I was more than capable of leaving her a quivering mess.

"So what's this about a job?"

"What about it?"

Eva's hands moved down my neck as she sat straight, grazing my throat. And when her palms rested on my chest, I had to sum-

mon all my concentration in order to finish this conversation that at the moment seemed seriously fucking unimportant.

"You're looking for a job?"

"Of course I am. I need to work."

"What about the boys?"

Eva's brows knitted together, clearly perplexed.

"Liam will be in school and Elijah will go to daycare. I managed to save some money, but only enough to float me for a month or two, depending on what the rent is on this place."

"You're not paying rent."

As she stared down at me, her features sharpened even more and I braced for her response. Gauging her new look, it was going to piss me off.

"Yeah, Max, I am. I pay my way."

"Not anymore."

Jesus Christ, Eva transformed right in front of my eyes. Her entire body stiffened—her once-lax thighs resting near mine had gone solid and she looked like she was ready to come out of her skin.

"Don't do this," she muttered.

"Do what?"

"Force me to rely on you."

"What the fuck?" Every good feeling I'd had minutes ago fled in a rush of fury. "I hope to Christ, you're not comparing me to your asshole ex."

"I'm not. I know you are nothing like him. You're the best man I've ever known. You're the only person that has ever made me feel cared for. You make me feel protected in every way. Not just physically safe from harm, but I know you'll guard my heart, you won't let anything hurt me—or the boys. But that doesn't mean that you telling me that I can't work isn't a huge trigger for me. I have to know I can support myself. I have to know I can contribute in some way—even if it's only paying half the rent and buying groceries. But I *have* to do it. This is important to me, Max. Please don't do this to us. Don't strip me of my self-worth and make me beholden to you."

Fucking shit, if the panic in her eyes hadn't already gutted me, the tears would've.

"That's not what I'm trying to do. I want to take care of you. If it's about money, I have—"

"It is, but it isn't. Yes, I want to make my own money, but it's more than that. I need to feel like I have value, like I'm important, like I'm worth something."

"Christ, honey, you're worth everything."

"Then prove you feel that way and don't ask me to sit around while you pay for everything."

My stomach clenched as I tried to find a way to navigate the minefield she'd laid.

"Can we compromise?"

"Honestly, it depends."

"Fair enough. What if I cover the rent until you get on your feet? I don't want you draining your savings. And this house is expensive, half the rent would be more than you were paying in Florida. Can we agree on a quarter? I'll cover utilities and kick in for food. And before you argue, remember you're used to only feeding yourself and two small children. You want to contribute, I get it, but I don't want you taking a financial hit because of me."

"But you get to take the hit for me?"

Goddamn, I was mucking this up despite my best efforts.

"Straight up, Eva, I make a lot of money. I've had no overhead for a lot of years, so I've got a sizeable amount sitting in the bank. I could easily carry our family and not feel it. You don't want that and as much as I hate to admit it, I understand why you need to feel useful. Hell, honey, I admire and respect it. But the truth is, I want to stay in this house even if it's more than we need. I want this. I need this. I've never had a home. I feel at peace here with you and the boys. I like knowing they have something nice. And this is gonna make me sound like a dick, but, Eva, you gotta know. I suck at cooking. That means you're gonna be saddled with that or we're eating takeout. I can do all of the laundry, but I have no interest in dusting, sweeping, and vacuuming. I'll kick in when you ask, but please, honey, do not think you're gonna come home to find me with a dust thing in my hand. That means I'm hiring someone to clean our house, or you're gonna be taking on the brunt of that, too. You're looking at this arrangement as me taking care of you because I'll be paying more. But the truth is, you'll be the one taking care of me and our family in all of the important ways."

"Our family?" she whispered, tears now streaming faster down her pretty face.

"Baby, again, what do you think we're doing here? Yes, absolutely our family. What you add daily is more valuable than anything I could ever contribute. Without you I have nothing, Eva. If you leave, I go back being the cynical, lonely asshole who's walking through life in a pitiful daze. You and the boys will still have each other. The three of you would be just fine. But me? I'd be fucking wrecked."

"I love you."

Christ, how was it possible three words could catch my soul on fire?

"Love hearing you say that. But I need to know, can we compromise on this?"

"Yeah, baby, we can."

"Great."

Then before she could utter another word, I had her flipped over, her shirt was sailing through the air, and my lips latched on to her nipple over the lace of her bra.

"Time to prove how much I love you."

CHAPTER 33

It's amazing how much could change in just a few days. The rest of our weekend had been awesome. No more talk of jobs, money, or rent.

Life was about give and take. And the thing I needed most Max had already given me. He understood why I wanted to pull my own weight. His understanding made me love him all that much more. And maybe one day I wouldn't associate my self-worth with being able to financially support my children on my own and I'd see what Max saw and that I was valuable no matter what. But that would take time and Max was giving me what I need.

I took that as a huge win.

The only hiccup had been when Zane called to tell Max that the hitman Joshua Lemont was being detained in one of Z Corps' holding rooms. Something to mention, it kind of freaked me out that the man who'd been hired to kill me was named Joshua. I didn't know what I'd expected his name to be, but Joshua sounded sweet, almost wholesome. Which was a strange thing to think but I couldn't help it.

Max had laughed at me when I told him my weird thoughts on the subject and asked what I'd imagined his name to be. I didn't have an answer, but the man I pictured was short, ugly, and mean-looking. I thought he would have a mangled face and bald head, and the mere sight of him would scare small children. Max said I was describing Freddy Krueger and he was right. Joshua Lemont was not what I'd pictured.

So Joshua was being held in Maryland but was supposed to be taken to Alaska and turned over to the authorities later today. The team that Tex had hired to find him had an emergency callout—I didn't know what that meant but Max explained they were needed somewhere else and it had to be top priority or Tex wouldn't have pulled them. That meant Joshua was handed over to the Blue Team, which Max explained was another group of men that worked for Zane.

Further, I'd learned that Max's team was called the Gold Team, and Zane had a third group called the Red Team. I'd had a million questions about what Z Corps did, all of which Max answered. I got the sense he was sugarcoating some of it, but I could admit I was happy he'd held some of the details back because what he'd told me scared the shit out of me.

But the worst of it was when he told me his team would be deploying again in the near future to take out a group they'd been following for a long time that had proven to be hard to catch.

I didn't ask what "take out" meant, I had a pretty good idea and I didn't need confirmation. Suffice it to say, Max had a dangerous job. One that would take him away from me for weeks at a time. I viewed this as all the more reason for me to find a job quickly so I'd have something to keep my mind occupied on something other than worrying about him twenty-four-seven.

And as my luck would have it, Tatiana knew someone that was hiring a nanny.

How perfect was that?

The mother of the toddler was Tatiana's hair stylist. Her husband was an insurance broker in DC. Audrey—that was the mother getting ready to open her own salon—didn't want their son Mikey in daycare all day.

When I'd spoken to her over the phone, she'd said she had no problem with me bringing Elijah over when I watched Mikey. As a matter of fact, she'd suggested it. That way Mikey, who was three, would have someone to play with.

So there I was, standing in the bathroom finishing up getting ready for my interview with Audrey and Michael, and I was more nervous than I ever remember being before an interview but I really wanted this job. It was perfect.

I heard Max's terse voice in the bedroom so I stopped brushing my hair so I could listen.

"They're moving him today?" Pause. "Myles and the whole team is escorting him, right?"

Oh, shit, Max was talking about Joshua.

"Yeah, Zane, I know I'm wound tight," Max barked. "I'm not happy the fucker is in Maryland to begin with. I want him away from my family but I need to know that Myles, Owen, Gabe, and Kevin got this. So cut me some slack and just tell me the whole god-damn team is taking him."

Family.

God, I loved when he said that.

"Now you're pissing me off. Yes, my family. You wanna talk about how you lost your shit over Ivy? My ass was stuck in the sandbox when she had you tied in knots, but the stories are legendary so don't think I haven't heard them a thousand times." Another pause. "Perfect. Let me know when they deliver him."

I heard Max blow out a breath and in my mind's eye, I could see him raking his hands through his hair in frustration, something I'd witnessed a lot.

I set my brush on the vanity and made my way into the bedroom where Max was indeed combing his fingers through his hair.

"Hey."

His head popped up from studying the floor and he glanced over at me.

"You look beautiful."

"Thanks. Everything okay?"

"Yeah." His brows lifted in question.

"You sounded a little agitated when you were talking to Zane."

"Nothing for you to worry about."

Silly man.

I walked closer and wrapped my arms around his middle, happy he was mine to touch this way anytime I wanted.

"It's my pleasure to worry about you," I told him and watched as his forehead unwrinkled. "You said it yourself, when you told me that the Blue Team was going to take Joshua back to Alaska that they were completely competent. You also told me, they were all hand-picked by Zane, as you all were because they were the best at what

they did. You're worrying for nothing. But I have to tell you, I love that you are. Says a lot about how much you want to protect us."

"I love you, Eva, and the boys. Of course I'm going to protect you."

Damn, I seriously loved Max Brown. It's a crazy, irrational love that snuck up on me and invaded my life, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

"I love you, too. Now tell me I'm gonna nail this interview."

"You're gonna nail this interview. They're gonna love you and hire you on the spot."

"From your lips to God's ears."

"Really, you're perfect for the job, you have nothing to worry about."

I wasn't sure if I was perfect, I had no experience nannying but I had been a mom for six years so that had to count for some on-the-job experience.

"Perfect, right. Now kiss me, give me your keys, and walk me out so I won't be late."

"You're becoming quite bossy." His lips quirked and I gave up waiting for him to kiss me.

I rolled to my tiptoes and took what I wanted. Unfortunately, Liam came into the room before it could get heated.

"Max, are we still gonna practice pitching?" Liam asked.

This was something new. Liam had decided in the last forty-eight hours he was going to be a major league pitcher and Max had decided to indulge my son's latest professional endeavor. I figured I'd let Max learn on his own that Liam changed his mind about what he was going to be when he grew up about twice a month.

With a final soft, sexy brush of his mouth, Max pulled back, grinning.

"Yep. Let me walk your mom out to the car and then we'll go out back. Is Eli ready?"

"Yeah, he's waiting by the door with his glove and bat."

When Declan had shown up with three bags from a local sporting goods store filled with baseball and football gear, I had two choices: pitch a holy shit fit Max was asking his friends to run errands for him and still spoiling the boys, or delight in their joy as Max showed Liam and Elijah the purchases. I decided on the latter. I also decided that seeing Max's boyish smile when he explained to

the boys how the game of baseball was played was the next best thing to my boys telling me they loved me.

I'd never seen Max so carefree and happy as he was when he played with the boys. It was a different kind of love that he shared with them—it was unconditional, pure, and paternal. There was nothing better than watching Max and my boys fall in love.

"Liam, please go make sure Elijah's not swinging the bat in the house. Especially near the sliding glass window."

Max chuckled as Liam darted out of the room.

"What's funny?"

"You are."

"I don't see how."

"No, honey, there are a lot of really great things about you, you don't see." He leaned in and kissed the tip of my nose. "You're a good mom."

I loved he thought that. Maybe if he told me another five-million times I'd start to believe it. I'd made so many mistakes sometimes it was hard to see past them.

"You're doing it again, honey."

"Huh?" I looked up at Max to find him gazing down at me, watchful.

"Stay out of the past."

"How do you always know what I'm thinking?"

"Magic." He chuckled. "C'mon, let's get this show on the road so my woman can go dazzle her new employers so she can hurry up and come home so we can celebrate."

"Do you want kids?" I blurted out.

My question sliced through the air, electrifying the atmosphere. My hand flew to my mouth as if I could somehow shove the words back in.

What in the hell was wrong with me?

"Forget I asked. Hell, I don't even know why I asked."

"Babe—"

"Please, Max," I begged. My face flamed with embarrassment. "I have to get to my interview so just forget it. I swear, it's like I was possessed for a second and I wasn't in control of my mouth. Just walk me out."

Ohmigod, it was like an alien spirit had taken over my mouth and I was spewing the most humiliating shit.

I needed to leave.

Max clenched his jaw before he forced himself to relax. "Okay, Eva. Let's get you on the road."

After hugs and kisses from the boys and Max making sure I had the directions, my phone, and understood how to use the navigation system in his truck even though he'd printed the instructions, because one could never be too prepared—those were his words—I was on the road.

It wasn't until I was crossing over a quaint bridge that it hit me—not only had I left my boys with Max to watch but he'd loaned me his car and I was driving in Maryland for the first time. Hell, it was the first time I'd been out of the house alone since I'd moved.

My freak-out was cut short when the nav system blared through the speakers for me to turn. Two minutes later, I was pulling down a long driveway, an elegant house stood proudly at the end of the drive and my breath caught. Insurance brokers in DC must make a pretty penny if the couple could afford a huge brick home on the water.

Thankfully, the door opened as I parked and I had no time to talk myself into believing I wasn't good enough to nanny for Audrey and Michael.

An hour later, I was back in the truck, gainfully employed.

I dialed Max's number and waited for him to pick up.

"Hell—"

"I got the job!"

"Proud of you, Eva. I knew you'd get it."

"Thanks. I'm so excited. I saw a bakery on the way here. I'm gonna stop and pick up some cupcakes on my way home so we can celebrate."

"Sounds good. I'll let you tell the boys your good news when you get home."

"All right. I'll see you in thirty."

"Drive careful. Love you."

God, I loved hearing that.

"Love you."

I disconnected and tossed my phone in the cupholder.

I had a job.

I didn't start for two weeks, which gave me plenty of time to get Liam ready for school. And Max was making it so I wasn't stressed

about money so I could afford to take a few weeks and get settled.

It didn't take long for the bakery to come into view and I pulled into the lot, cut the engine, grabbed my phone, got out, and flung the strap of my purse over my shoulder.

And that was when I'd made the biggest mistake of my life. How many times had Max told me to be aware of my surroundings? How many times had he told me not to text while I was walking through a parking lot?

I knew better.

But I'd been so excited about my new job I was texting Tatiana to thank her.

I never sent that text.

I never made it home with cupcakes.

I didn't get to tell my boys my good news and I didn't get to celebrate with Max.

I was a goddamn idiot and I wasn't paying attention, therefore I'd missed the man walking up behind me. I missed him lifting his hand and the needle coming down toward my neck. And by the time I was paying attention, it was too late.

CHAPTER 34

"When's Mom gonna be home?" Liam asked.

I checked my watch and tried to hide my concern.

"Any minute now."

That was the third time in the last ten minutes I'd given that answer.

Eva was ten minutes later than she said she'd be home and it went against everything inside of me but I wasn't going to call her. She could be running late for a variety of reasons. Eva had made a solid argument the other night about needing her independence and I wasn't going to turn into an overbearing asshole and start calling her because she was a few minutes late.

Though I wanted to. All sorts of shit was running through my head, everything from her broken down on the side of the road to her being trapped in my truck after a horrific accident.

What the hell was wrong with me?

If one of my teammates was ten damn minutes late I wouldn't be concerned. Hell, if one of their women was late I wouldn't bat an eye. But Eva? I was freaking the hell out over ten fucking minutes.

"Can I help?" Elijah asked.

I looked down into a pair of yellowish-green eyes and my heart constricted. Eli looked so much like Eva but that wasn't what had started the ache in my chest. The normally shy boy had totally come around and he was now openly affectionate. Not that tugging on my hand was demonstrative, but for Eli it was huge.

"Sure, buddy." I reached down and picked Eli up, plopped him on the countertop, and looked around for something for him to do.

We were surprising Eva with tacos. One of two meals I could make that was edible.

"Here." I moved the bowl of half-smooshed avocados next to Eli and handed him a fork. "Smash 'em up."

Eli happily went to work and Liam continued to grate the cheese. Together, we got so lost making Eva dinner that when I looked up, another ten minutes had past.

Fuck this shit.

Twenty minutes was too much.

I pulled my phone out of my back pocket and dialed her number. Straight to voicemail.

I waited a moment in case she was trying to make a call and tried again.

Voicemail.

I sucked in a breath trying to tamp down the panic I told myself was unnecessary and dialed the office.

"Lo," Garrett greeted.

"Track my truck."

"Come again? And hello to you, too, dick."

"Garrett, please track my truck."

"Damn, brother, someone steal it? Thought that house was good —"

"Eva took my truck to go to a job interview."

I glanced back in the kitchen, keeping my eyes on the boys but walking far enough away they couldn't hear me.

"It's sitting on Chesapeake Avenue near Sixth Street. Hold on, let me check the address." Garrett paused a moment then continued. "Looks like it's actually in the parking lot of Bakers Delight."

"Do me a favor, call the bakery and ask if anyone's seen Eva, then ask them to go out into the parking lot and check to see if she's in the truck."

"Tell me what you're thinkin'."

"I don't wanna think anything, Garrett. I just need to know if Eva's there and I can't make the call myself with the boys in the next room. Both of them pick up on everything. Especially Liam. If I give him one inclination something's wrong, he's gonna panic."

"I'll call you back."

Garrett hung up on me and for the first time since I'd met the boys, I closed down. They needed me stone-cold and focused.

I walked back into the kitchen, went to the stove, and started pushing the ground beef around in the pan.

I was overreacting. I had to be.

My phone vibrated and I pulled it out and read Declan's text: Garrett called. We're on it. I'm on my way over. Everyone else is going out to look.

My hand shook as I tossed my phone on the counter and lowered my head.

This could not be happening.

Then dread hit my gut and I snatched my phone back up and shot off a text to Zane: Where the fuck is Joshua Lemont?

Zane: In the air.

Fuck.

Yeah, I was overreacting. I had to be.

Eva was just running late.

But I knew it was a lie.

I knew twenty minutes ago, something was wrong.

Fucking knew it and ignored my gut and now Eva was in trouble.

* * *

"FIVE HOURS," I GROWLED. "IT'S BEEN FIVE HOURS, TEX."

"Max, I know," he barked back. "She had three tracking devices on her. None of them are in service. I'm working as fast as I can. We all are."

Fuck. I was a total dick.

"I know you are. I'm... Christ... I can't breathe."

"Hang tight. We got the images from the toll booth near Dulles. It shouldn't take me long to run them."

A hand on my shoulder had me uncharacteristically jolting, nearly dropping my phone.

"I'm sorry, Max," Anaya mumbled. "But Elijah's super upset. He wants you. I tried to calm him, but he's not having it. I know you—"

"Thank you, Anaya. I don't know what I'd do if you weren't here helping me with them. I'll just..."

I'll what?

What the fuck was I going to do?

Go talk to a four-year-old and tell him I didn't know where his mom was? Face Liam's revulsion that I'd let something bad happen to his mom after I told him I'd protect them?

What in the actual fuck was I going to do?

"Max, I know you don't want to hear this right now, but you guys will find her. I know you can't see it right now, because you're so worried. But this is what you guys do. You find people."

"Today before she left she asked me if I wanted kids," I told Anaya. "I froze. I didn't know what to say. I never wanted kids—as in never. Then Eva came into my life and with her came Liam and Elijah and I thought that was cool, because I'd have a shot at being something special to them, someone to teach them things. But I still didn't want anymore. Liam and Eli were enough. Then tonight we were making dinner and I looked down at Eli and something happened. I saw Eva's eyes staring back at me, and for the first time in my life, I felt an ache. I want kids, Anaya. And I have to find Eva so I can tell her."

I stalked down the hallway thinking I'd pretty much lost my mind, telling Anaya some stupid ass story about kids when Eva was out there lost and alone.

But I couldn't stop thinking about the way she looked before she left. Happy. Hopeful. Full of joy and life.

And she was asking me about babies and I didn't answer.

Fucking hell.

"Did you find Mom?" Liam asked as soon as I walked into the bedroom.

Tatiana stood from where she was sitting on the end of the bed and gave me a tight smile as she walked past me. Her pat on my shoulder made my blood run cold. I didn't deserve anyone's sympathy. I should've been more vigilant. I should've driven her to her interview.

"Not yet."

I made my way to the bed and no sooner had my ass hit the mattress, Elijah climbed into my arms. His arms wrapped around my neck and his face burrowed into my shoulder, a move I'd seen him do to Eva plenty of times.

"What..." Liam started then trailed off.

"Ask, bud. I'll answer anything you wanna know."

"What happens if you can't find her?"

"Liam, we're gonna find her."

"But what happens if you can't?" I took in Liam's panic and pain-filled eyes, his bright red cheeks, and his vibrating body, and bile churned in my gut.

"We're—"

"What happens if you can't find her?" Liam shouted and Eli startled in my arms. "Where will we go?"

"Where will who go?"

"Me and Eli."

"Nowhere, Liam."

"You won't get rid of us? You promise."

Fucking Jesus Christ. My throat clogged and my sinuses tingled. I was so lost in what Liam had said I couldn't contain my response.

"Son, no matter what, you and Eli are mine," I choked out, not bothering to hide the wetness I felt spilling from my eyes. "You and your brother will never go anywhere. You understand?"

Liam nodded his head and crawled across the bed when I picked one arm off Eli's back and motioned him over.

Somehow, some way, I had to shove my fear aside. Eva needed me on my game, she needed me to be smart and find her and bring her home.

The three of us huddled together on the bed I'd shared with Eva. I was stuck in the worst possible scenario. I had two children who needed comfort and reassurance—they needed me. Yet everything inside of me was screaming to go out and find her—hunt, rescue, kill.

But I didn't move. I held my boys and trusted my team had my back.

CHAPTER 35

"I'm not gonna do it!" I screamed, and the throbbing in my head intensified.

Once again I was screwed—no, I was worse than screwed.

My life was over.

And my boys would be alone—but right now I couldn't think about them or I would have a complete breakdown. I had to believe Max would take care of them, it was the only thing keeping me from going into a full-blown panic. I couldn't let that happen. I had to focus on getting myself out of this latest situation because no one was coming for me.

I didn't have my phone, my purse, or the necklace Tex had given me that had a tracking device in the pendant. As a matter of fact, my watch was gone, too.

"Then you're gonna die," Novak returned, his lip curling in disgust.

My eyes darted to the woman standing near the trunks that were being packed into the Cessna 172. She had her arms wrapped around her middle, hugging herself tightly. She looked disheveled, and frightened. Whoever she was, she didn't want to be standing on the tarmac of a small airport in God-knows-where-fucking-fucking-Alaska anymore than I wanted to be.

My eyes snapped back to Novak and I knew I'd messed up. And when he walked to the woman, snatched her by her ponytail, and turned his gun to her head, my thoughts were confirmed.

"Actually, we're gonna start with this bitch." Novak shoved his gun to her temple. "Is this what you want, Eva? You wanna watch

me blow this bitch's head off?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't take my eyes off the woman. She looked resigned, hopeless. It was as if she was begging me with her gaze to say yes.

What had Novak already done to her that was so horrible she'd rather die?

I searched my memory and thought back to all of the interaction I'd had with Novak Yazzie. He and Jay used to be partners and I'd seen him around a lot. The drugs that Jay had stowed in my plane when I'd been arrested were actually Novak's, which got me thinking about something else.

"The last time Jay tried this, it didn't work out too well," I reminded him.

"Yeah, because the motherfucker called it in," Novak spat and jerked the girl angrily. "This time, without that bitchass involved, you'll fly into Canada undetected."

I'd always known Jay had called the authorities to set me up, but hearing Novak say it was a knife to my heart.

"I'm not doing it, Novak."

"Then this bitch dies."

My stomach clenched and I looked back to the woman. Could I really let her die? Could I live with myself knowing I was the reason Novak killed her?

Fuck, no, I couldn't. But I couldn't live with myself knowing I'd transported drugs, either.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked. Not that it really mattered, because I wasn't going to live through this, but I was trying to buy time.

The thought of leaving my boys motherless nearly brought me to my knees.

Max has them.

Novak was going to kill me as soon as I delivered the woman and drugs—I knew it. There was no way he'd allow me to walk away.

And honestly, it was more about delivering a woman to an unknown future that didn't take a genius to figure out was going to be misery. I couldn't do *that* no matter what.

"Because you fuckin' owe me. You and Jay. Your fucked up tug-a-war lost me millions. Since I can't find that motherfucker—you're

gonna pay me back."

Wait, one goddamned minute.

"How'd you find me?"

Novak's mouth curved into the nastiest, cruelest smile I'd ever seen.

"I never understood what Jay saw in you," he sneered. "You're the stupidest bitch I've ever met. Then I realized that was why Jay picked you. You're so goddamn dumb you still don't get it. I run this place. As soon as I heard Eklund hired someone to find you, I had you."

I ignored Novak's dig, mostly because he was right. I was dumb, punctuated by the fact that there I stood on a tarmac in Alaska instead of being home with my guys. *Nope, Eva, don't think about them, not right now.* But this stupid bitch wasn't going down without a fight.

Think, Eva.

"You went through a lot of trouble to find me, when you could've found someone here a lot easier."

"Enough talking!" Novak shouted. "What's it gonna be? A quick four hour flight to Vancouver to deliver my products or am I killing this bitch?"

Four hours to Vancouver... we had to be south of Juneau—not that that little tidbit would save my life, but maybe it could help me escape.

I could agree, take off, and crash the plane, but I'd run the risk of killing the woman and myself. This wasn't a float plane like I'd flown...

Nope. Not going there. Thinking about Bubba and Zoey wouldn't help—though Bubba's cargo pockets full of stuff might've come in handy right then.

"Answer me, Eva!"

"Don't do it," the woman cried. "Let him kill me."

"Shut up, Natasha!"

"He sold me!" she shouted. "I'd rather—"

Natasha didn't finish. Novak used the gun at her head like it was a hammer and slammed her across the face. Her forehead and cheek split open, blood oozed from the gash, and stomach acid burned my throat.

Now was my chance. I needed to run, but I couldn't stop thinking about Natasha's bludgeoned face and her comment about being sold had me paralyzed. I needed to leave her behind and save myself—for my boys, for Max. But damn if I could make my feet move.

Natasha was on her knees, Novak was half bent dealing with a screaming, hysterical, bleeding woman.

Instead of running for the trees, I took off *toward* Novak and Natasha. Shit, I was the stupidest bitch that ever lived but I couldn't leave her.

But before I could take more than three steps in their direction, all hell broke loose. A bullet cracked, then I watched in horror as Novak's head...exploded.

Okay, maybe that was a slight exaggeration, but Christ Almighty, half of it was gone.

My body froze, my lungs seized, and I threw up.

It was too much. Way too fucking much.

Natasha's ear-piercing scream tore me from my stupor and I ran. I didn't think about the blood, I didn't think about the missing pieces of Novak's skull. No, I was on a mission—get Natasha and run. We had to get out of there.

The woman was still shrieking—not that I could blame her, there was blood pouring from the gash in her forehead, running down over her brow, the bridge of her nose, and dripping from her chin. It flowed faster than the Alsek River during a melt-out. And if that wasn't bad enough, Novak's blood...and...other stuff...stuff I didn't want to think about, had splattered all over her. But sweet Jesus, the woman had a set of lungs on her.

Then I was no longer running. Two steel bands wrapped around me from behind and lifted me clean off my feet. My eyes locked with Natasha's horrified ones and time stopped. Fear slithered down my spine and my mind blanked. Two men dressed head-to-toe in black appeared—their faces hidden behind black masks, both had scary black rifles pulled up to their shoulders, pointed at Natasha.

We were going to die.

That's when I remembered to fight.

And fight I did. I twisted and turned. Clawed at the arms around my middle, kicked my feet, threw elbows, and screamed my head off until I was finally dropped.

"Eva, stop," the man grunted but I didn't.

Now that I was on my feet I was prepared to run. I took off in a sprint, but didn't get very far before a hand curled around my bicep, spun me, and pulled me close.

Fight!

I broke free from his hold and swung wildly, I wasn't aiming at any particular body part, I was just punching, then I remembered I wasn't using my feet, and I started kicking. The impact of my blows had no effect on the man, not that I was actually making that much contact, the man was so much larger than me he easily deflected my strikes.

"Stop, Eva! Max sent us."

My fist finally connected, the man's head jerked to the side, and before he could recover, I ran again.

I was off my feet, a hard wall of big-bad-scary-man behind me, the wool of his mask scratched my neck as he lowered his face, his mouth to my ear and he growled, "Stop, goddamn it. Max sent us. We're here to help you. Tex and Max. Stop fighting me so we can get you home to your boys."

My body started to sag in relief when I remembered how stupid I'd been in the past. No way had Max and Tex sent these men. They had no idea where I was.

This was a trap. It had to be.

I strained to get free, arching my back and jerking my body with every last bit of strength that I possessed.

"Fucking hell, woman. Stop. My name is Gabe. I work with Max. If you stop fighting me, we'll get you home."

"Gabe?"

I knew that name. I'd heard Max say it on the phone.

"Yes, Eva. I'm Gabe."

"What team are you on?"

"Blue."

Hm. Still could be a trick.

"Who else is on your team?"

"Myles, Kevin, and Owen."

"What are you doing in Alaska?"

Please get this right. Please be a good guy.

"We were transporting Joshua Lemont, the man who was hired to kill you."

Thank God.

All the fight drained out of me and my body slumped as the adrenaline waned and I fought to catch my breath. Now that it was over, everything hit me. Gabe must've felt it because he slowly set me on my feet and gently turned me in his arms.

"I need to get home."

"Yeah, you do, before Max has a stroke."

"Have you talked to him? How are my kids?"

"I talked to Max thirty minutes ago. He threatened disembowelment if I didn't have you on a plane home to him within the hour. So if you wouldn't mind getting a move on it, I mightily like my intestines where they are."

Gabe gave a sharp whistle and threw his arm around my shoulder.

I was going home—alive.

In a few hours, I'd have my arms wrapped around my boys.

"Wait."

I shrugged Gabe's arm away, turned, and ran toward Natasha.

"Whoa, Eva."

"I can't leave Natasha," I told him.

"We're not." Gabe gestured to the woman now cradled in a man's arms, his rifle gone as he carried her our way.

Minutes later, we were safely stowed in the third row of an SUV. A man that was not Gabe was speeding away from the small private airport, Natasha was mostly leaning against me as I pressed a shirt a man had produced against her forehead. Throughout this, I didn't mention I was a tad squeamish when it came to blood and tried my best to breathe through my mouth so I didn't gag. I'd already puked once, I didn't think any of the men would appreciate a repeat performance in the tightly confined space.

"What day is it?" I asked.

"Wednesday."

Holy shit, I'd been gone more than twenty-four hours. I sucked in an unfortunate breath, a coppery smell filled my nostrils, and I started to cough.

Hold it together, Eva.

With my free hand, I felt my neck but couldn't find the puncture wounds I was looking for as I searched my mind how many times Novak had injected me. Two that I could remember for sure. But there were a lot of blurry parts.

"I don't remember getting here. I was passed out." Gabe turned to look at me and now that he'd taken off his mask, I could see the creases around his deep brown eyes, and his thick eyebrows that matched his dark hair were pulled together in a frown. "Where are we?"

"Sheep Creek Trail," Gabe answered.

So we were in Juneau.

Gabe looked away from me for a moment and when his gaze came back to me, he was smiling.

"Your man's calling."

Gabe swiped the screen and held the phone out. I may've been a little overeager and snatched the phone out of his hand with an overwhelming urgency to speak to Max.

"Max."

"Thank fuck." His exclamation was guttural and I felt it slice through me.

"Max," I repeated.

"Are you hurt, honey?"

"No. I'm okay."

"Thank God. Fucking hell, I've been out of my mind."

I heard the hitch in Max's voice and I lost it. All the stress and fear I'd pushed aside came rushing to the surface and I couldn't stop the sob that escaped. Raw pain slipped past my lips in a rush of air that burned.

"I'm so, *so* sorry." Next to me Natasha rested her head on my shoulder and placed an arm around my chest, pulling me closer. "I wasn't paying attention."

"Shh, honey. Nothing's your fault."

The sadness in his voice cut me to the quick. God, how could I have been so stupid?

"You told me to watch my surroundings," I reminded him. "God, I'm stupid. I almost...almost..."

"You're killing me, honey," he groaned. "You're safe. That's all that matters."

"The boys! How are the boys?"

"They're scared. But holding it together."

"Can I talk to them or do you think—"

"I think you better talk to them or Liam'll be pretty mad at me. We've been waiting twenty-seven hours for this call."

Oh, God, he'd been counting the hours.

"Thank you."

"Don't know what you're thanking me for. Tex and the team tracked you down. I've been pretty fucking useless."

"I don't believe that."

"It's the truth, Eva. I don't know what I would've done without them. The boys and I... fuck, honey... it's taken everything in me to pull my shit together for them."

"You taking care of them means the world to me. I couldn't even think about them because I was afraid I'd have a nervous breakdown. But I knew they were safe and I knew no matter what happened to me, you'd take care of them. That meant everything."

"Hang on." I heard rustling on Max's end, then the sweetest sound warmed me from the inside out.

"Mama?"

I stifled another sob and cleared my throat. "Hey, little man."

My son on the other hand couldn't contain his. It took a few moments for Max to calm him down as my heart ached. I wished I was there, but knowing that Max was and he was consoling went a long way to soothing my pain.

"Are you on your way home?" Liam hiccupped.

"I am. It's gonna take a while, but Max's friends are with me and they're bringing me home right now."

"Max told us they were going to find you."

That made me smile.

"I love you."

"I love you, Mom."

"Tell your brother I love him, too, and I'll be home as soon as I can get there."

"Okay."

There was some more static then Max came back.

"You still there?"

"Yeah."

"Good God, it's so good to hear your voice. I think I lost twenty years off my life when you didn't come home."

"I'm sorry."

"Please stop saying that, honey."

"But—"

"You coming home is all that matters."

"Okay. See you in a few hours?"

"The boys and I will be at the airport waiting for you."

"I love you."

"Love you, Eva."

I hurried and disconnected the call and tapped Gabe's shoulder. He turned and took his phone, but before he righted himself in his seat, he smiled huge.

"Everything good?"

"Everything is perfect. Thank you for finding me."

"Don't mention it."

* * *

WE WERE ON THE PRIVATE PLANE ZANE LEWIS HAD ARRANGED BEFORE I was formally introduced to the rest of the guys. And much like Max's team, these men were all tall, muscular, and menacing. But they all looked a little older than Brooks, Thad, Kyle, Declan, and Max. They looked a little rougher, too.

After takeoff, Owen, the man who'd carried Natasha to the SUV, made his way to where she and I were sitting, knelt in front of her, and tenderly tended to her wounds while she gripped my hand to the point of pain. The poor woman was scared out of her mind.

"Natasha?" I called once Owen was finished and was picking up the medical supplies he'd used to clean her forehead and butterfly her gash closed.

"Yeah?"

"You're safe with these men," I told her. "They'll help you get home."

"I don't have a home," she whispered, and Owen's intense gaze snapped back to Natasha.

"What do you mean you don't have a home?"

"Novak bought me."

A deep rumble emanated from Owen and Natasha jolted and squeezed my hand harder.

Good Lord, the woman was strong.

"Where are you from?" Owen asked.

"Nowhere."

"What does that mean, darlin'? Where did Novak take you from?"

"Chicago."

"We can take you back—"

"No. I can't go back there. You can just drop me off wherever you're going."

"That's not gonna happen. I'm not leaving you outside an airport."

"Really—"

"Not gonna happen, Natasha. Get some rest, we'll figure it out. But I'm not leaving you stranded."

It was safe to say, I really liked Owen.

"Glad you're okay, Eva. You gave us all a scare."

"Um...I'm sorry." Owen chuckled like he found me amusing. "Thanks for finding me when you did, I was running out of things to talk to Novak about and I was afraid I'd have to crash the plane to get away from him."

Owen's features darkened but just as swiftly, he covered his irritation and cleared his anger.

"We were watching. You did a good job." Then Owen's face split into a shit-eating grin and he continued. "And I hope to God that shot you got on Gabe's cheek bruises. I can't wait to tell Max his woman got the drop on the Great Gabe CQB."

"CQB?" I asked.

"Close-quarters battle. Gabe's the best on our team at hand-to-hand combat. No one ever gets the drop on him. Well, that is, until your right hook."

"Ohmigod. You can't tell anyone that. I feel bad. I was a little crazy."

"You shouldn't feel bad. And besides, Max will be proud as hell to know his woman fought hard."

That was weirdly nice. And since the last twenty-seven hours—not that I could remember all of them—had been filled with more stress and anxiety than I could handle, I decided not to think about Owen telling Max anything.

Instead, I sat quietly, holding hands with a woman I didn't know, and watched the clouds fly by.

I was alive.

CHAPTER 36

“Are we almost to Tex’s?” Liam asked from the back seat and I smiled.

This was not the first road trip I’d taken with Eva and the boys but it was the first one that was for fun.

And strangely, it didn’t bother me that Liam had asked that very question no less than ten times and Elijah had asked double that.

No, I didn’t give the first fuck the boys needed to stop every thirty minutes to use the bathroom. I didn’t care we’d stopped to eat lunch even though we’d had breakfast before we left and the drive to Pennsylvania and Tex’s house was only three hours.

This was because Eva was sitting next to me smiling and happy and my boys were in the back seat and they, too, were smiling.

Life was good.

It had been good before Eva had been taken. But something had changed in those twenty-seven hours she’d been missing. I’d never be able to say I was grateful my woman had been kidnapped, but now I understood Bubba.

He’d never be happy he and Zoey had almost died, but something great had come from that, and Bubba had decided to concentrate on that and that alone.

The silver lining.

So I was taking a page out of Bubba’s playbook and focusing on what had come from Eva’s abduction—my boys.

Mine.

That day we sat on the bed together and shared our fear, we forged an unbreakable bond. And in the week since Eva had been

home, it had only grown stronger.

I was surprised how quickly Liam and Eli had bounced back from the ordeal. Eva wasn't surprised and had told me it was because while she was gone I'd made them feel safe and loved. I didn't think that was the case. I figured the boys were just happy their mom was home and that was all they cared about.

Either way, the kids were good. Liam was excited about starting school soon and Elijah was looking forward to Eva starting her new job and getting to play with Mikey all day.

And if they were happy, I was happy, even though the team was gearing up to leave on a mission. Eva had refused to let me tell Zane to pull up one of the guys from the Blue Team to take my place.

I was still on the fence but I knew if I stayed behind, I would be in danger of Eva's wrath and from what I'd heard from Owen and Myles, my woman had one helluva right hook. Gabe had proudly sported her mark for days and even joked he was going to ask her to be his new sparring partner.

That would happen never.

"Yeah, Liam, we're pulling up now."

Eva's hand on my thigh tightened and I glanced over at her.

Damn, she was beautiful.

But more than that, she was tough. Strong and smart and resilient.

"Excited?" I asked even though I already knew the answer.

"Yes. I can't wait to meet him. Melody and their kids, too."

I pulled to a stop in Tex's driveway and told the boys to wait in the car until I got Eva out. They met my request with groans but I knew that even as excited as they were, they'd do as I asked.

I grabbed my cell and got out of my truck and rounded the hood. There was something I needed to tell her before I lost another opportunity.

I opened Eva's door and she looked up at me with curiosity as I helped her out.

"Before we go in, I need to tell you something. I should've found time before now, but the week's been crazy."

"Everything all right?"

"We started to have a conversation the day you were taken. We never got to finish it."

"Max—"

"I want kids. I didn't think I did. Even after I met you and the boys, I didn't want more. I thought the boys would be enough—and they are. So if you don't want more, you have to know, Liam and Elijah are—"

"You want kids?" she cut me off.

"Yes."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

"I want girls," I told her.

"Seriously? I thought all men wanted boys."

"I already have boys," I reminded her. "I want them to have little sisters."

"God. Just when I think I couldn't possibly love you anymore than I already do, you prove me wrong."

"It's you, Eva. All you. Before I met you, I had nothing and I was content to live out the rest of my life alone. Then you and the boys came along and thank God you did, because I realized I wasn't really living. I was simply breathing. Nothing more." I wiped the tear that started to fall and smiled. "Let's get you and the boys in the house to finally meet Tex."

"All right."

* * *

DURING INTRODUCTIONS AND A LENGTHY GREETING, WHERE EVA HAD broken down into tears while hugging Tex, who looked so damn uncomfortable it was funny. When Eva was done with Tex, she turned to Melody and thanked her profusely, too.

Mel was much more comfortable and simply muttered, "I know. He's the greatest, isn't he?"

Akilah and Hope both stood to the side beaming with pride as Liam and Elijah told Tex's daughters that their dad was "more awesome" than any silly superhero on TV. Then they told the girls that their dad had saved Eva. The vibe in the room changed as Tex's girls simultaneously sucked in a breath and stared at their dad. Surely the girls knew Tex helped a variety of people, but I doubted they ever got to meet the people he saved.

And he indeed saved Liam, Elijah, and Eva.

The love I saw shining in Tex's daughters' eyes hit me like a jackhammer to the gut. I prayed that one day Liam and Elijah looked at me the way Akilah and Hope looked at Tex.

He was the center of their world.

With the women chatting in the living room and Hope and Akilah showing the boys their movie room, Tex and I went back to his office.

Christ, the man had a setup that rivaled NASA. Three big screens hung on the wall, four more monitors sat on a huge desk alongside numerous keyboards, computer towers, and laptops.

"This is damn impressive," I told him.

"What'd you think, I saved your asses on a Dell?" He chuckled. "Here."

He handed me a beer and motioned for me to sit in one of the three chairs.

"Thanks."

"So, figured we should get this out of the way now," he said and I braced at the tone of his voice.

Tex took a seat, stretched out his left leg, the cuff of his pants riding up just enough for me to catch a glimpse of his prosthetic. It was easy to forget Tex had lost half his leg in an IED explosion—nothing slowed or stopped the man.

"You were right," I told him and watched his mouth twitch before his head tipped to the side and he roared with laughter.

"Yeah, I was," he said, still chuckling.

"Well, I'll be damned, you're like a commando cupid."

"You can call me whatever you want but you know I was right."

"I said you were."

"All right, I'll let you off the hook. But I want your first born named after me."

"John?"

"No. Tex."

"I'm not naming my kid Tex. I'll consider sneaking John in as a middle name."

"Bet Eva will name your kid Tex," he told me.

He was correct, Eva would jump at naming my kid Tex.

"We're having girls, so this conversation is moot," I told him. I did not see good things for my unborn child so I changed the sub-

ject. "Anything we need to go over? Did Owen ever get back to you about Natasha?"

"The woman's not talking. I've been over all missing persons reports with the first name Natasha and came up with nothing. Either that's not her real name or no one's reporting her missing. Owen's gonna get me something so I can run her DNA. But for now, he's more worried about her getting settled in. You know he took her back to his place, right?"

"Yeah, I know. Eva's called over there a few times to check on her."

"And I got nothing new. You already know Novak's body was taken care of. Kenneth and Tracy Eklund are making deals. Joshua Lemont is up shit creek with no paddles or life preserver. You four are all good. Smooth sailing from here."

"Smooth sailing? We're gearing up to roll out as soon as you and Garrett finish your work up."

"Yeah, we should have everything ready in a few days."

Fucking hell—a few days and I'd be leaving.

"It gets easier," Tex told me.

"What does?"

"Leaving. Or so I've been told. The first time Wolf went on a mission after he met Caroline he was a wreck, couldn't wait to get home, all the guys busted his balls over it. The first time's the hardest."

"You know you sound like an old man, sitting back sharing wisdom."

"I'm an old man with everything I could ever want."

Damn right, he had it all.

"Listen, I need to talk to about something." The seriousness in his tone had me on high-alert.

"There a problem?"

"Not right now but there's gonna be."

"Come on, Tex. This isn't your style. Enough with the cryptic bullshit."

The deep creases between Tex's brows worried me. In our world a problem could mean a variety of things. Anything from a shortage of ammunition, to someone's life in danger, to anything in between.

"Declan's...in over his head—"

"Yeah, Tex, I know." I cut him off. "Has he talked to you about her?"

"Take Dec's back," Tex told me.

"What?"

"Max, trust me on this. Take his back. I know you don't understand right now, but Declan's struggling more than any of you know."

"Declan is—"

"Hollow. He's a dead man walking with nothing left to live for. He's a shell of who he once was and if this goes sideways, he'll never recover. This is it. Autumn Pierce may be the only person who can heal what's broken inside him."

"How do you know about Autumn?"

I didn't bother asking how he knew Dec was dead inside. That was the only thing my team leader didn't hide. You didn't even need to meet the man face-to-face to know he was a shell of a man, you could hear it in his voice. I hated that Dec preferred to suffer in silence, but there wasn't anything any of us could do when he refused to open up and trust us.

"I know a lot of things, Max."

More ambiguity. Tex did know a lot, truth be told he seemed to know all—yet he'd never tell anyone how he came about the information.

"I'd never let a friend swing. I'll take his back but Thad's gonna be pissed. Emerson's gonna lose her shit, which is gonna make Thad lose his. The whole situation is a clusterfuck and it doesn't have to be. He should've told Thad—at a minimum—that Autumn was living in Annapolis."

"Dec has his reasons. Trust him."

"Trust him? Fuck, he needs to learn to trust us."

"True story, but he has a good reason for keeping his personal life private. You of all people should understand when someone screws you over, in a way that is so heinous your only option is to protect yourself."

Well, fuck me, Tex had a point.

"I'll take care of Declan."

Some of the tension left Tex's shoulders and he relaxed back into his chair. I glanced around his inner sanctum—the epicenter of information that had saved my ass and countless lives and I took a moment to take it all in. Tex valued his privacy and protected his per-

sonal life to the nth degree. It was an honor to be welcomed into his home.

“Preciate the invite. Means a lot to Eva and the boys.”

“Invitation’s always open.”

“Preciate that, too. As fun as it is sitting in here staring at your ugly mug, whatever your wife’s cooking is calling my name.”

“Mel’s one hell of a cook, but I don’t think my wife’s cooking is what’s calling your name.” He chuckled.

Nope, it wasn’t. Eva was. In the week and a half since she’d been home I still couldn’t take my eyes off of her, I needed her within arms’ reach at all times. Thankfully, she either felt the same way or was willing to humor me. I didn’t care which one it was, I just wanted her close—always.

* * *

“I MISS MORNINGS LIKE THIS,” MELODY SAID, AND WITH HER COFFEE mug in hand gestured to the boys. “Enjoy happy mornings while you can. Once they become teenagers its all sass and attitude when you wake them up.”

Liam and Eli had been up bright and early, which was a little shocking considering last night they’d stayed up late with Akilah and Hope. Tex and Melody’s daughters were great with the boys and had entertained them for hours while we’d sat outside and waxed lyrical.

Tex and Melody had a good life, a great marriage, after all the years they’d been together the love they shared still shone bright. Being around them had filled me with certainty. They were proof there was such a thing as a long, happy, healthy marriage.

“So I’ve heard.” Eva’s beautiful smile never failed to take my breath. “Though I think they’re extra excited they got to help you with the chocolate chip pancakes.”

Eva leaned closer and my arm went around her shoulder, tucking her to my side.

“Everything okay?” I whispered.

“Perfect.”

“Good.” I kissed the top of Eva’s head and breathed in the flowery scent of her shampoo.

I'd almost lost her—lost my chance at happiness. It would be a long time before the nagging thought burned out, one day the fear and crushing panic would dissipate, but I'd never forget those twenty-seven hours. They'd always be a constant reminder of how fragile life is, how in a split-second everything can be taken from you. A warning to never to take Eva and my boys for granted.

"Thanks for letting us come up and spend the night." Eva sniffed and cuddled closer to my side. "You've done so much—"

"Eva..." Tex cut her off, never comfortable with gratitude.

"No, Tex, let me finish. I'll never forget what you've done for us. First you saved my boys and gave them back to me, then you believed in me when no one else did and helped me get on my feet so I could give my kids what they deserved. Then you gave us the best gift—Max. So, thank you, for saving us in every way."

I was having difficulty swallowing the boulder in my throat and the stinging in my eyes was intensifying with every second that ticked.

"You're welcome, Eva." Tex cleared his throat and leveled his intense gaze on me. "But I didn't give you the gift. I gave it to Max."

Fuck, yeah, he did. A gift so bountiful I'd treasure it always.

"I just have to say," Melody croaked. "I have the best husband in the world."

"Damn right you do." Tex declared with way too much seriousness, and the women dissolved into laughter.

It had been a damn good visit but we had to get on the road.

"We should start packing up the boys," I told Eva.

"Yeah, you're right," she sighed.

"Come up anytime. We loved having you," Mel invited.

"We'll be back," Eva promised.

An hour later we'd said our goodbyes, passed out hugs, handshakes, and wrestled the boys into the car—a task that was only accomplished because Hope had buckled Liam and Eli into their seatbelts.

"You ready?" I asked Eva as she waved to Tex and Melody still standing on their porch.

Her pretty eyes came to mine and damn if they weren't shining with happiness.

"So ready."

Eva rolled up onto her toes and brushed her lips against mine. It wasn't the time nor the place but I couldn't stop the rush of excitement that accompanied her touch.

"Might get bumpy. Life's full of curveballs and surprises. But no matter what, Eva, I swear I'll be by your side."

Eva stared up at me and graced me with one of her megawatt smiles that blazed a trail of love that haywired my brain.

"Bumps, curveballs, surprises...By your side I'm the strongest I've ever been—bring it."

My fierce, strong woman was cute as fuck. With our eyes locked, my thundering laughter surrounding us, our kids waiting for us in back seat, and good friends standing nearby, I crushed my mouth to hers and didn't give the first fuck people were watching.

Best kiss ever.

CHAPTER 37

Declan Crenshaw unlocked the front door and stepped into Autumn's tiny, two bedroom cottage, and knew.

He didn't need to search her house to know she was gone. The air was different, it lacked the electricity he felt when she was near.

The hell of it was, he'd expected this even if she'd promised she wouldn't leave.

Autumn Pierce had a mission and no one, not even him, could stop her from obliterating her prey.

But just because he knew didn't mean it wasn't a kick to the gut. A sharp and acute pain that caused the left side of his chest to ache.

Declan was well aware he never should've touched her, never should've gotten as close as he had. That would go ballistic, Emmy would be hurt her sister had been so close for months and she'd been kept in the dark. He'd disagreed but Autumn had insisted her presence be kept a secret.

Declan took his cell out of his pocket and started to dial Tex as he made his way into the kitchen.

Empty.

Just like everything else in his life—a vast canyon of nothingness. A deep gorge that would never be filled. Not that he deserved to be replete. Hell, the reprieve he'd found in her bed hadn't been warranted either. His only justification for the hours of bliss Autumn's warm, soft body had provided was she'd taken what she needed from him.

Declan had never met anyone—woman or man, whose suffering had mirrored his own. Two broken souls who had no desire to be

fixed. Autumn used her pain much like he used his—as a crutch to survive in a world where everyone else strived for love and happiness.

Fuck that. Once upon a time, Dec had it all. A beautiful wife who'd given him an equally beautiful daughter. But all of that was gone—torn from him in the worst way. And not a day went by, he didn't remember it was his fault.

Dec stabbed his phone's screen, irritation infiltrating his normal calm and calculating demeanor.

"Hey, Dec," Tex answered. "I just sent the intel to Garrett."

His eyes hit on a note left on the counter and annoyance grew.

They were too late.

"We got a problem," Declan informed Tex.

"We always have a problem. You're gonna have to be more specific."

"Autumn's gone. She knew Madeleine Strotherby was going to Afghanistan for a photo op for that new girls' school. She swore she wouldn't go off halfcocked and by herself."

"You think she went to Afghanistan?"

"Considering I'm staring at a goddamn note that reads: 'Got a new source, headed over now. See ya' in the sandbox. P.S. Don't forget your sunscreen.' I say yes, she's left for Afghanistan."

"What do you need from me?" Tex asked.

"Find her new source."

"And you want me to do this how? Pull a name out of my ass? I need a little more than 'source'."

"I don't know how you do what you do, I don't pretend to know, I don't pretend to understand the voodoo you work. All I know is you've never let us down and I need to know who got to my woman and why she took off. We had a plan and she bolted anyway."

Tex's heavy sigh wasn't the reassurance Declan had been hoping for. Garrett could work on finding the source, he was good at gathering intel, but Tex was the best and if he was moaning his complaint, Declan was in deep shit.

"I'll get you a name."

Thank fuck.

"Appreciate it."

"You know you're gonna have to come clean."

Christ, he'd known his days were limited but he thought he'd have more time.

"Yep. Zane's my next call."

"Good luck. And don't worry about Autumn—she knows what she's doing."

That was what was worrying Declan. An off-the-chain Autumn could mean any number of things. Worst case she was on a suicide mission, best case she'd kill Madeline and skip home happily.

"Thanks, Tex."

Declan disconnected the call and stared at his phone.

It was time—his day of reckoning had come.

* * *

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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.

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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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