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BITE THE BULLET

GIULIA LAGOMARSINO

BITE THE BULLET

AN OPS PROTECTOR
ROMANCE

GIULIA LAGOMARSINO

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BITE THE BULLET

Bite The Bullet Origins:

“**Biting the bullet**” is a metaphor which is used to describe a situation where one accepts an inevitable impending hardship or hard-to-refute point, and then endures the resulting pain with fortitude.

It has been suggested that it is derived historically from the practice of having a patient clench a bullet in their teeth as a way to cope with the pain of a surgical procedure without anesthetic.

-Wikipedia

OPS Meaning:

Accept your fate and move forward.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Cash Owens- Owner of Owens Protective Services, sniper, and overall badass.

Eva James- deadly mistress of throwing knives and Cash's...person

Team 1:

Jerrod Lockhart- Complete hardass, rule follower, and generally the guy considered to always have a stick up his ass.

Juliette Cassinelli- Junk food addict, avid runner, tiny human that can't reach the top shelf. Oh, also a fabulous model who has stolen the heart of the unmovable Jerrod Lockhart.

Edward "Edu" Markinson- Hater of hospitals, slow drivers, and references to anything in the '80s.

Brock "Rock" Patton- Wannabe model, obsessed with his looks and constantly combing his hair...A ferocious fighter for a man so obsessed with his looks. Also, as a side note—he can't act for shit and hates the word 'loins'.

Scottie Dog Thacker- Tactical vomit expert, hater of flying planes, and always up for a good time. If you're with him, have a barf bag in hand. Has never had even a sip of alcohol in his life.

Quinn Lake- Awesome geologist who is terrible at telling people no. She's a runner—running from situations so she doesn't have to grow a spine and deal with confrontation. Awesome at Battleship and Twister.

Team 2:

Marcus “IRIS” Slater- His name stands for *I Require Intense Supervision*. EOD expert that has taken up a new love...blowing up shit.

Jane Layne- IRIS’s sidekick in real life and in her mystery novels. Also known as Shayla Jacque. Absolutely despises technology, and goes so far as to use a typewriter to avoid it.

Mick “Slider” Jeffries- Not Slider from *Top Gun*. Sorry, ladies, I know he was gorgeous, but it’s not the same hottie.

Tate “Thumper” Parsons- No, not named for the adorable furry rabbit. Thumper got his nickname after losing a foot to an IED. Now using a robotic foot, he is probably the fastest person on the team.

Bree Wilton- Financial guru, killer of the boardroom, and newly appointed partner in her firm. Wilts under the sun. Hates hiking, dirt, bunnies, and generally all things that don’t come with a luxury sticker.

Team 3: Now known as The Ditty Boppers

Eli Brant- Fierce team leader, but will put you in your place with a good practical joke when necessary.

Sarah Williams- Pickpocket, crazy lady that reacts inappropriately in tense situations.

Red Warren- Funny, meat-eating, California-hating, rifle owner. Proud to take out the bad guys in any way possible.

Zoe Thacker- Screenwriting badass that hates guns, refuses to eat meat, but loves a good gunfight.

Bradford Kavanaugh- Son of a senator, terrified of mummies, scarabs, and basically anything from ancient Egypt. Loves practical jokes, except when they’re about him.

IT Department:

Rae Dennon- Sarcastic, witty, badass woman. Terrified of nothing, will take down any man with little effort, and has an intense feud with Dash.

Duke Mason- The mechanic. Sexy, dirty, and the man every woman wants. His hands alone could have a story written about them and all the things they can do. Not afraid to have his ass kicked by Rae.

Dash- Awesome with computers and a skilled fighter. Constantly being compared to Rae, the sexier version of him. Still trying to convince Fox he's just as awesome.

Black Ops Team: Also known as The Three Js

Jack Cox- Team leader who loves aviator sunglasses as much as a good gun fight. Willing to take one for the team as long as the mission is long and hard...just like his johnson.

Skylar West: Neighbor to the grouchy Jack McClain. Mother to Parker, the son of notorious arms dealer...the son of a notorious arms dealer: Rico Gelbero. Desperate to break free from the confines of her little house, she's willing to do anything to leave Texas in the dust.

Johnny Wood- Dangerous cowboy, loyal to Rafe—a man that would kill his own mother if it finished the job. Respects a man willing to get the job done.

Tahlia James- Mad scientist...well, coroner. Desperate for the truth and willing to do anything to get those answers, as long as it doesn't include enclosed spaces. Not afraid of Johnny and his sexy body.

Jason Long- Number 3 of the baddies. Dangerous and dark, always full of threatening wisdom. Stay out of his way.

The Other Guys:

New Guy- Also known as FNG- Doesn't have a death wish, but firmly believes he can never be killed. Willing to take horrible risks to prove he's unstoppable. Medic and smart as a whip, but also one of the most ridiculous men you've ever met.

Honey- Wife of FNG. Named for her honey scent and the way she sticks with FNG. Oh, also the daughter of a dangerous cartel leader.

Jones- Spotter for Cash during their military days, with a bad attitude since losing the use of his leg. Like you really need one of those.

Rafe- Evildoer posing as the good guy. Or is it the other way around? Dangerous antihero with not a single redeeming quality who stays hidden in the shadows. Unknown relationship to Cash.

Liberty- Pretty ballerina with hidden talents. Obsessed with Rafe and willing to sacrifice anything to be with him. Or is she???

Fox- Works in training, has an undeniable fascination with throwing knives, and loves singing show tunes...sometimes a little too much!

Anna- Gorgeous Hollywood star who has captured Fox's twisted heart. Her looks aren't nearly as deadly as her right hook.

Nicholas Tate: Former SEAL who worked with Fox. Still a mystery, but currently works at OPS, though he can't seem to find his place. Must be crazy to be friends with Fox.

IKE- Roguishly handsome with a penchant for cigarettes, action, and a writer lady named Jane. He moves in the shadows, taking only the dangerous jobs. He's the man nobody wants to be compared to. Well, him and a mechanic.

Max Huxley: Former military. Licensed pilot. Rivals Scottie Dog's amazing flight skills. Has a bit of a drinking problem and loves his pink Hawaiian shirts and straw hat. Don't even think of taking his cigar from him.

The Young Squad:

Asher White: This suit-wearing enigma has a thing for dangerous jobs, fast women, and...trains. Yes, you heard that right! Don't come between a man and his love of locomotives.

Jade Buchanan- The wife of the elusive Asher. Forced into an arranged marriage by her power-hungry father, she suffers from terrible nightmares, longing to leave this horrible life behind. Died when she crashed a minivan into a tree.

Chase Carter: Tattooed badass with a bullring in his nose. His wacky personality is nearly as irritating as his love of playing Monopoly.

Patrick Cook: This is no ordinary gigolo. Hang onto your hats ladies! You're not just getting a striptease with this stud!

JACK

20 YEARS AGO...

“ARE YOU PICKING ME UP TONIGHT?”

“I’ll be there,” I said, irritated that my kid sister was calling me again. I was working a full-time job to support both of us, but no matter how many hours I put in, I always came up short. I hung the phone back on the wall and strode over to the packing list. I saw my boss glaring at me from the corner of my eye. It was against the rules to take personal calls on shift. I knew that, but I wasn’t about to ignore my sister. I was all she had.

“Jack!” my boss called out.

I glanced up at Matt, who stood on the other side of the boxes.

“Man, you are so screwed. That guy has it out for you.”

I set down the list and muttered under my breath, “Don’t I know it.”

I jerked my chin at my boss as I walked over to him. I knew I was about to get my ass reamed. Rick was the owner’s son, and he wielded his power against anyone he didn’t like. It just so happened I fell into that category.

“Make phone calls on your own time.”

“It was my sister. She needs me to pick her up—”

“I don’t give a shit what she needs,” he hissed. “I pay you to do a job, not chat on the phone.”

He didn't pay me at all. He stood in the corner supervising us all night as he talked on his new mobile phone. Not a single guy in this warehouse could afford a phone like that. The closest thing I had was a bulky car phone that died after one phone call. I only used it in emergencies, and there was no way in hell I was bringing that bulky piece of shit inside the warehouse for all the guys to see.

"It won't happen again."

"Make sure it doesn't." His eyes trailed over me in disgust. It was no secret that I was from the wrong side of the tracks. My dad was in prison for dealing and my mom died of an overdose just three months ago. If it weren't for the fact that the trailer was paid off, Hannah would be in the system right now. But I convinced the judge that I could take care of her. I wouldn't let her down.

With a nod, I returned to work, blowing out a harsh breath. There was a lot to get done before I could leave tonight. It was an unspoken rule that nobody left until the trucks were loaded. We didn't get paid overtime for those additional hours, but if we walked off the job, it was a guarantee we'd get a pink slip the next shift.

I picked up the pace, loading boxes in the truck and checking them off the list in record time. I was so close to finishing my shift, but one look at my boss and I knew he was going to pull some crap with me. He liked to show that he was in charge of all of us, that he could ruin our night with the snap of his fingers. But I had to keep this job if I wanted to keep Hannah with me. She only had two years of school left, and then she'd be in college. I didn't take my shot when I had the chance. I stayed to make sure Hannah was safe around my parents.

There were times I regretted not leaving. I had a scholarship to a good school and would have been studying engineering right now if it weren't for my old man. But every time I started to think about school, I reminded myself why I was doing this. When Hannah graduated, I would get back on track. I'd take night classes and work my ass off until I was out of this dump job.

“Jack!” Rick yelled.

I refrained from rolling my eyes as I turned to face him. “Yeah?”

At my gruff reply, his eyes narrowed on me. I knew I was in trouble now. “Are you finished?”

“Just loaded the last truck. We’re good to go.” I glanced at the clock—two minutes to the end of my shift.

“I have another job for you.”

I gritted my teeth, reminding myself how much I needed this job. “Sir, I need to pick up my sister.”

“Are you refusing to finish the job?”

“The job is finished. Every truck is loaded and ready for the morning.”

“That doesn’t mean the job is done. I need someone to stay and do inventory.”

He already had someone who handled the inventory. His buddy spent hours on inventory every week, using most of his time to flirt with the women at the front desk. And then last week, Rick decided to give him an entire week off. Paid.

“Sir, I can’t stay tonight.”

His nostrils flared in anger as he walked over to me. “Then don’t bother coming in tomorrow.”

I clenched my fists to keep from knocking this guy to the ground. My pulse hammered in my ears, drowning out the voice inside telling me to back off. I was two seconds away from slamming my fist into his face when Matt’s voice broke through.

“I can stay and help him finish.”

I would be late picking up Hannah, but with Matt’s help, we could knock out the inventory in an hour or two. I took a breath, then another, repeating the process until I calmed down. Rick waited, wanting me to throw a punch so he could toss me out. He couldn’t fire me without just cause. Despite the little shit that Rick turned out to be, his father was a good

man and treated his employees fairly. But the last man that went over Rick's head ended up working the graveyard shift.

"Fine," Rick snapped. "Get it done."

When he was out of sight, I turned to Matt. "I'm sorry, man."

"Don't be. I don't have anything better to do tonight."

"I doubt inventory was on your list of things to do."

"Maybe not, but I don't mind helping out. Look, I know you have it rough, man. Don't let him get under your skin. You need this job."

"I know. Believe me, I'm trying."

"You could still go to the boss. He would—"

"He would tell his son he has one more chance and that would be the end of it. How many last chances has that guy had?" I shook my head. "I can't afford to be put on the graveyard shift. I have to be there for Hannah."

"Maybe she could stay with a friend overnight. I'm sure—"

"She's my responsibility," I said, cutting him off. "I won't shove her off on someone else like my parents did."

He held up his hand. "Alright, I know. I just wish I could help in some way."

"You are. Let's get this shit done so I can get to Hannah."

I TOSSED THE KEYS ON THE TABLE AS I SHUT THE DOOR BEHIND me. "Hannah?"

The trailer was silent, which was unusual for this time of night. Hannah didn't like to be left alone, so she always turned on music to fill the silence. Shit. Sighing, I turned around and headed back for the door, grabbing my keys on the way out. She was probably still waiting for me at the gas station.

I cranked the engine on my old pickup and tore down the driveway, angrily slamming my fist into the steering wheel. It

was two hours past the time I was supposed to pick her up. She was probably exhausted from the day, and on top of that, she might still have homework to do.

I pulled into the station five minutes later, squealing to a stop and jerking the gear shift into park. I hopped out, not bothering to kill the engine. Yanking the door open, I nodded to Hank.

“Where’s Hannah?”

He shot me a funny look. “She left hours ago, mumbling about how you forgot to pick her up.”

A nasty feeling engulfed the pit of my stomach. She wasn’t here and she wasn’t at home. “Call the police. She wasn’t at the house.”

I turned and shoved the door open, then got back in my truck and tore out of the parking lot in search of my kid sister. With every minute that passed, a sick feeling grew inside me. I should have told Rick to fuck off. I should have been there for her when she needed me.

I drove up and down the streets, looking for any sign of her. After ten minutes, a cop pulled up behind me and flashed his lights. I pulled over, waiting for the officer to walk up to my window.

In my side mirror, I saw Bruce get out of the car. He knew all about my parents and the shit deal they left us with. He was the one that arrested my dad, and he was there for me, to help us through the process. As he walked up to me now, I felt like it was happening all over again. “I heard about Hannah. You’re sure she wasn’t in her bed?”

No, I wasn’t. “I didn’t check.”

He quirked an eyebrow at me. “Son, you should have—”

“I know, but trust me, she never stays at home without music on. It was silent when I walked into the trailer.”

Sighing, he thrust his hands on his hips. “Look, I’ve got every officer out combing the streets for her. We’ll find her if she’s out here. In the meantime, go home and check the house.”

We need to be sure she's not there. You have my number. Call me if you find her."

I nodded, though I knew in my heart that she wasn't there. Still, he was right. We needed to be sure. I pulled back onto the road and was in my driveway five minutes later. I bolted from the truck, calling out her name as I ran inside. It didn't take me more than thirty seconds to see that the trailer was empty. Her backpack sat on her bed, untouched. She always dropped it off after school before heading to the gas station.

I walked over, swallowing the lump in my throat as I reached out with a shaky hand and touched the rabbit's foot that dangled from the zipper. She spent every last penny she had to buy it at the kid's fair at school when she was in fifth grade. Despite the fact that it was just a dyed piece of fur, she said it was her lucky charm. It didn't feel very lucky right now.

I walked back into the other room and picked up the house phone, calling Bruce. The phone rang twice before he answered. "Is she there?"

"No," I croaked out. "Just her backpack. She always drops it off before heading to work."

"Alright, stay there in case she comes home. I'm calling the Chief right now to get more units out here."

"I need to be out there. She's my responsibility."

"Son, I know how much you love Hannah and want to help her, but let us do our job. If she walks in the door in the next five minutes, you need to be there to let us know."

I hated that I was being sidelined, but he was right. Someone had to be here. "Fine. Call me as soon as you know something."

"I will."

I hung up the phone and walked over to the couch, slumping down on the ratty, brown fabric. My knee bounced in time with the seconds passing. I passed the time by trying to think of anywhere she might have gone. Maybe she went to a friend's house to piss me off. I forgot her. This had to be a trick.

After only five minutes, I couldn't sit still any longer. I paced the small space of the trailer, cursing my parents for allowing us to live in such a hell hole for so long. If only they'd gotten real jobs, we might have actually had something growing up. But the drugs were always more appealing to my father. He didn't use, but he did his best to get anyone he could hooked. That's why so many people in this town hated us. It didn't matter that we were only kids when he went to prison. We were tainted because of him.

Lights flashed in the driveway, and I rushed to the door, yanking it open. Running out into the night, I was relieved to see Bruce getting out of the car. He must have found her and brought her home. But when he shut the door and turned to me, I knew that wasn't the case. I stumbled to a stop, waiting for him to tell me the worst.

He didn't need to say a word. The look on his face said it all. I felt everything tilt around me as he walked closer. I didn't want to hear what he had to say. Hannah was the last of my family. I couldn't lose her.

"Just...tell me," I managed to get out.

"We found her. She's in the hospital and she's in pretty bad shape."

There were so many questions on the tip of my tongue, but when I opened my mouth, I couldn't say them. His hand clasped my shoulder and as I looked up into his eyes, my own filled with tears. I had let her down.

"Let's get you to the hospital."

THE BEEPING OF THE MONITORS ECHOED IN MY EARS THROUGH the glass separating my sister from me. She was barely recognizable laying in that bed. Her face was cut up and bruised, leaving only small patches unmarred. The doctor said she was in critical condition—that the next twelve hours would tell us if she could survive the injuries she sustained. The mental issues she'd have would no doubt take longer to

recover from. As if being beaten wasn't bad enough, whoever did this took something from her that wasn't his to have.

I hung my head, sucking back the tears before they could fall. I had to be strong for her. I couldn't allow myself to fall apart when she was depending on me to take care of her. But I didn't even know how to start. If she survived this, she'd be in the hospital for weeks. Her spinal injuries were so severe that the doctors said we had to wait for the swelling to go down before we knew if she'd ever walk again.

And this was all because I stayed to finish a job that should have belonged to someone else. I turned around, resting my head against the window. I couldn't keep looking at her, knowing how badly I failed her.

"Hey," Bruce called out as he walked off the elevator. He glanced into Hannah's room before stopping beside me. "How are you holding up?"

I huffed out a laugh. "Me? I'm not the one unconscious in a hospital bed."

"You can't blame yourself for what happened."

"I was supposed to pick her up," I said, finally looking up at him. "She's in there because I didn't protect her."

"She chose to walk home," he argued. "We both know how dangerous the streets are."

"Yeah, and I made it worse by staying late and then forgetting to pick her up. I was supposed to be there for her. My parents aren't around anymore and she's relying on me. I failed her."

His hand clasped on my shoulder, but I shrugged him off. I didn't need his sympathy. I needed to rewind and start the day over, but that wouldn't be happening.

"Did you catch him?"

His lips tightened as he stared at me. "We did."

"Who is it?" I knew it was bad the moment he looked away from me. It had to be someone I knew. "Tell me who did this to my sister," I snapped.

“Jack, you have to promise me you won’t do anything stupid.”

“Are you refusing to finish the job?”

“The job is finished. Every truck is loaded and ready for the morning.”

“That doesn’t mean the job is done. I need someone to stay and do inventory.”

I took a step back, shaking my head as I realized Rick left right after that. “No.”

“Jack—”

I spun on my heel and stormed over to the flight of stairs, shoving the door open so hard it bounced off the wall. I could hear Bruce yelling at me, telling me to stop, but all I could think about was finding Rick and making him pay. I was almost to my car when I was tackled to the ground.

Bruce rolled me over and pinned my arms to the ground. “You can’t go after him.”

“I did this!” I shouted, my voice cracking as a sharp pain lanced through my chest. “He fucking knew I would be at the warehouse. He knew I had to pick her up.”

“We know.”

“Tell me he’s in jail.”

“He was. His old man bailed him out.”

“Why? Why would you let him go after what he did to her?”

“Because we can’t place him at the scene, and your sister isn’t awake to tell us who did this to her.”

“I don’t understand—”

“Someone said they saw him around that time right where we found Hannah, but he has an alibi. His father said he was at home already. We couldn’t hold him.”

I stopped struggling, knowing there was nothing I could do right now. I closed my eyes, remembering the first time she

stopped by work to bring me dinner. I didn't like how Rick looked at her then, but I never imagined he would do something like this. I should have been more careful.

Bruce got off me and held out his hand. I took it, realizing there was nothing I could do tonight. But that didn't mean I wouldn't go after him. He had to pay for what he did to her. I just had to be smart about it.

"Jack, I know this hurts, but you have to play this smart. No one wants to see this guy pay more than you, but I promise I will not let him walk."

"You can't promise me that," I murmured.

I knew all too well that if you had the right connections, you could get away with murder. It happened plenty of times in this town. Rick's parents had enough money to fight his legal battles. And when the judge saw that the victim was the daughter of John and Linda Cox, he would turn Rick free. Pretty much everyone in this town saw us as the damaged offspring of two criminals. There would be no retribution for my sister.

I SAT IN MY PICKUP TRUCK DOWN THE ROAD FROM HIS HOUSE. It had been three days since my sister landed in the hospital and I hadn't gone back to work yet. I stayed by her side, waiting for her to wake up. I slept by her bed and woke up every morning disappointed that she hadn't regained consciousness. Then, this morning, the doctor told me I should start preparing myself for the worst.

I knew what would happen if I came over here. I couldn't wait for the police to take action. They had no evidence that Rick attacked my sister. That meant the only way for my sister to get justice was for me to go after him myself. It would mean prison for me, but my sister was worth it. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if Rick walked away.

At precisely ten o'clock, he pulled into his driveway. That was when his shift ended—the same time mine normally did. It would have been easier if I had just jumped him outside of

work. There weren't cameras in the loading area, and Matt was the only one who worked until ten with me. He was probably my one and only friend in this town, and I knew he wouldn't rat me out.

There was no easy way for me to get to him at his parent's house. His father still thought he was innocent, and if I charged in there, he would side with his kid. I would have to wait until tomorrow night to get him. But just as I was about to start my truck, Rick walked back out of the house and got in his car.

I followed him out of town, trying to keep my distance, but as soon as we were in the country, I hit the gas and slammed my truck into his bumper. He swerved, then hit the grass on the side of the road. His car fishtailed before veering across the road and crashing in the ditch. I got out and ran over to his car. Smoke floated out from under the bent hood, leaving an acrid taste in the air.

I yanked the car door open, grabbed him by the shirt, and threw him on the ground. Climbing over his body, I slammed my fist into his face three times before gripping his shirt and lifting him off the ground to meet my eyes.

"Why did you do it?"

"What are you talking about?" he cried out.

A car drove past, but I didn't care. They could lock me up. Maybe it was the best considering how I let her down. I slammed my fist into his stomach. I knew I was losing control, and when that time came, I wouldn't be able to hold back. "Tell me why! Why would you hurt her like that?"

"I didn't do anything!"

"I don't believe you!" I shouted. I slammed my fist into his face again, this time leaving a long cut across his cheekbone.

Sirens wailed in the distance, but I ignored them. I only had so much time to get him to admit the truth.

"Please," he begged. "I swear, I don't know what you're talking about!"

“Why do I not believe you?” I lowered my voice. My nostrils flared in anger as I grasped his hair and pulled him even closer to me. “Did you do it because she’s sixteen? Or maybe it was because she knew she was too good for you.”

A sob burst from his lips as I punched him again in the stomach. “I—I—”

“I just want to hear you say it,” I hissed. “Tell me why!”

The sirens were so close. I knew I only had a few seconds left.

“I didn’t mean to take it that far!” he cried out. “Please, you have to believe me!”

“Is that why you told me to work late? Because you knew she would be alone if I was at work?”

“Yes!” he cried out when I punched him again. “I was just messing with her,” he sobbed. “And she spit in my face! She told me I would never be good enough for her! I just lost it!”

Arms wrapped around mine, hauling me off the pathetic shit on the ground. I was thrown up against a cop car and my hands were cuffed behind my back. I watched in disgust as paramedics tended to the man that raped and nearly killed my sister.

“It’s over,” Bruce said in my ear, trying to calm me down. “We heard everything.”

“It’s not over until he’s rotting in prison.”

He spun me around and pushed me back against the car. “And who’s going to protect your sister while you’re in prison? Did you think about the fact that his daddy’s lawyers are going to throw everything they can at you?”

“Yes, and I don’t care! It doesn’t matter anymore!”

“It does!” he snapped. “Your sister woke up an hour ago. We were trying to find you. The hospital couldn’t get ahold of you.”

Relief swept through me. Maybe I should be upset that I wouldn’t be around to help her, but all I felt was an

overwhelming sense of peace that the man who did this to her was going away.

“Take me to her.”

“I can’t,” Bruce sighed. “I have to take you to jail. With any luck, the judge will grant you bail, but I don’t know how the hell you’re going to afford it.”

I still couldn’t regret it.

“Listen,” he said, watching as the medics loaded Rick into the ambulance. “I’ll sneak you in to see her tonight. But you’ll only get a few minutes.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“We were all on your side, Jack. You should have let the police handle this.”

“You said you had nothing on him. What would you have done in my position?”

He huffed out a laugh. “Probably the same fucking thing.”

JACK

“JACK.”

I jerked upright in the bed at the sound of Hannah’s voice. With a quick glance around the room, I realized I wasn’t back in that trailer. I was in a small house in the seedy part of town on a job for Baz Gelbero, an arms broker out of Canada. It was my job to watch his deadbeat son and keep him in line.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and scrubbed a hand down my face. Sleep didn’t come easily. Then again, it hadn’t since the day Hannah was attacked. That night changed my life forever. In some ways, it was for the best. But I also lost Hannah because I wasn’t there for her.

I warred with myself on a daily basis over whether or not I made the right choice. If I had gone to prison, I would have been out in a year. Yeah, I would have had a record, but Hannah wouldn’t have been alone. Then again, because of my stint in the military, I made something of myself and made the world a better place. At least, that’s what I told myself on nights when I couldn’t sleep.

My skin was burning below the surface. The need to shoot up was overwhelming this morning, but I had been clean since the night Johnny stopped those men from breaking into my house. It was the wakeup call I needed. If he hadn’t been here, I would be dead right now. I was sleeping off my last hit and was totally out of it until I heard the chaos in the next room. That could never happen again if I wanted to survive this job.

I shoved out of bed and walked over to the window, peeking through the blinds to study the neighborhood. I didn't know much about my neighbors yet thanks to my addiction. But I was feeling better today. Yeah, I still wanted the drugs, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it had been the past week.

What I needed was a cold shower and a good breakfast. I turned for the bathroom, catching sight of my phone lying on the table. All it would take was one phone call.

I stormed past the desk and slammed the bathroom door behind me. I would not call my dealer. I didn't need the drugs and taking them would ruin everything I'd accomplished in the past week. I turned on the water and quickly stripped before stepping under the cold shock of water.

As it slid down my body, I rested my head against the wall and tried to push the staggering need from my head. I needed a distraction from my addiction. That was the only way to get through the day. I snatched the washcloth off the bar and lathered up the soap. As I washed up, I couldn't help but notice how different my body was. I tried to stay in shape while I was in prison, but it wasn't the same as being back with my team and training every single day, pushing my body to the limit.

I'd lost some muscle definition and my body was bordering on lanky. This wasn't me. I didn't ever allow myself to lose sight of what was important. This man I had become in the name of the job was fucking with my head. Even my hair was longer than I normally liked it.

I shut the water off and wrapped a towel around my waist. I needed to get back out there and train. It would set my mind right and help me forget what I really wanted. I didn't have my normal training gear, so I grabbed some sweatpants and a t-shirt, then slid into my ratty gym shoes. I needed to earn some money so I could afford better shoes.

The old me had plenty of money, but I couldn't go near that and keep up the appearances of a junkie just released from prison. I hated living like this, but again, it was for the job.

As soon as my feet hit the pavement, I felt just a small shred of my old self worming its way back into my body. It wasn't easy to get back into the swing of running. At the prison, I could lift weights, but running wasn't something I got to do very often. I was in the hole too many times. And I could feel the strain with every step I took. My thighs burned from the exertion, but it was a good burn. I just had to keep pushing until I was back to the man I used to be.

I was out of breath and had a terrible stitch in my side by the time I got back to my house forty-five minutes later. I bent over and sucked in deep breaths, then stretched out my legs as I discreetly checked out the neighborhood. Not many people were awake at this hour. Most of the people on this street were part of Baz's network, which was why it surprised me when my neighbor walked out the door with a small kid.

I stretched one arm across my chest as I studied this woman. She had brown hair pulled up into a ponytail and she wore blue scrubs with white tennis shoes. She didn't fit the profile of anyone in this area, so why was she living in that small blue house with tulips out front?

She glanced over her shoulder and stopped the instant she saw me, then quickly finished buckling her kid before getting in the driver's seat. As she drove away, I saw her look at me one last time with a worried expression on her face. She should be nervous. She lived in a terrible neighborhood, surrounded by the shittiest people in the city. This was no place for her or her kid, but that wasn't my problem. I had only one thing to focus on and that was worming my way further into the organization and taking it down.

SKYLAR

A SLIVER of fear skated down my spine as I drove past my new neighbor. He was handsome, even if he did look like a drug dealer. I knew all too well that the good looking ones were trouble. That's why I was in this mess to begin with. But I couldn't regret what I got out of my relationship with Rico.

I glanced in the rearview mirror and smiled at Parker. He took on my own family's traits more than Rico's, thank God. With short brown hair and blue eyes, he was a little mini-me, always smiling and laughing, something Rico hated. He wanted his kid to be hard and tough like him, and when Parker cried, Rico would yell at him for being too soft. Thankfully, Rico went to prison, and since he got out, he hadn't been around to see his son.

"Mama, look!" He held up his fingers and laughed because he finally figured out how to cross them.

"Good job, buddy," I smiled at him in the rearview mirror. "Are you excited for school today?"

"Yep! Ms. Sally said we're...we're doing letters today!"

Parker was doing so well in preschool, something Rico didn't think was necessary, but I was determined to give him a better life than his father had. There was no way in hell I was letting him turn into a gangbanger at the age of thirteen. I just had to save up enough money to disappear for good. Baz had a long reach, though. He wouldn't let us go easily, something he reminded me of whenever he stopped by for a surprise visit.

I pulled into the preschool parking lot and shut off the car, twisting in my seat to see my son. “I have to work late tonight, so I’ll be here at six-thirty for you.”

“Okay, mama.” His voice was understanding, but his eyes dropped to his lap as a frown appeared on his face.

“Hey, we’ll go to the zoo this weekend, okay? I have the whole weekend off.”

That immediately cheered him up. It pained me to see him so sad. I wished we could be like other families that had both parents there to support their children, but that would never happen. We’d have to make the best of things and deal with the circumstances before us.

I helped Parker out of the car and walked him inside. His mood brightened even further when he saw Ms. Sally. His hand slipped from mine as he ran across the room and flung his body into her arms. She nearly toppled over when he crashed into her.

“Parker,” I reprimanded. “You need to be gentle. Remember, Ms. Sally just had surgery.”

“Oh, I’ve healed from that,” she chided me. “I’m not even walking with crutches anymore.”

“Still...” She still walked with a limp after her knee surgery. I wasn’t about to have my kid set back her progress. I bent down in front of Parker and turned him to face me. “I want you to be good for Ms. Sally today. You do whatever she asks you to do, no questions.”

He nodded. “I will, mama.”

“And what do you say at lunchtime?”

“Thank you for the food.”

“And what do you say at the end of the day?”

“Thank you for teaching me today.”

I smiled at his responses. I was paying for preschool. It wasn’t like Ms. Sally was watching him for free, but I wanted him to latch onto good manners now. After straightening his

jacket, I pulled him in for a hug. My breath caught in my chest as he squeezed his little hands around my neck. I was lucky to have such a good kid.

“Alright, I’ll see you after work.”

“Okay, mama. I love you.”

He ran off without another word, hanging his backpack on the hook and slipping out of his jacket. I watched as he sorted through the name tags, and when he found his, put it on the wall in the attendance column.

“He’s really a very good student. He’s the best behaved and my brightest kid.” She leaned in close and smiled. “Don’t tell anyone else I said that.”

“I won’t,” I grinned. “He was reading National Geographic to me last night.”

“You know they’re going to want to have him skip a grade when he gets into elementary school.”

“I won’t do that. He’s doing great in school, but emotionally, he’s not ready to be with older kids.”

She hesitated for a moment, then grabbed something off her desk. “I’ve been looking into schools that would be good for him. The district he’s in right now has very low test scores. Most of the kids there don’t go to college, let alone graduate. And the few who do make it out...” She pursed her lips. “Parker is very smart for his age. I would hate to see him in a school without the environment he needs to thrive. Take a look at these pamphlets.”

My eyes dropped to the handouts and I immediately knew they were out of the question. “These are all private schools. There’s no way I could ever afford—”

“There are scholarships available. I know the principal, and she told me that with a letter of recommendation, he stands a real chance at getting in. I’ve already sent over some of the work he’s done in class and discussed what kind of student he is. She said she would love to set up a meeting with you and Parker.”

I didn't know what to say. The fact that she even thought to look into this for me was amazing. "Thank you, Ms. Sally. This is...thank you."

"You know I love Parker," she smiled. "He's one of my favorite students. Again, do not repeat that." She gently rested her hand on mine. "I know how difficult things are with his father. This is a great opportunity to get him out of that path and onto a brighter one."

I was speechless, and that was partly because my eyes were watering and my throat was clogged with tears. I quickly swiped them away and smiled at her. "Thank you so much."

"Let me know if there's anything else I can help you with. And don't wait too long to call the principal. They'll be closing registration for next year soon."

"I won't." I glanced at the clock and smiled at her again. "I have to get to work. Thank you again for this."

"We'll see you at the end of the day."

I rushed out of the preschool, setting the pamphlets on the passenger seat of my car. With any luck, I could call on my lunch break and get a meeting scheduled soon. If I could get him in, this could change the course of his life forever. No matter what bad choices I made, I wouldn't allow my son to ever go down the same road I had.

"HOW ARE YOU FEELING, MR. LANDRY?"

He grunted, not bothering to answer the question. I walked further into the room, but was immediately on guard. Something about the way he was staring at me set me on edge. I'd seen it all too well with patients that came in after a bar fight. This guy was arrested during a drug deal and was thrown to the ground as cops wrestled to get him under control.

If he was hopped up on drugs, that meant he was dangerous and I had to proceed with caution. I walked over to

the computer and read through his intake chart. No matter who he was or what he'd done, I still had a job to do.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the handcuff latched to the bed was no longer around his wrist, but lying on the bed. I had to get out and call for security before he realized what I was doing. With a bright smile, I took a step back, but I wasn't fast enough. He must have noticed my hesitation because he leapt from the bed before I could make it to the curtain.

I screamed as his body crashed into mine. My back slammed against the cart and I fell to the floor, smacking my head against the tile. I was too stunned to make a move, and that delay gave him enough time to get his hands around my throat. Seconds of shock passed until I slammed my knee up into his stomach and attempted to roll him off me, but he was too strong. I struggled to breathe, but his meaty hands cut off my air supply in seconds.

Through the fog from lack of oxygen, I heard other people shouting, but didn't know what they were saying. I was hauled off my feet by the monster and spun around. Air filled my lungs instantly, but it took a second to regain my bearings. Everyone was staring at me in fear, but I had no idea why. Then I felt the cool metal of the scalpel he had pressed to my throat.

"Just stay back!" he shouted in my ear. "You come any closer and I'll shove this knife in her neck!"

He jerked my body to fully cover him as more people ran into view. I could see security calling it in to local police, but that could take minutes I didn't have. My best friend Gina was staring at me in horror. We'd all heard stories about something like this happening. I just never thought I would be the one behind the blade.

With one look at the clock, I realized I was going to be late picking up Parker. I was supposed to leave in ten minutes. What would he think when I didn't show up on time? What if I didn't show up at all? Would he be sent to live with his deadbeat father? Any hopes of him attending that school would be out of the question.

I couldn't think about that now. I had to focus on what was happening right now and figure out a way to get out of this mess. I licked my dry lips and closed my eyes, trying to calm the panic growing inside me. I'd taken self-defense classes after I gave birth to Parker. Knowing that his father was going to be in my life, I didn't think I had a choice. I just had to remember what I was taught and fight the panic enough to think clearly.

"Landry, you don't want to do this," I heard someone shout.

I peeled my eyes open and focused on the officer standing just outside the curtain. He was my focal point, the only way I was going to get out of this in one piece. Dark eyes, dark hair, tall, strong gun arm...I made a mental list of everything about this man down to his name tag. *Thorson*.

"You don't think I'm serious?" Landry shouted, pressing the knife further into my skin.

I felt the sharp sting of the blade and a trickle of blood from where he'd cut me. Hostage negotiations could go on for hours if the prisoner was angry and brave enough. And if this guy was hopped up on drugs, there was no telling what he was capable of.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," the officer said, holding up his hands. "You don't want to do this. Just take a breath and calm down."

"Calm down? You want me to calm down?"

"I want you to think about what you're doing. The hospital is shut down. There's nobody here but us and a dozen other cops. There's only one way this ends, and if you don't put that knife down, you'll end up in a body bag."

His voice was strong and determined, giving me the strength to focus on what I needed to do. I locked eyes with him for just a moment, and when I felt the scalpel against my throat ease just a little, I yanked his knife hand down, then slid back under his armpit.

I stumbled backward as Landry was tackled by the officer and another one I hadn't seen. Landing on my butt, I scrambled out of the way as the officer spun him to his stomach and cuffed his hands behind his back, while the other officer held him down.

"Sky!" Gina shouted as she rushed over to me, kneeling down beside me. "Are you okay?"

I nodded, still staring at the man who'd just attacked me. I couldn't believe that actually worked. I had practiced it many times before, but that was when Parker was little. I had never used it in a real situation.

"Hey, talk to me, girl."

I finally looked at Gina, but couldn't say a thing. I started to feel light-headed and the adrenaline coursing through me had my heart pounding in my chest.

"Ma'am, I need you to back up," the cop said, grabbing Gina by the arm and gently pulling her to her feet. Gina took a step back, still watching me carefully. "Are you okay?" the officer asked.

My eyes once again landed on his name tag and I repeated his name over and over in my head to keep from flipping out. I felt his hand brush my cheek and finally met his eyes.

"Take a deep breath. Watch me."

I kept my eyes on his mouth as he sucked in a breath, then slowly released it. I could hear the clock ticking in the distance and used it to help count my breaths. Slowly, my heart started to slow, but the shaking increased. He took my hand in his and gave a squeeze, reassuring me he was still there.

"That's better," he grinned.

I gave him a shaky smile, noticing for the first time how beautiful his face was. With a five o'clock shadow covering his jaw and those dark eyes, it was easy to see him as dangerous, but the grin on his face hinted at mischief.

"Can you stand?"

I nodded and let him haul me to my feet. I was still shaking and felt off balance, but at least I didn't have a knife to my throat anymore. "Gina," I finally croaked out. "I need you to call the preschool. Parker—"

"I'll take care of it. Just sit down."

I watched as she hurried off to the front desk. The officer guided me over to a chair and pushed me down. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Uh..."

"Let's start with an easier question. What's your name?"

"Skylar," I answered, licking my lips. "Skylar West."

"Hey, Skylar. I'm Officer Thorson."

"I saw that," I said, pointing to his name tag. "I focused on it when he—"

He nodded slightly. "That was quick thinking. You should teach some classes for us."

"I doubt that," I huffed out. "I've never done that before. I mean, aside from in class."

"Well, they taught you well. You really kept your cool."

"I have a son," I blurted out. "I was thinking about him. I'm supposed to pick him up from school soon."

"Can you call his father?" he asked, reaching for his phone.

"No," I answered immediately. "His...his father's not in the picture. And I don't want him to be."

"Understood. How about we get you checked out and you can give me your statement? Then I can get you out of here."

"That sounds good." My eyes drifted around the room and the man's face flashed in my eyes. "Not in here. Let's go to a different room."

"No problem."

He grabbed my elbow and helped me stand. Still shaky, I wobbled with him to another room, grateful when Gina

stepped in to clean me up. The cut wasn't deep, but I would need it cleaned out to be on the safe side. While Gina got to work, Officer Thorson asked me to repeat what happened. I went through the motions, telling him what happened, how I noticed he wasn't cuffed to the bed anymore and tried to get out. It only took a few minutes to tell him everything I knew. After that, I just wanted to punch out and go home.

“Thank you. If we need anything else from you, we'll be in touch. Here's my card if you need to talk.”

I took the card and nodded, shoving it in my pocket. As he left, Gina turned to me with a knowing grin.

“Girl, he was fine.”

“He's a cop.”

“And all the more fine because of it. You know I like a man in uniform.”

I rolled my eyes and pushed off the bed. “I have to go get Parker.”

“You're not even going to talk about this?”

“About what? You saw what happened.”

“Not the man that held a scalpel to your neck. I'm talking about the man candy that just strolled out of here, looking like a wet dream.”

I huffed in laughter. “Seriously, do you ever stop thinking about sex?”

“On most days? No. And especially not when a man that good looking walks into the room. But he wasn't looking at me. He only had eyes for you.”

“Because I was the one with a scalpel to my throat. There was nothing else there.”

“Sure, if you want to see it that way.”

I walked out of the room and over to the front desk. With a quick glance at the clock, I saw a half hour had passed already. Parker would be worried if I didn't show up soon.

“Are you really telling me you didn’t see the way he was watching you?”

I spun on my heel to face her. “Yes, he was watching me like a woman who had freaked out, and wanted to make sure I was okay. I appreciate that he didn’t leave me in the moment, but he’s gone now, off to rescue someone else.”

“Are you sure about that?” she asked, nodding her head discreetly to the emergency room doors.

He was standing over there talking with another officer. That didn’t mean anything. “He’s working the scene. Where else would he be?”

“I’m just saying, he stuck around for you. Just think about it.”

She grabbed a chart and walked off. I briefly wondered if she was right, but shoved it to the back of my mind. He was here to do a job, and I had to get my son. I clocked out, then headed to the locker room to grab my stuff. I didn’t have time to change tonight since I was already late. With my bag in hand, I headed for the exit, purposely ignoring the fact that Officer Thorson was still there.

“Hey,” he said, running to catch up with me outside. “I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I am,” I smiled at him. “Thank you. I just have to get my son.”

“Yeah, I thought I would walk you to your car. Anyone would be shaken up after what happened.”

That was the truth. My whole body was jittery and on edge. I was trying to appear cool and calm, but my brain was going a million miles a minute, trying to keep up with my body’s reaction. I didn’t want to go home or be alone tonight, but I didn’t exactly have a choice in the matter.

“Do you want me to drive you home?” he asked, watching me carefully.

“What?” I looked up at him, realizing I was standing in the same spot as when he stopped me and I had totally spaced out.

“Do you want me to take you home?”

“I have to get my son,” I repeated.

“How about I follow you? And when we get to your house, I can check it out for you, just to make you feel better.”

I didn't want to admit how much I needed that right now. Just the fact that he offered had my eyes welling with tears. Other than Gina, I had no one. My parents lived in Florida, far away from all my drama. When I got pregnant, they wanted to move closer, but I wouldn't let them—not when I knew who Rico really was. My dad had a lot of health problems, and the last thing I wanted was to put any more stress on him.

And that was another problem. If Officer Thorson drove me home, everyone in the neighborhood would see it. It would eventually get back to Rico, and then his father. I didn't need that kind of attention right now.

“I'm fine,” I smiled. “Really.”

I could tell he didn't believe me, but he didn't push it either. I got in my car and drove away, but in the rearview mirror, I saw him watching me. A small smile touched my lips. Gina was right. He was very good looking.

JACK

WORKING out wasn't nearly enough to completely wipe the cravings from my mind, but it helped enough that I was able to get out of the house and look at a bike I'd had my eye on from the moment I passed it at the local mechanic's on my first day in this town. There was nothing special about this bike. In fact, it was going to take a lot of long hours to fix it up and make it run again. Which provided the perfect cover for me as I scoped out the neighborhood.

The man was good enough to bring it to my house on his trailer. I handed him the cash and shook his hand as he twitched uneasily in front of me. Yeah, I got the same feeling the first time I laid eyes on my neighbors. Since all of them were working for Baz, I had to assume that they were all druggies just like me.

Just like I *used* to be.

I would always be an addict, but that didn't mean I would always be a druggie.

"Send me some pictures when you have her fixed up," Mike smiled. "I'd love to see how she turns out."

"Will do," I answered, slipping him another hundred. "Do you see a lot of people from around here?"

He glanced at one of the other houses and nodded. "Yeah, not exactly the clientele I want hanging around, but a man has to pay the bills."

"Understood. If you ever hear anything..." I paused, making sure he understood what I was saying, "give me a

call.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “You don’t seem like the type to hang around these guys. Mind if I ask why you’re in this part of town?”

I wanted to say I was nothing like them, but that wouldn’t do much to hold my cover. “Just got out of prison. This was the only place I could afford.”

“You looking for work?”

“Maybe.”

“I’m assuming since you’re fixing up this bike you’re good with your hands. If you need a job, swing by. I may have an opening for you.”

That raised more than a few red flags. “Just like that? I just told you I got out of prison and you’re offering me a job?”

His eyes drifted to the tat on my arm for just a moment. “Special Forces?”

“Raiders First Battalion,” I answered.

“75th Ranger. I would keep that covered up or you’re gonna be their new enforcer.”

With that, he turned and headed for his truck, then stuck his hand out the window in a wave as he pulled out of the driveway.

He saw the tat as a hindrance, but it was exactly how I planned to get inside. I couldn’t move up in the organization if I was sitting on my ass all day. I needed insider knowledge. Baz trusted me enough to keep his son safe, but would he trust me with his business dealings?

Pulling the trigger on that cop ate at me, but taking out these assholes to prove my loyalty to Baz was not a problem. Every criminal I took out was one less I had to deal with. But it would also draw attention to me, putting a target on my back because of who I was. It was a necessary evil, and would help get me the fuck out of here a hell of a lot faster.

I was about to head inside when I heard the rumble of a Harley at the end of the street. Driving way too fucking fast in a neighborhood like this, Rico flew past my house, then turned and parked in front of the house beside mine.

When he took off his helmet, he grinned at me. “My man!”

Christ, I hated this fucking prick. Thankfully, I never showed him any kindness in prison, so I didn’t have to fake it out here. I nodded at him, then gave him my back as I checked out my new bike.

“Man, I haven’t seen you since the trial. How’s it going?”

When he walked around my bike and stared at me, I knew I wouldn’t get rid of him easily. I bent down, checking out all the shit I would have to replace to get this thing rolling again.

“Pops put you up in a nice place.”

I rolled my eyes. If he thought this was nice, he must be living someplace really shitty.

“So, check it out. You’re living right next to my girl. I’d appreciate you keeping eyes on her.”

That had me looking up at him. “She’s yours?”

“The kid too,” he grinned. “I met her at a club and the rest is history.”

How the fuck did Rico land a woman like that? I didn’t know her, but even looking at her, I could tell she was out of his league. “Why aren’t you staying with her?”

Normally, I wouldn’t ask any questions, but this might actually help move my agenda further along.

“We’re not exactly together anymore.”

“Then she’s not yours,” I countered.

His eyes narrowed dangerously. It was hilarious that he thought he could intimidate me. “She’s the mother of my kid. She’s off-limits.”

“Never said she wasn’t.”

“You can keep an eye on her. I was gonna send someone over here, but since you’re her neighbor—”

“I’m not watching your baby mama,” I cut in.

“I think you’re mistaken who you’re working for.”

I slowly rose to my feet. I didn’t take being threatened lightly. It didn’t matter what the job was, I wouldn’t allow this fuckweasel to lord anything over me. “I had your back in prison because we were cellmates. Don’t think for one fucking second that I won’t put your ass in the ground if you ever threaten me again. I don’t give a fuck who your daddy is.”

Like the shit he was, he backed down immediately. The problem with guys like this was that they’d never really known how to do anything for themselves. He was a product of his father’s making, but he didn’t have the skills to take on anyone.

“Listen, man,” he chuckled. “I’m just sayin’—”

“I don’t give a fuck what you’re saying,” I said, stalking around my bike to get in his face. “If you want to protect your woman, get your ass over here and do it yourself. I gave enough in prison.”

He flinched at the reminder and immediately backed down. “Sorry, man. No hard feelings.”

I stepped closer, until we were chest to chest. Surprisingly, he didn’t back up, but I could feel his body trembling with every breath he took. He was fucking terrified. The problem was, he didn’t know true terror, but I’d be happy to give him a lesson anytime he wanted.

“Stay the fuck off my property. Got it?”

His throat bobbed as he gave a slight nod. When I turned my back on him, I half expected him to try and attack, but instead, he scurried around me like the sniveling weasel he was and practically ran to his bike. He wasn’t going to make it long on the outside if he didn’t man up.

As he drove away, I glanced at the house next to me. I couldn’t understand how a woman would get tangled up with

someone like him. Not only was he the son of an arms dealer, but he wasn't man enough to defend her. Whatever the deal was, it was none of my business.

“PACK OF REDS,” I TOLD THE CASHIER AT THE GAS STATION.

She turned and grabbed one off the shelf in the back, then tossed it on the counter. I'd never smoked until I took this job. Now, it was the only thing that was keeping me from wandering the streets for a dealer. It was a disgusting habit, but I'd do anything not to take another hit.

I handed over the cash and grabbed my smokes, but didn't get any farther than that. Two men stepped up behind me, crowding me against the counter. I sighed in frustration. I was so fucking tired of people trying to intimidate me.

“You got a fucking problem?” I asked, pocketing my change.

“Boss wants a word with you,” the guy on the right said.

I glanced at the woman behind the counter, giving a slight shake of my head. She was terrified and her hand was inching toward the edge of the counter. If she hit the panic button, it was going to cause more problems than we needed.

Turning, I spotted a couple of dark SUVs out the window, idling in the parking lot. There was only one person who could be, and I didn't exactly have a choice whether or not I wanted to see him. Shoving past the two men, I shoved the door open and stormed out to the vehicle. The door opened just as I got to the back, and I slid inside beside the man who got me in this position in the first place.

“Nice of you to finally show up,” I muttered, not bothering to look at him.

“Cry me a river. You had a job to do,” Rafe said.

Completely unapologetic. That was my boss to a T. Normally, I didn't give a fuck, but the way he left me hanging really chapped my ass. “You didn't check in even once.”

He shifted to face me, his dark eyes peeking out from under the brim of his black cowboy hat. “Are you fucking kidding me? You knew the job.”

“Yeah, I also stupidly thought you’d have my back.”

“You knew what this would mean. If I’d visited you, it would have blown the op and you’d be in the ground right now.”

“I almost was in the ground,” I hissed. “Not that you care, but I was in the hospital. I almost fucking died.”

“I know,” he snapped. “Just because I couldn’t make contact didn’t mean I wasn’t keeping tabs on you. I was fucking running that place.”

I snorted at that. “Yeah, you really did me a lot of favors.”

“More than you fucking realize. Who do you think made the decision to throw you in the hold multiple times? It saved your ass and held up your cover.”

“Saved my ass?” I said incredulously. “You’ve gotta be fucking shitting me right now. Do you have any fucking idea what it was like in that place?”

“I got a good idea.”

“Yeah? Tell me about it. Tell me how much sleep you got while I was watching my back every fucking second of the day.”

“You knew what you signed up for!”

He was right about that. “I did,” I relented. “I knew exactly what would happen to me once I was on the inside.”

“Then what are you fucking whining about?”

As much as it pained me to admit it, he had a point. I knew what I signed up for, and like it or not, this was the job. I just didn’t realize how it would affect me after all this time. My hand shook as it rested on my thigh, not because I was nervous, but because the need to take another hit was racing through my veins. I pulled out my smokes and lit one, not giving a fuck that I was smoking in his vehicle.

“Put it out.”

“It’s either this or I find a drug dealer.”

I pulled the smoke between my lips and inhaled the nicotine straight into my lungs. The relief was stark, but not enough to completely kill the need. It was only a bandaid, and with time, that need would only grow. I was still too close to the edge, no matter how hard I fought it.

“Christ, you’re a fucking addict now?”

“I’m what you made me.” I took another drag and closed my eyes. Tonight was going to be hell.

“You were supposed to go in and get the job done—not fall in line with Gelbero’s crew.”

“And what did you think was going to happen?” I snapped. “You sent me in to do a job and I had to fit the part. I did what was needed.”

“And now you’re too fucking addicted to see straight,” he scoffed. “Fucking useless.”

I put out the cigarette on his seat right next to his hand. His eyes met mine in challenge, but I wasn’t playing that game anymore. I would finish the job only because I was already in too deep. This had to count for something. I wouldn’t allow my addiction to be for nothing.

“The next fucking time you see me, you’d better be arresting that prick. After that, you can find someone else to do the job. I’m out.”

I reached for the handle, but he grabbed my jacket, yanking me back. “You’re out when I say you’re out.”

With deadly calm, I pried his fingers from my jacket. “I’m out when I say. The days of me being your muscle are over. Find someone else to do your dirty work.”

I flung the door open and got out, walking right past his new muscle. Despite feeling like my skin was crawling, I felt pretty damn good about my newfound distance from Rafe. And I was even happier than ever that I took this job instead of Johnny or Jason. They were the only men I could rely on, the

only two that ever gave a shit about me. I'd gladly take the hit for them if it meant all of us could walk away in the end.

I got in my truck and tore out of the parking lot, leaving Rafe in the dust. The job was long from being over, but knowing I was done once this was over gave me a sense of peace I hadn't felt in years. When this was over, I was going straight. Maybe I'd retire for good and settle down on a beach with a margarita in my hand. Then again, maybe the peace of the mountains would be better for me. At least I could still carry a gun without anyone looking at me funny.

Feeling lighter than I had in years, I headed back to the house. One year. That's all the time I was giving myself to finish this job. If the job wasn't finished, I was walking away.

One year.

SKYLAR

Ms. SALLY MET me at the door, stepping outside before Parker could see me. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I smiled. “I’m not gonna lie, it was really scary.”

“What happened? All Gina said was that someone attacked you.”

“Yeah, it was...” Honestly, I didn’t want to talk about it. I just wanted to move on.

“I’m not trying to pry. I just want to make sure you’re okay. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No, I just want to go home and kick my feet up.”

“That’s understandable.”

“How much do I owe you for the overtime?”

She waved me off. “Please, don’t worry about it. I’m just glad you’re safe.”

She opened the door again and let me into the building where one of the aids was working on a popsicle stick project with Parker. She glanced up and smiled. “Parker, your mom’s here. How about we finish this tomorrow?”

“Okay.” The moment he looked at me, the panic simmering in my chest increased tenfold. I loved my son more than anything in the world. I always assumed that if something went wrong, it would be because of where I lived, not because I was at the hospital. But after what happened today, I was even more terrified that I wouldn’t be able to protect him.

Killers walked the earth all around us. There was no possible way to keep him safe at all times.

I took a deep breath and held out my arms for him, catching him as he flung himself at me. I squeezed him tight, sending up a prayer that I could protect him. “Hey, buddy,” I sniffled back the tears. “How was school today?”

“It was so good! I count to forty!”

“You did?” I said, laughing at the silly grin on his face.

“Momma, why are you crying?”

I swiped at the tears, refusing to let him see how terrified I was. “It’s so silly. I stubbed my toe and it really hurt.”

“Should I kiss it?”

“No, baby. It’s all better now. Are you ready to go?”

His eyebrows shot up as he spun away from me. “I gotta get my backpack!”

I stood as he ran across the room and grabbed his folder, then started putting his papers inside.

“He had a really good day,” Ms. Sally assured me. “He told me Dr. Seuss was too easy and made me pick out a harder book for him. Good luck with that,” she laughed.

“I’m sure he’ll read it to me all night.”

“I don’t doubt it. It’s a book about the ocean, and he hasn’t stopped staring at it since I gave it to him. Alison set up this project just so he would put it down for five minutes. When he started telling me about bioluminescence, I decided he’d had enough for the day,” she laughed. “I’m not sure I even knew what bioluminescence was until I was an adult.”

“He’s setting the bar pretty high.”

He crashed into my legs a few seconds later, grinning up at me. “Can we get burgers on the way home?”

“Anything you want.”

After today, I needed a night with no cooking. Besides, he had to be starving. It was way past dinner time. I’d have to get

him home and right to bed. I thanked the ladies one last time for staying late, then walked out with Parker to the car. He chatted my ear off the whole way, telling me about all the things he learned from his new book.

I smiled and nodded along, but I was so distracted that I didn't hear half of what he said. I ordered a kid's meal for Parker, but couldn't stomach the thought of eating anything right now. I was still nauseous from what happened at the hospital. What I really needed was a warm bath and a big glass of wine.

It wasn't until I turned down my street that I even thought about the officer from earlier. He was currently parked in my driveway, which initially freaked me out, but then I realized that all he had to do was look me up. He had the resources to find out anything he wanted.

"Mama, why is there a police officer in our driveway?"

"Um...I met him earlier. He's just here to say hi."

"Is he gonna give me a ride in his car?" he asked excitedly.

"Not tonight. You have to get to bed, mister," I answered as I parked beside the cruiser.

I got out, looking over at my new neighbor's drive first. He was kneeling next to a bike I'd never seen before, but he wasn't working on it. He was staring at me. Swallowing hard, I quickly turned and grabbed Parker from the back seat just as Officer Thorson walked around the back of my car.

"I know you told me you didn't need me to come by, but I would feel better if I checked out the place."

Everything about him put me at ease. It wasn't easy to live in this area with a small kid. Baz always had his men running errands for him. I was just lucky there were never any shots fired, but if Officer Thorson kept coming around, I wasn't sure that would last.

"Okay, but I have to put this guy to bed."

"I won't be long. I promise."

I nodded and headed for the door, glancing over my shoulder one last time at the man beside the bike. His eyes followed me all the way to the front porch, but he looked away as soon as Officer Thorson looked his way.

“Is he a problem?” Officer Thorson asked.

“Um...I don't know. I've never met him. He just moved in.”

He took the keys from me and unlocked the door, letting himself in. I followed, but hung back as he walked through my small house.

“All clear,” he grinned. “I'll get out of your hair.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate you taking the time to come out here.”

“Yeah, we'll pretend that I didn't look up your information,” he laughed.

“I'll let it go if you can excuse my messy house, Officer Thorson.”

“Pete,” he corrected. “And your house is fine. Lock the door behind me.”

“I will.”

He pulled a card out and slipped it into my hand. His hand closed around mine for just a second, but that was all it took to feel something I hadn't felt in years. I looked up into his dark eyes and tried to tell myself that I couldn't get involved with a police officer. But the way he was looking at me, I knew this wouldn't be the last time I saw him.

“Call me if you need anything.”

“I will.”

But I wouldn't. If he came out here too often, Baz would get wind of it and start coming around more. I needed to keep him as far away from me as possible.

As soon as the door closed, I shook off the tingling feelings rushing through my body and hustled Parker into his bedroom. It didn't take long to get him through his bedtime

routine tonight. He was exhausted from the long day, and conked out almost as soon as I started reading to him.

Turning out his light, I headed for the kitchen and grabbed a wine glass from the cabinet. As I pulled out the wine, my neighbor's eyes flashed in my mind. Those ice blue eyes were familiar. I just couldn't place them. Pouring myself a glass, I walked into the living room and pulled back the curtains just enough to see outside. He was still working on his bike, but suddenly looked up at me. With a yelp, I stepped back, letting go of the curtain.

After a moment, I peeked outside again, but he was gone. That was weird. Why would he be watching me so closely? Or was he like that with everyone? Shaking it off, I headed to the bathroom and turned on the warm water. As I sat on the edge of the tub with my hand under the water, I tried to place where I had seen his face before. But I saw so many people at the hospital that it was nearly impossible to remember them all.

I almost jumped out of my skin when my cell rang. Pressing my hand to my racing heart, I answered my mom's call. "Hey," I said as cheerily as possible.

"Hey, honey. I didn't hear from my grandson tonight."

Shit, I completely forgot to call. "Yeah, we had a busy night. He crashed as soon as we got home."

"I missed seeing his face." I could hear the smile in her voice. I made a point of calling her every night, video-chatting whenever possible. My parents missed out on so much, and I knew it was hard on my mom especially.

"We'll call in the morning before school."

"Oh, don't worry about it. I know your mornings are busy. So, how's work going?"

"It's—" Flashes of the man attacking me still played on repeat in my head, but I shoved them aside. The last thing my parents needed to worry about was me getting injured at work. "Busy as always."

"I wish we were there to help out."

“You know that would be too stressful for Dad.”

“I know. You don’t have to tell me again,” she chastised.

Avoiding another lecture, I switched topics. “How was lunch yesterday at the women’s club?”

“You know how those ladies are. Half the time, I wish I had never gone and the other half I feel that it’s good for me to get out of the house.”

“It is. You can’t spend your whole life taking care of other people. Besides, you know Dad would lose his mind if you hovered over him every second of the day.”

“Well, since you won’t let me hover over you—”

“Mom,” I sighed in frustration. “Can we not do this again?”

“I’m just saying, I understand why you don’t want us there, but I could help out. Besides, it doesn’t make sense that you keep your parents away, but your son is still around that man.”

“I don’t have a choice,” I argued. “It’s not like I can move right now. Baz is always watching. I have to be careful when I make my move.”

“And I could be there in the meantime to help out. That’s all I’m saying.”

She was never going to let this go. “I know, and thank you for the offer, but the fewer people around, the easier it will be to get out of here. The last thing I need is Baz going after you too.”

“I don’t like it,” she grumbled, “but I’ll stay out of it. For now.”

And with that threat, I decided it was time to get off the phone and destress. “I have a few things to do before I go to bed. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Code for, you’ve interfered too much and it’s time to get off the phone.”

“I still love you.”

“You have a funny way of showing it,” she chuckled.
“Talk later.”

“Bye, Mom.”

Sighing, I tossed the phone on the table and took one last peek outside at my neighbor. Thank God my mom wasn't around to see him. All those tats on his arms would freak her out, and then she'd drag me away by my hair. After locking all the doors and turning off the lights, it was time to unwind for the day.

Undressing, I slipped into the bath and grabbed my wine glass. Taking a long sip, I pictured my happy place, somewhere far away from here where I wouldn't have to worry about violence on a daily basis. Maybe I could find a small town to disappear from the chaos. Some place Parker could grow up with friends who would play ball with him after school and he could ride his bike around town without worrying about gang violence.

I would make it happen sooner rather than later. I almost had enough money saved from working my side job as an EMT. Before I was in nursing school, I trained as an EMT, getting my license so I could put myself through school. I still take shifts twice a week to help pay the bills and save up for my escape. Most of the time, Gina watches Parker for me. She knows my situation, and was there the night I met Rico. She wants me to get out just as much as I do.

If I have to put in a little extra time now so my kid is safe in the long run, I'll do it. Even if that means wearing myself thin from the long hours or meeting some of the worst of humanity when we get called to the prison. That place gives me the creeps. It's one of the most dangerous prisons in the United States and—

I sat upright, nearly sloshing my wine over the side of the glass in my haste. My heart slowly pounded faster and faster in my chest as I realized where I'd seen the man next door before. He was on my gurney a few months back. We'd been called to the Beaumont for a prisoner who had been injured. That was him. He looked different now—not banged up like

he was then. But I was sure of it. The question was, what was he in prison for and were we safe next door to him?

JACK

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”

I turned at the sound of the tiny male voice over my shoulder. Of all the people I expected to talk to me in this neighborhood, I hadn't expected this kid to be one of them.

“Fixing my bike.”

“What's wrong with it?”

“Everything,” I grunted.

“If everything's wrong with it, why don't you buy a new one?”

Dropping my tool, I got off the bucket I was using for a seat and snatched the rag off the seat of the bike. Wiping my hands, I stared down at the kid who couldn't be more than five years old. With a mop of brown hair on the top of his head and blue eyes that matched his mama's, it was hard to see how he was related to Rico at all. He didn't look a thing like him, which was probably for the best.

“Where's your mama?”

“In the house,” he said, wiping his nose on the sleeve of his shirt. “She's mad because she didn't hear her alarm go off. She said she's late and her boss is going to yell at her a lot.”

“Yeah? What does she do?”

“She's a nurse at the hospital.”

This kid had to be older than I thought. The way he spoke—it didn't sound like any five-year-old I knew. Not that I

knew many of them. “How old are you?”

“Four!” he beamed, holding out four fingers proudly. “I’ll be five in two months!”

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. This kid was only four? He spoke clearly, with not even a hint of uncertainty about what he was saying.

“Why don’t you buy a new bike?”

“Because I don’t want a new bike.”

“But a new bike would be prettier.”

“I like the work that goes into fixing up a bike,” I countered.

He sighed heavily, shaking his head as he stared at the heap behind me. “That’s a lot of work.”

“Yeah. You know something about it?”

He swiped at his nose again, shaking his head. “No.”

“Have you ever been around a bike?”

He shook his head again, but then his eyes lit up. “I have a monster truck, though.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

The screen door on his house banged shut as his mom came running out. She wasn’t dressed in scrubs, though. She was donning a blue EMT outfit. Maybe the kid had it mixed up.

Her eyes scanned the yard for her son and the panic was evident when she saw he wasn’t by her car. Then her eyes landed on me and the panic turned to fear. I didn’t like the gnawing feeling in my gut from that look, but I shoved it down. It wasn’t my job to make friends with her, and any involvement would only make my life harder.

“Parker!” she shouted, rushing over to him. She pulled him against her, keeping her hands firmly locked around his shoulders. “You can’t wander off. I told you not to go outside.”

“I was looking at his bike,” Parker answered.

“I didn’t know where you were. You scared me.”

Correction. I scared her. I was with her son, and it was pretty fucking obvious that she thought I was a threat to him. That was good. Better for her to assume that I was dangerous. Besides, any good mother would be terrified based on the way I looked. This was really for the best.

“I’m sorry if he bothered you.” The slight shake in her voice gave away how terrified she was, though she was trying to hide it. She didn’t quite meet my eyes, and despite trying her best to appear calm, I could see her pulse fluttering at the base of her neck. Her only thought was to get away from me as fast as possible. Those were good instincts, ones that she should abide by.

“It’s no problem,” I shrugged. “I was just working on my bike.”

Her eyes skittered over the bike quickly before she looked away. “I have to get to work.”

“He said you’re a nurse,” I said quickly, stopping her just as she was about to leave.

“Uh...that’s right. But I don’t work outside the hospital, if that’s what you’re wondering,” she added quickly.

I shook my head slightly, trying to put her at ease. No matter how much I said I didn’t care that she was afraid of me, deep down, I fucking hated it. I didn’t like being seen as the bad guy. I fought for those who couldn’t protect themselves, and while that vision might have been skewed while working for Rafe, it would always be who I truly was.

“Just wondering because you’re wearing an EMT uniform.”

She glanced down, then back to me. “I take shifts twice a week.”

“To help pay the bills,” I surmised.

She flinched at my astute observation. I didn’t mean to put her on the spot. It was just how I did things.

“His old man in the picture?” I asked, overstepping my bounds.

She stiffened at my question, then steeled her spine, finally looking me in the eyes. “That’s none of your business.”

“You’re right. Sorry.”

It was clear she didn’t give a shit about my apology, and that bothered me a hell of a lot more than I wanted to admit to myself. I didn’t need the complication of a woman and kid in my life, especially not when her kid was the son of my enemy. But the longer I stared at her, the more I hated that look in her eyes. She shouldn’t feel terrified to live next to me.

I slowly held out my hand, knowing this was the beginning of the end for me. “I’m Jack.”

Her eyes flicked to my hand for a second. She was nervous, worried about appearing rude when she should be only concerned with her son’s safety. Then again, she might be worried that in offending me, she was putting herself in a bad position with her baby daddy.

She finally took my hand, shaking it once before snatching her hand back. “Skylar.”

Beautiful name. It was only after several heartbeats passed that I realized I was smiling at her. Not only that, but I was staring at her, cataloging all her features from the slight laugh lines at the corner of her eyes to the way her tongue darted out to lick her lips when she was nervous. And those eyes—ice blue—the same fucking eyes I saw the day I was brought to the hospital. Those eyes locked with mine when I was on the verge of death. She saved my life—a man who didn’t deserve her kind words or attention.

I stepped back and glanced down at her boy, who was oblivious to everything passing between his mom and me. “Nice to meet you, Parker. Take care of your mama.”

I turned back to my bike, trying to get my thoughts off the woman who kept me alive when my life was going to hell. I heard her footsteps retreating as her son yapped about my bike. In the rusted chrome of the bike, I could see her get in

the car, and moments later pull out of the driveway. My eyes followed her down the street as she turned out of sight, and stayed way too fucking long at the stop sign.

I had to get her out of my head. She was a complication I didn't need. And her kid was bound to get in the way of the job. I didn't know why she was living here amongst killers when she could be literally anywhere else, but I had to assume it had something to do with the baby daddy.

Against my better judgment, I pulled out the cell Baz gave me just after I was released from prison and I dialed his number.

I STOOD AS A LINE OF SUVs STOPPED AT THE CURB IN FRONT of my house. Baz never went anywhere without protection, which made it damn near impossible to take him out without an army at your back. That's why I had to get on the inside. It would have been so fucking easy to take this asshole out with a single shot. Rafe had the manpower to do it, but that wouldn't solve the problem. For every asshole like Baz, there were another ten lined up to take his place. The operation had to be taken down from the inside, along with all his contacts from The Syndicate. But the longer this went on, I wondered if it was even worth it. Sure, we could take them down in time, but how long would it be until another group formed the same fucking operation and started this all over again?

"Given your reluctance to accept my thanks at the prison, I'm a little surprised you called," Baz said as he walked up the drive to where I was standing beside my bike.

We were on complete opposite sides of the spectrum. He was dressed in his best suit, sticking out like a sore thumb on this side of town. Whereas I looked like the typical dirtbag in my ratty jeans and t-shirt. He wore thousand dollar shoes and I wore work boots. It would be clear to anyone who saw us together that I was nothing more than his flunky.

"I'm surprised you made the trip to see me."

He shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged. "I was in town for a business meeting. I was intrigued when you made the call. Did you finally decide to get on board?"

"Not exactly," I said carefully. I didn't want to turn him down completely. I needed him to continue to trust me, to figure out how to use me to his advantage. Only then would I make any headway.

"Then what is this about?"

"Your son stopped by yesterday. He said my new neighbor is his woman and his kid."

"Your point being?"

"He asked me to look out for them."

He chuckled slightly, taking a step closer to me. "Whatever it is, just fucking say it."

"Why are they here?" He didn't say anything, but his eyes watched me shrewdly. "It's a problem."

"In what way?"

"Look around here. This place is filled with criminals, all willing to do your bidding."

"Much like you," he answered.

"I never said I would be on your payroll."

As soon as I said it, his guards stiffened slightly, but Baz raised his hand for them to back down. "You know, that's what I like about you. Most men want to join me, to reap the spoils of war. But you're different. I read up on you. Former military, lethal with a weapon, yet you're not carrying."

"I don't need to."

"And somehow you got wrapped up in drugs and killed a cop. How is that possible?"

"I think you know exactly how it happened," I answered, refusing to give too much away.

He moved closer, pulling his hand from his pocket to rub against his top lip. Everything about this man was calculated,

planned out as if he saw my call coming—as if he always knew what was coming. That made him both predictable and a loose cannon. The question was, which way would he go today. Making that call could very well get me killed for interfering in a personal matter. But if I was right about him, it would put me in the position to climb my way up the ladder much faster than I anticipated. My neighbor wasn't just his son's woman. She was the mother of Baz's heir, and that made him worth more than anything.

“So, why exactly did you call me here?”

“Because that kid doesn't belong in this part of town. We both know this area isn't safe, so why the hell is your son's baby mama living here, putting your grandson in danger?”

“Suddenly, you care,” he said interestedly.

“I don't care, but I see the attention she draws every time she steps out of her house.”

“She's here so my men can keep an eye on her and my grandson. Is that all you called me for?”

This wasn't going the way I hoped. I thought he would see sense and move them away from the danger, but he thought a bunch of criminals were better suited to watching her back.

“Like I said, your son asked me to look after her. I'm not a fucking babysitter. I don't give a shit how you got me out of prison. I paid the price for that, even if it wasn't intended to help you or your son in any way.”

“And you want me to know that you're not going to look after them, to protect them,” he hissed as he stepped closer.

He was just a few feet from me now. I saw the evil in his eyes, the sadistic fuck that gladly brokered deals with the worst of humanity for a cut of the profits. There was nothing good about this man, and if he had his way, that kid would end up on his payroll by the time he was eighteen.

“I could have you arrested and thrown back in prison with the snap of my fingers,” he threatened. “When I got you out, it was with the understanding that I own you, not the other way around. My son—however useless he may be—fathered a

child, and he means everything to me and my legacy. It would be wise of you to keep an eye on them, to make sure they're safe."

"It would be wiser to move them to a safer neighborhood," I snapped, refusing to be intimidated by him.

I anticipated the move before it happened. He pulled his gun and pressed it against my forehead. I didn't move, didn't even flinch as he racked the gun. Death would not be the worst thing that could happen to me at this point. And while I didn't have a death wish, I also wouldn't back down to this fucker and let him push me around. It was the only way he would respect me.

"You have some brass balls, Jack. I saved your goddamn life and not only do you not thank me for getting you out of prison, you have the audacity to tell me what to do with my own flesh and blood."

"Go ahead and pull the trigger," I egged him on. "Do you really think this is the first time I've had a gun to my head? Do you think I'm scared of what you could do to me? I saw worse things in the military."

"And yet you got caught murdering a cop in broad daylight."

"That's what happens when you turn to drugs instead of taking care of shit."

The gun pressed even harder against my head, but then he holstered the weapon, laughing like he hadn't just threatened to kill me in broad daylight.

"I knew I liked you. I have a job for you."

"I already told you, I don't work for you."

He nodded his head from side to side. "We'll see. One day, you'll need some money, and I pay extremely well. When that day comes, you have my number."

"And the woman?"

"She stays. For now," he said, turning his back on me and heading back to his SUV. "I would consider it a personal favor

if you kept an eye on them,” he called out without looking back at me.

In other words, if anything happened to them, it was on me. As the SUVs pulled away from the curb, I noticed more than a few curtains slipping closed across the street. They weren't here just to watch the woman and her kid. They would be watching me, and if I made one wrong move, they'd call the boss and inform him immediately. It was the way the food chain worked. The only way to get them off my back was to make them fear me the way they did Baz.

That would come in time. For now, I had to play it cool and get as much intel on their movements before I jumped into the game. Only then would I truly be able to take them down.

SKYLAR

“I THOUGHT for sure I was going to get a call that you weren’t showing up today,” Aaron jeered as I raced to meet him at the ambulance.

“I overslept,” I answered, hopping in the passenger side. “And when have I ever called in sick?”

“Never, but there’s a first time for everything.”

That charming smile he sent my way was one all the ladies fell for. He was your classic good-looking, suave guy who knew exactly what to say to a woman to get her to go home with him. And when he let them down easy the next morning, they never seemed to mind.

His blonde hair was just short enough for women to tangle their fingers through, and as he says—*the scruff of his beard rubs them just the right way when he’s between their legs*. I’ve never experienced it myself, and I would never go there since he’s more like a brother to me, but I could definitely see the appeal. And if that wasn’t enough to tempt any woman, the bright blue eyes that sparkled along with his smile would definitely do the trick.

He had been my partner on and off for over ten years, and that was after he trained me. He wasn’t easy on me and he didn’t hand out any favors. I had to earn my place in the department, and when I went to nursing school, he had my back, fighting with the department to keep me on the schedule. The hours were hell and the paycheck sucked, but it got me through to the end. If I hadn’t fucked everything up by

sleeping with Rico and getting pregnant, I wouldn't have to work as a medic two days a week anymore.

But I wouldn't trade Parker for the world. And the one man that has always been on my side through it all was Aaron. Which is why working today, despite wanting to sleep in, has put a smile on my face.

"What's the call?" I missed it since I was running into the station right as the call came in.

"Transport from the nursing home. How's Parker?"

"Straining my last nerve," I laughed. "I was running around the house getting ready and couldn't find him. He was outside with the new neighbor."

Aaron glanced over at me in surprise. He knew where I lived and why Parker going outside by himself was a bad idea. "I'm assuming he's still alive and kicking."

I rolled my eyes at him. "Of course he is."

"Any luck on moving out of the neighborhood?"

"I'm getting there. Maybe a year more of this shit."

"And then I won't have to see your face anymore or yell at you for running late," he teased.

"You're the one who's always late. This is my first time."

"You know what they say. It's a slippery slope."

"Which explains why I've had to cover for you so many times."

He scoffed at my comment. "When was the last time you ever covered for me?"

I turned to him with a grin on my face. "How about the time you were having sex with Carrie upstairs when the call came in?"

"I wasn't late," he argued.

"No, you just came running out to the ambulance with your pants around your ankles. It was very impressive."

"Okay, that's one time."

“Ooh, or when you got drunk with Hank after your shift and passed out on the couch for the night? I have pictures of that.”

Hank was a fireman and the worst influence possible on most of the guys. He drank like a fish and swore like a sailor. Nobody in the station could keep up with him, but they sure did try. They always failed.

“Alright, alright,” Aaron cut me off just as I was about to give him another example. “Fine, you may have a point. I won’t ever say that you’re late again.”

“Thank you,” I grinned, sitting back in my seat.

“By the way, I may have found a date for you.”

I groaned, rolling my head to stare out the window. “No more dates. The last one was a disaster. Besides, whenever someone hears that I have a kid, they run away as fast as they can.”

“Not all men are like that.”

“Not all, but there are a hell of a lot of them.”

“You know, I’ve picked out some good guys for you over the years,” he argued. “What about Steve?”

“He was a good guy,” I conceded. “There was nothing wrong with him.”

“See?”

“But there was no spark.”

“You didn’t even give him a chance.”

“I gave him three dates. I’m sorry, but if I don’t feel it after three dates, it’s a no-go.”

“That’s harsh.”

“Yeah?” I turned to him. “You wouldn’t go out with a woman for more than one date if there was no spark.”

“That’s different. I’m a guy, and I have needs.”

That made me burst out laughing. “And you think women don’t? Let me tell you, I have a vibrator that has had to fill in

more than once for a man over the years.”

“I’m listening.”

“I’m not offering details,” I chastised when he shot me a wicked grin.

“You’ve never given me a chance.”

He was only saying that because I told him about my vibrator. “And you wouldn’t want a chance. Not when I tell you that by the time Parker goes to bed, I’m so exhausted that I pass out on the couch. Or that I sometimes forget to do laundry and have to wear the same clothes twice.”

“Everyone does that.”

“Okay, then you would be fine if I told you that you could never sleep over because Parker crawls into my bed in the middle of the night about three nights a week?”

His thumb drummed a steady rhythm on the steering wheel as he swallowed hard. “Uh...I could go home early.”

“Uh-huh, and that would get old really fast when you have to get up at the crack of dawn for work.”

“Okay, you may have a point, but I still wouldn’t mind hearing more about that vibrator. What color is it?”

“I’m not telling you that,” I laughed.

“Red? No, pink. I bet it’s pink and has multiple settings.”

“All I’ll say is this,” I teased as we pulled into the drive of the nursing home. “Jack does a better job of getting me off than any man I’ve ever been with.”

His face dropped at my admission. I flung the door open and hopped out as he called after me. “That’s just mean! I’m gonna need more details! You can’t walk away and leave a guy hanging like that!”

TWO HOURS INTO MY SHIFT AND THE DAY WAS ALREADY crazy. The first call was for elder abuse, which was horrific enough to make my stomach churn with disgust and anger.

The smell of human waste struck the moment we walked through the door.

I did my best not to cover my nose as I walked through the door, followed by Aaron. With a quick look around the living room, it was clear that the son did nothing to take care of the apartment, let alone his mother. Takeout containers were strewn all over the furniture and the floor. Garbage was piled up in the corners of the room, and I was pretty sure a mouse skittered past my foot as I approached the woman in the wheelchair.

With the TV blaring, I couldn't hear a word the old woman was trying to say to me, which is what I assume the son intended when he turned the volume up. He was too lazy to take care of his mother, but didn't want to hear her complain.

Setting my bag down, I knelt beside the eighty-year-old woman in the wheelchair. Smiling at her, I brushed the knotted strands of gray hair behind her ear. I didn't need to pinch her skin to tell she was severely dehydrated. The dark circles and sunken eyes were enough to give away that this woman was suffering.

"Mrs. Henderson, how are you feeling?"

Her head sort of rolled toward me. I could hear the faint sound of her whimpers now that I was closer, but that damn TV made it impossible to hear anything.

Aaron grabbed the remote off the table and shut it off, then turned to the son. "When was the last time your mother ate something?"

"I just gave her breakfast," he argued. "I had to work this morning."

"Why don't you have someone taking care of her while you're gone?" he fumed.

"I can't afford it. What do you want me to do?"

"Take care of her," Aaron snapped.

"Mrs. Henderson," I tried again. "When was the last time you had something to drink?"

A keening noise left her lips as her eyes fluttered closed. “I’m so hungry,” she whispered, as if she didn’t have the strength to say it louder.

“She has dementia,” the son argued. “She doesn’t even know what she’s saying.”

“All the more reason for you not to leave her alone,” Aaron said. “Show me what she’s been eating.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Aaron nod his head toward the kitchen. He glanced over at me, nodding for me to continue. I quickly examined her, but it was clear to me that we needed to take her to the hospital. It was going to be messy, though. The overwhelming smell in the air was coming from her adult diaper, which was overflowing with excrement. It probably hadn’t been changed in days.

I could only imagine how much pain this woman was in from sitting in this chair for so long as a rash ate away at her skin. I didn’t need to remove the diaper to know it was there. I blinked back tears as I thought of my own grandmother being treated this way. This woman should be able to rely on her child to take care of her, but instead, he was acting like she was a nuisance—a complication he didn’t need.

Anger bubbled up inside me with every second we were in this apartment. I was so grateful when Aaron went downstairs to grab the stretcher. We would get her to the hospital and finally get this woman the help she needed, but what happened to her after that was up to the courts.

After taking the woman to the hospital to be treated for severe dehydration and suspicious bruising, we were called out again for a 10-50, a car wreck just down the road from the hospital. I could see the smoke in the air before we even got in the ambulance.

Hitting the lights, my partner took the driver’s side as I answered the call. “Holy shit,” I muttered as we pulled up to the scene. There was already a police officer on scene, rushing to the vehicle that was wrapped around a light pole.

I flung the door open and hurried to the back to grab my bag.

“I’ll take the vics in the car,” Aaron said, grabbing his own bag. “You take anyone outside the perimeter.”

“On it,” I answered, running over to a woman sitting on the sidewalk, holding her head in her hands. I didn’t mind him taking the lead. Aaron was a full-time medic, and senior medic in the field. I knelt down in front of the woman, assessing her injuries.

“Ma’am, can you tell me where you’re hurt?”

She slowly looked up at me, her eyes glazed as they flicked over to the car. “He came out of nowhere,” she cried. “I didn’t even see him.”

“Ma’am, does anything hurt?” I asked, keeping my voice gentle. She had a gash on her head, but I couldn’t tell yet if that was her only injury.

She sniffled, blinking as she focused on me. “Just my head.”

“Did you lose consciousness?” I asked, getting out my kit to clean her up.

“No. I dove for the sidewalk. I barely made it. I think...I think my foot caught...” She trailed off as he looked back at the car. Tears tracked down her face the longer she stared over there.

I checked her vitals, trying to keep her calm as more help arrived on the scene. Her pulse was a little erratic and her blood pressure was high, but that was normal after the scare she had. Both pupils were equal and reactive, but I still wanted her to go to the hospital to get checked out.

The sound of the jaws of life tearing into the car momentarily drew my focus. I knew whatever happened to the people in the car, they were in bad condition, but I wouldn’t be any help until the fire department finished prying the car apart.

I finished my exam, doing a total body assessment on the woman, starting at the head and working my way down. Other

than her ankle, which was tender from tripping, the woman seemed to be in good condition, just a little traumatized from the ordeal. Just as I was finishing up, the second ambulance arrived on scene and loaded my vic up on a gurney, then drove her to the hospital.

“You ready for this?” Aaron asked as the firemen worked on the car.

“Just another day’s work,” I grinned.

“Then let’s get to it.”

CASH

“WHERE THE FUCK IS FNG?” I asked, looking around at everyone that wasn’t on a job, sans the one man that should fucking be here since he just had a year off.

“He’s taking the day to show his lady around town,” Fox answered with a grin on his face. “I think it’s sweet. He’s really putting in the effort to make this work.”

“*This?*” I asked, my eyebrows shooting up. “He married a woman after knowing her for forty-eight hours. What’s there to make work?”

“Love, boss,” Fox answered in confusion. “They’re meant to be.”

“How the fuck can it be meant to be when he doesn’t even know her name?” Thumper snorted.

“I don’t know, look at Bowie. He married Carly and he knew her name. Look how that turned out.” Rae swiveled in her chair, looking pointedly at Thumper.

“You want to use a quickie marriage in Vegas as the example of a good marriage?”

“No, a bad marriage,” Rae answered. “They’re not married anymore.”

“Since when?”

I interrupted the conversation, trying to get us back on track. “Since it doesn’t fucking matter. We have work to do.”

“Really?” IRIS asked. “It’s uh...been a little dull around here, boss.”

“Dull? FNG returned and we were attacked. What about that is dull?”

IRIS looked around at the others, shrugging slightly. “Well...I didn’t get to blow anything up. That’s a slow Tuesday as far as I’m concerned.”

“Around here, we consider that a good thing.”

“Maybe for you. I’m just saying, I have to use my skills to keep them honed. What good is it to have me around if I can’t blow up—”

I narrowed my eyes at him and he cleared his throat.

“I mean, if I can’t diffuse any bombs?”

“You blew up a building on your last job.”

“That was FNG,” IRIS said quickly. “I didn’t have anything to do with that.”

“You were there.”

“I didn’t press the button. Figuratively speaking.”

“Christ,” I muttered, rubbing the ache that was beginning to form behind my eyes.

“Boss, you okay?” Fox asked, shoving out of his chair and stalking over to me. “You look a little stressed. You know, I’ve been looking at some alternative medicine—you know, ways to heal holistically.”

“Yeah, I got that,” I snapped.

“Geez, you’re tense.”

I didn’t even have the chance to protest as he shoved me down in my chair and immediately started massaging the knots from my neck. I groaned as he hit a particularly tense spot. This was so wrong, but felt so right. I had no idea that the late nights with Benjamin were wreaking havoc on my body in this way. Fox’s fingers worked the knots at the base of my neck, moving up to my hairline where I immediately saw stars.

“Oh, God, yes,” I moaned. Fuck, this was the good stuff. “I had no idea you were so good with your hands.”

A throat cleared and my eyes popped open. Every single person in the room was grinning at me. “Right, um...” But Fox kept massaging, humming a soft tune as he worked. The camera app on a phone clicked, further humiliating me as if moaning indecently in front of my crew wasn’t enough. I swatted at Fox’s hands until he stepped back in shock.

“Boss, I was doing some great work. I think I might be on to something.”

“Do it on your own time,” I snapped.

“No, see, I was thinking, this could be a new approach for us,” he said excitedly, motioning for Dash to move out of his chair on my left side.

Dash shot him a scathing look, but Fox was relentless, finally shoving him out of the chair and plopping down in it. Dash tumbled to the ground, instantly jumping up and grabbing Fox by the scruff of the neck.

“What the fuck was that?”

“Hey, I’m trying to work here,” Fox argued. “Find another chair!”

“I had a chair, asshat!”

“Lock, tell him! This is a situation in which he should scooch.”

“It is not!” Dash shouted. “I was sitting there. You don’t get to move me all willy-nilly just because you want the boss’s attention!”

And the headache was back. I rubbed tiny circles between my eyebrows, hoping it would dull the sharp needle metaphorically jabbing me through both eyes.

“This is not a scooch situation,” Lock answered in a bored tone. “You’re not dating Cash, nor do you require his immediate attention.”

“Uh—that’s an awfully bold statement,” Fox huffed. “How can you be sure that I wasn’t about to introduce some life-altering technique that could change the course of how we interrogate suspects?”

“Because it’s you,” Lock retorted. “What’s your plan? To give them Funyuns to persuade them to talk?”

“No,” Fox snorted, “but that is a great idea.”

“It is not, and it doesn’t require all of us to shift to make room for you.”

“Why would you all shift?” Fox asked.

We were so far off track now, I wasn’t even sure how to bring the conversation back around to...fuck, I couldn’t even remember what we were discussing.

Lock stood, tossing down his pen on the table. “Look, if you make Dash move, he’s not going to give up his prime location next to the boss for a seat at the other end of the table. He needs the attention.”

“Hey—” Dash protested, but Lock cut him off.

“It’s the truth. For every meeting, you rush in here before everyone else so you can get the best seat in the house.”

“I sit here so I can do any IT bullshit that needs to be done.”

“And since it’s IT,” Lock continued, “you could do it from literally any seat around the table. You like being the teacher’s pet.”

The headache was growing worse by the second, and no amount of massaging my temples would change the fact that I was surrounded by idiots.

“Fine,” Dash huffed, backing away from the seat in question. “I don’t need the seat. In fact, I could sit in the other room and still be just as valuable as I am right beside the boss.”

“Great,” Fox said, ignoring him.

“I’m going,” Dash continued, walking toward the door.

“We see you,” Slider chuckled.

“I’m really going. I can tell I’m not wanted here. And I can do my job from anywhere.”

“Not as well as I could,” Rae chuckled.

“I’m serious. I’ll be in there, and you’ll see...”

“Then just fucking leave,” Lock snapped.

With a huff, Dash walked out of the room, but I saw him standing on the other side of the wall, smooshed up against it as if no one could see him. His shadow gave him away, though.

I didn’t agree with Fox’s motivation for kicking Dash out of the seat, but if the fight over a chair stopped, I would gladly let him walk out so I could regain order in the meeting.

“Where were we?” I asked.

“We were about to discuss my new methods of interrogation.”

Sighing, I knew this wouldn’t stop, no matter what my argument was. “Fox, we’re about to discuss the business of the day.”

“Yes, and what is more important than new interrogation techniques?”

“Boss,” Rae gave a slight shake of her head. “Just let him get it out. Then we can move on.”

I motioned for Fox to continue, but he had to finish glaring at Rae first. She responded by sticking out her tongue at him.

“As I was saying,” Fox continued, “it occurred to me that maybe torture isn’t the way to go.”

“And what would you have us do to the bad people in the interrogation room?”

“We should ease it out of them, make them so comfortable that they willingly hand over the information,” he grinned. “Sometimes, using force doesn’t get you what you need. Did

you see how easily you gave it up to me with just a little shoulder rub?”

“I did *not* give it up to you,” I snapped, feeling my face flame as I remembered moaning from his touch. “I had a sore muscle in my neck. That’s hardly handing over enemy secrets.”

Fox grinned at me, jumping up from his chair. “Admit it, boss. I had you right where I wanted you. If we apply these same tactics during interrogation, show the baddies that we’re the goodies, and make them comfortable, they’ll roll over for us.”

A snort of derision came from Rae, but she quickly covered it up as Fox leapt to his feet and continued, walking around the table as he told us his plan. “We need to heal those old wounds these men feel. They don’t need pain. They need to be cherished and feel like they have someone on their side, someone who can rescue them from this life of treachery and despair!” He rested his hands on Lock’s shoulders and started to massage. “If we treat them with love and kindness, we’ll get further than if we torture their souls and make them feel worthless.”

He pulled a small vial from his pocket and held it up for everyone to see. “This is a creation of my own making. Filled with the most calming and influential scents in the herbal industry, it is sure to bend our enemies to our way of thinking, and get them to turn over all their secrets. Just a small dab on the neck and the pressure points on the face...”

He turned the bottle over, pouring just a few drops on his fingers. Then, he slid his fingers around Lock’s face, dabbing here and there, then spread his fingers wide. He closed his eyes and gently rubbed the liquid into Lock’s skin, paying particularly close attention to the zygomatic and maxilla.

Lock’s fingers tensed around the arm of the chair for only a second, then he moaned, instantly relaxing under Fox’s unorthodox methods. I’d seen some strange shit in my time, but this one took the cake.

“Are you really suggesting that we...calm our enemies into submission?” I asked incredulously.

“Boss, did you see what I just did? These hands,” he said, holding up his palms. “These are magic hands. They’ve taken life, and now it’s time to use them for healing. I promise you, this is the way to go.”

I literally had not one single argument for him. As much as I didn’t like this new idea, the fact that Fox was bringing the crazy down a notch was a good thing. Well, it was a new brand of crazy, but if it worked, it could mean big changes for him, and that would be good for everyone.

“Great,” I answered. “Tell me what you need and I’ll make it happen.”

“Seriously?” Fox grinned, rushing over to me.

“Yeah, seriously?” Rae asked. “Boss—”

I held up my hand, cutting off her argument. She knew we’d discuss this later. Now wasn’t the time.

“Boss,” Fox laughed, wrapping his arms around my neck from behind. “This is so awesome. I’ll show you. This is gonna be amazing!”

“I’m sure it will.”

“I’m gonna work on that list now,” he said, rushing from the room.

“Take Dash with you!” I shouted.

When the door slammed behind him, I let out a harsh breath and turned back to everyone else in the room. “That should keep him busy for a while.”

“Are you really letting him do this?” Rae asked. “We need him to be Fox.”

“Clearly, he’s going through something right now. Stifling his creativity will only make our lives harder. Moving on...” I said, trying to gather my thoughts. “Johnny,” I barked.

He was slouched in the corner, with his arms crossed over his chest and his legs stretched out, crossed at the ankles,

you'd think he was taking a nap. And with his hat tipped down over his face, I couldn't be sure he wasn't. Slowly, he tipped his hat back with only his pointer finger. He quirked an eyebrow at me, clearly not happy with me calling him out.

“Yeah?”

“How's Jack?”

He shook his head slightly. “Don't know what you're talking about.”

“I had Rae pull the tracking data when you disappeared. You led us right to Jack,” I answered drolly.

“Maybe that's what I wanted you to think,” he answered.

My head swiveled to Jason. “And what do you know about this?”

“Not a thing,” he answered, leaning against the opposite wall.

Was anything ever going to be easy with these guys? “You realize that we're all on your side, right? All we want is to help. Rafe put Jack in an untenable situation. It's in all of our best interests to see that Jack makes it out of this alive.”

Johnny shrugged, not giving away much else. “Can't help you.”

“Then what the fuck are you doing here?” I snapped, feeling the anger swell inside me. “You show up every day, you do the work, but you still don't fucking trust us. And if you don't trust us, what the fuck is all this for?”

His eye twitched slightly before he sat up, spreading his knees as he leaned on them heavily. With a glance over at Jason, I saw the uncertainty pass between them. I knew they wanted to be here. They showed up every fucking day, eager to find out whatever information they could on their teammate, though they didn't share willingly. Rafe had essentially turned on them, forcing them into a situation where it was them versus him. That may not have been his intention, but that's how it turned out in the end.

“Jack is...he’s not in a good place. I went out there to see him.”

“In Texas,” I finished, for those that didn’t know.

“Yeah. To fit the role he had to play, he started using before he went to prison. I’m pretty sure he was clean on the inside, but once he was out...” He rubbed his hands together, clearly disturbed by whatever he saw when he went to Texas. “Someone broke into his house and he was too fucked up to know what was going on. They nearly got him.”

“Do we need to send a team out there?”

His eyes perked up at the offer. “Seriously?”

“Did you really think I was going to leave him out there on his own? Would I do that to anyone?”

He was silent for a moment, then nodded. “Jason and I would like to go out there.”

“And me,” Rae spoke up.

“No,” Johnny said, cutting her off immediately. “That’s a bad idea. I don’t want you wrapped up in this.”

“Too bad,” Rae retorted. “I can handle myself. And you need me there to gather information to take this asshole down.”

“By asshole, I sure as fuck hope you mean Gelbero.”

She smirked at him in her usual fashion. “Did you really think I meant Jack? I’ll get packed up and we can leave in an hour. It would be best if you could get us someplace to stay near Jack. I can set up cameras to monitor the neighborhood without drawing suspicion from everyone else.”

“Everyone in the neighborhood works for Gelbero,” Jason answered. “It’s not going to be easy to get something close by. He owns all that property.”

“Then we need a reason to buy a house from him,” Rae surmised.

“Through his contact,” Lock offered. “Another buyer looking to engrain himself in the community.”

“Nah,” Johnny shook his head. “From what I can tell, he doesn’t trust anyone. The men who broke into Jack’s house were sent by Gelbero. It was a test. He’s not going to allow a buyer that close to his guys.”

“Alright, we’ll work on finding you someplace close by. Get geared up to leave. Take whatever you need in supplies. We’ll contact local LEOs and make sure they know you’re coming.”

“That’s not a good idea,” Jason snapped. “You’re gonna get us killed. We need to go in covertly.”

“And I need to make sure that they don’t bust in on you with a no-knock warrant if you get tangled up in something. I’ll make sure it stays at the top. The last thing we need is a bunch of rookies on the police force blowing your cover. But they do need to know we’re there. If you’re going to fit into the community, you’re going to need a vehicle that blends in. Our minivans will stand out like a light in the middle of a fucking blackout.”

“I’ll talk to Duke,” Rae said, pushing out of her chair. “I think he has something in the garage that will work.”

“Good, and you’d better clear it with Duke before you leave. The last thing I need is him coming over here every day to find out what you’re doing.”

She barked out a laugh. “That’s funny, boss.”

“I wasn’t joking.”

She thrust her hand on her hip, glaring at me in a way that I knew meant she was going to kick my ass if I kept arguing with her. “I don’t ask anyone for permission to do my job. If Duke has a problem with it, he can call me, but this doesn’t concern you.”

The warning signs were all in front of me. I knew opening my mouth again would be dangerous, but I had to establish some level of authority here. I was her boss, even if she did rule everyone around her.

“It concerns me because you’re my employee, and if your husband is going to cause problems, that affects how well you

do your job. You're going to get his permission first. End of discussion.”

My heart started pounding in my chest at her answering smirk. I didn't know what she was up to, but whatever it was, it wouldn't end well for me. “No problem, *boss*.”

RAE

TALK TO MY HUSBAND. He wasn't even my husband yet. Technically. It didn't matter that we didn't have the paper yet. To me, there was no backing out of our relationship. I was his in every way, and he was mine no matter what the state said.

"Are you sure he has something we can use?" Johnny asked, slamming the door as we got out of the minivan at the garage. "Everything looks too flashy."

"Trust me, you'll agree when you see it."

We headed for the garage bay, bypassing the two part-time guys he had working for him. Bowie was the only other full-time employee and that's the way it had to stay for now. Cash needed to keep our anonymity as much as possible, and too many guys hanging around could be dangerous in a small town where everyone gossiped.

"Uh-oh," Bowie grinned at me, wiping his hands on a rag as he ducked out from under the hood of the car he was working on. "I smell trouble. You brought the dark and dangerous crowd with you today."

"Where's Duke? I need to talk to him."

"No love for me? That's alright, I see how it is."

I rolled my eyes at him. "Bowie, I see you every fucking day at the house. Why would I need to pay even more attention to you here?"

"Ouch. I'm not gonna lie, that hurt just a little bit."

"Duke?" I asked again, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Fine, he’s out back grabbing the next vehicle to work on.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome!” he called out. “And I’ll have you know that I won’t be living with you that much longer!”

That had me intrigued. I spun around, waiting for the rest of the story. “Who is she?”

“She?” he laughed. “No, not gonna happen. Especially after the disaster with Carly.”

“You like her,” I jabbed.

“For an ex-wife, sure. She’s okay.”

“You still sleep with her.”

“Hey, up until recently, she was still my wife. That means conjugal visits still apply.”

“Is it necessary for us to talk to him?” Johnny muttered. “We have to hit the road.”

“You’re leaving?” Bowie asked, a frown forming on his face.

“I have a job.”

“And you’re leaving me with Duke? Man,” he whined. “He gets so bitchy when you’re not around.”

“He’ll be fine. He knows this is my job.”

With a heavy sigh, he nodded. “How long this time?”

“Until the job’s done.”

“Ya know, this whole vague thing doesn’t really work for me. I’m a details guy.”

“So am I, but since you’re not on the team, it doesn’t concern you.”

“Hey, I’m the one that has to listen to him whining while you’re gone. I think I deserve a little bit of leeway here.”

I rolled my eyes at Bowie’s dramatics. After serving in the military, you would think that he would understand how things roll, but instead, he was acting like the spouse left behind.

“I’ll call when I get there and give you updates when I know more. Okay?”

He huffed, shaking his head as he turned from me. “I guess, if that’s all I’m going to get. Was it really that hard?”

Having had enough, I headed for the office with Johnny hot on my heels. “Is he always like that?”

“You don’t really want to know. Duke and Bowie have a very weird relationship.”

“That’s obvious, but why?”

“They served together.”

“I served with Jason and Jack. You don’t see me sharing a house with them and interfering in their lives.”

I stopped and turned to him. “You broke into Jack’s house not even a week ago.”

“Yeah, but that’s different. He was in trouble.”

“Well, maybe you can talk to Duke about that. I’ve been trying to get Bowie to move out for over a year. Maybe you’ll be more successful than me.”

“Successful at what?”

I turned around to find my darling almost husband standing behind me with a questioning look on his face. Although, as his eyes trailed over my body, he stiffened in understanding.

“Not with him,” he pointed at me.

“What’s wrong with me?” Johnny asked.

“Do you really want me to tell you?” Duke snarled. “Whose side are you on, anyway? How do I know you’re not dragging Rae along, only to get her shot by some criminal Rafe has you chasing?”

“Um...first of all,” I cut in, “no one drags me anywhere. I volunteered to go along.”

“Why would you do that?”

My eyebrows shot up. “Um...because it’s my job. It’s who I am. It’s what I do. You know this.”

“Not with him. The three of them are like a pack of wolves, always out for themselves and you’ll get caught in the crosshairs.”

Johnny chuckled darkly behind me. “Wolves, huh?”

“Don’t pretend that you don’t know what I’m talking about. Rae told me about the time she met you, how you were on her side until you turned and went back to Rafe. That’s what this is really about.”

“Rafe’s not in the picture anymore,” Johnny snarled. “You would know that if you were part of the team.”

“Ha! I got out of that life. It’s not for me.”

“It’s a shame,” Johnny grinned. “You were good once upon a time.”

“I still am good. I just don’t want my whole life to be dedicated to shooting people. You know, there’s a whole world of people out there that go about their day without a care in the world.”

“Yeah, and they have that freedom because of people like us who put our lives on the line to protect people like you, who just want to live in your fantasy world and pretend everything’s fine!”

“You can’t spend your entire life thinking about the next bad guy. What do you get out of it? How do you sleep at night knowing that someone is always going to come after you because you got in the way?”

“I sleep just fine,” Johnny said, his lips tilting up menacingly. “I have my gun on me at all times, and I know that if anyone dares to come near me or someone I care about, I can take them out without thinking twice. And then I’ll roll over and go back to sleep.”

“Alright,” I said, stepping between the two of them. “This isn’t solving anything. Go to your corners and think about

what you've said. Then come up with five ways you could have done it differently."

"I could have just put a bullet in his head and shut him up before he opened his mouth," Johnny snapped.

"And then I would have had to kill you," I said dryly. "Go wait outside while I take care of this."

With a final glare landing on Duke, he turned on his heel and walked out the garage bay door. Letting out a deep breath, it was time to face Duke.

"What was that about?"

"That guy pisses me off," Duke muttered.

"And he's also very good at his job and very loyal to the people around him."

"Which doesn't include you."

"At one point," I admitted. "I don't think that's the way it is now. I think he's done with Rafe."

"Thinking isn't the same as knowing. Rae, I don't like you going out there with him."

"I won't be alone."

That seemed to put him at ease. "Who's going with you?"

That was the part that wouldn't help. "Jason."

He threw his hands up in the air, spinning away from me. "How the fuck is that better?"

"Duke, I know you have a hard time with this, but you're gonna have to put a cork in it. I have a job to do. Jack is out there, and I have to do my part to keep him safe."

He sighed heavily, staring at the ground. I knew he didn't like this, but I couldn't back down just to make him feel better. That was no way to live my life, and would really hurt my job.

"So, you came here for what?"

"Well, your approval. Cash said I had to have it."

"And if I say no?"

I grinned as I wrapped my arms around his neck. “You already know the answer to that.” He grunted, his eyes narrowing in on my lips. “But I’ll make you a promise.”

“It’d better be good.”

“When I get back, we’ll start planning our wedding.”

“Nope.”

The smile that was on my face fell instantly. I thought we were on the same page, that we were going to get married and start a family. Even if I was uneasy about getting pregnant, I knew that it would make Duke happy, and that was something that took some time to get used to.

“Oh—” I started to step back, but he hooked his arm around my waist and dragged me closer. “We’re not waiting until you get back.”

“But I have to leave now.”

“You can wait another fucking half hour.”

“We haven’t signed a marriage license,” I reminded him.

“Already done. I’ve had it for the past three weeks.”

“And how did you manage that?”

“I have my ways,” he grinned.

It was clear there was no way out of this for me. A wedding was going to happen. I just wasn’t sure on the details yet.

“Well, if you want me to marry you, I guess we’ll have to get rings.”

“Already done. I’ve had them for a few months now.”

“How do you know I’ll like them?”

“Because I know you, Rae. For better or worse, I know how your brain works. I know every detail about what you like and what will piss you off. I know how to distract you when you’re about to dash out of my bed in the morning. But mostly, I know that if I don’t fucking marry you before you

leave, I'm gonna follow you out there and make the biggest scene until you agree to put my ring on your finger."

I bit my lip to keep from smiling. "That would definitely cause a problem."

"Which leaves only one option. We're about to get married, and you have less than ten minutes to get ready."

"Then I guess you better fucking kiss me and make this proposal official."

His lips slanted over mine, his tongue slipping into my mouth as he pulled me even closer to him. With a squeeze of my ass, he released me, breaking our kiss. "Get going before I change my mind about marrying you."

"Ten minutes."

He nodded. "Right fucking here."

"How about someplace not covered in grease?"

"Fine, under the tree at the backside of the property."

"The large oak?"

"The very one," he grinned.

"And who is marrying us?"

"Oh, you'll see," he laughed as he walked away.

"YOU'RE IN TACTICAL GEAR," JOHNNY POINTED OUT.

"What's your point?" I asked, letting my hair down so I looked just a tad nicer for my wedding.

"Aren't you supposed to wear a dress for your wedding? Or at least something white?"

I spun around to face him, a wide grin splitting my lips. Nothing could get me down right now. Not even Johnny's negative attitude. "Does it really matter what I'm wearing? I'm marrying the man I love."

He rolled his eyes, but I knew he was happy for me. Johnny was different lately, though he didn't want anyone

around here to notice. He was settling into his new life with Tahlia. He wasn't quite a happy-go-lucky guy, but he was closer than I'd ever seen him.

“Now, we have to get going so we're not late.”

He glanced at his watch, sighing heavily. “We were supposed to be on the road twenty minutes ago.”

“And ten more minutes won't kill us.”

“Yeah, like you're going to get married and then run off without consummating the marriage.”

“As much as I would love that, I know how important this job is to you. I won't delay it any further.”

His eyes checked me out in a strictly professional manner. When he seemed satisfied, he grunted and turned. “Let's go.”

To my surprise, he held out his arm for me. “Are you going to walk me down the aisle?”

“Do you have someone else to do it?”

I was so shocked at his offer that I almost didn't move. When his gaze snapped to mine, I quickly grabbed his arm and followed his quick footsteps. By the pace he was walking, you'd think this wedding was on a timer. Technically, it was, but that didn't really matter right now.

As we walked around the OPS building, I saw a crowd gathered under the tree in the distance. Almost everyone was here, and while it would have been nice to have everyone, that was nearly impossible with our schedules. The closer we got, the faster I walked. It was very unlike me to rush toward something like a wedding. I had never been that girl. I didn't dream about wedding dresses or flowers. I didn't envision my boyfriend getting down on one knee and proposing. My daydreams mostly consisted of my favorite guns and a good pair of cargo pants.

But then again, I'd never had a man like Duke in my life before. He was strong enough to let me be the dominant partner, but knew how to take control when I needed him to. He balanced me, making me just soft enough to accept that life

didn't have to always be about the next job, and that it was okay to let a man into my heart.

I sucked in a breath, stopping for just a moment.

"Everything okay?" Johnny asked. I saw him frown as his eyes lingered on my face. "What's going on? Why are you crying?"

"What?" I swiped at my cheeks, surprised when the tips of my fingers came away wet. "Oh my God! What is this?"

"Tears," he said as if I was stupid.

"I know that, but...Ugh, he's turned me into a girl!"

"And that's a bad thing," Johnny said hesitantly.

My gaze snapped to his and a scowl appeared on my face. "Do I look like the type of woman who gets sappy over finding a man that she wants to spend forever with?"

He was silent for a moment, and then he leaned in close, even though there was no one around to hear him. "If you tell anyone this, I will fucking gut you."

When I didn't immediately respond, his lips tightened in anger or something. I rolled my eyes, holding out my pinky for him. "I swear."

He clutched my pinky around his own finger, squeezing tight. "When I was on the run with Tahlia, I thought she was going to die. She was injured and had an infection that was spreading faster than I could get her treatment. It wasn't looking good and..." He heaved a sigh, rolling his eyes. "I cried."

"Sorry, what?"

"I cried," he snapped. "I had fallen for this woman in a matter of five seconds. The moment I saw her, that was it. She wasn't just an infatuation to me. And when I thought I was going to lose her, it hit me how horrible my life would be without her. I fucking cried."

I would have laughed at the indignation on his face, but it was so sweet. If a strong and rugged man like Johnny could

feel these emotions and admit that he was just as human as everyone else, why shouldn't I?

“So, you're saying it's okay to cry.”

“I'm saying that when you love someone, it doesn't fucking matter what anyone else thinks. You're not crying because you lost a game of poker or because your feet swelled. You love Duke, and knowing that you're finally getting to spend your life with him is a big deal. I'm saying, embrace it.”

I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around the gruff man, feeling him pat my back awkwardly for just a moment. Not wanting to get on his bad side, I stepped back and smiled.

“Thank you.”

“Whatever. Just do this shit so we can hit the road.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, giving him a mock salute.

“Don't fucking salute me,” he grumbled, grabbing my arm and linking it back with his.

The rest of the walk to the “altar” was hurried. Now that I knew I wasn't insane for feeling this way, I was rushing to get up there and make Duke mine. Except, there was no minister. Johnny handed me off to Duke, then shocked me when he stepped around us and stood in front.

“Um...what are you doing?”

“Do I have to explain everything to you today?”

For the second time today, I stood completely flabbergasted as I stared at the man in the cowboy hat. “You're a romantic.”

“Shut up,” he grumbled. “Let's get this shit over with.”

“Ah, the words every man wants to hear on his wedding day,” Duke grinned. “It wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I asked you to do this.”

Again, my head whipped back to Johnny. “You knew!”

“See, this is why I don't do this shit,” he snapped, trying to step around us.

I grabbed him by the arm and shoved him back. “I won’t say another word.”

“You better not.”

“Except for *I do*,” Duke added quickly. “That’s sort of necessary.”

Johnny looked between the both of us, then pulled a small book from the back of his pants. “Dearly beloved... Seriously? I can’t do this shit. Duke and Rae, do you?”

It was exactly the wedding I imagined ten minutes ago. I smiled at Duke and nodded. “I do.”

“Me too,” he laughed.

“Good, then we can get the fuck out of here,” Johnny said, shoving the book at me as he stormed between us and back the way we came.

I turned back to Duke, unable to keep the smile from my face. “So...”

“So...Mrs. Duke.”

“I like the sound of that. Johnny said we have a half hour, so...” He jerked his head toward the house.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my lips to his. “With the short ceremony, I bet we have an extra fifteen.”

He swooped me off my feet and hauled ass to the house, ignoring the catcalls from everyone around us. When he shoved us through the door, he stopped and grinned sheepishly at me. “I suppose now would be the wrong time to revisit that conversation about kids.”

JACK

I STOOD on my front steps, fighting the morning chill with just a sweatshirt and jeans. My bare feet scraped against the concrete steps as I sank down on the first step, pulling out a pack of smokes and a lighter. While it was still dark out, I could pretend that I was anywhere else, maybe living in the country somewhere, far away from the drugs and guns running through this city. No matter how long I lived here, I just couldn't see the appeal.

Shaking out a cigarette, I placed the tip between my teeth and flicked open the lighter. The first drag felt like relief after nearly two weeks of being clean. I ran my hand up and down my thigh, rubbing away the urge to use. My hands still tingled, and I constantly felt like I was covered in bugs. They burrowed under my skin, eating away at me from the inside. Most days, I just wanted to end things so I wouldn't have this goddamn overwhelming desire to shoot heroin into my body.

But I would never give in to the temptation. It wasn't in me. I was a fighter, born to fix whatever issues came my way. I'd never taken the easy way out in my life. Even when I joined the military to get out of going to jail, I set the standards higher than any of my drill instructors. And when I was deployed for the first time, there was no messing around. I stayed focused, refusing to joke around with the guys about the simplest things. They all thought I had a stick up my ass, but I was only that way because of how badly I'd fucked up with my sister. There was no room for error when others' lives were on the line.

I took another drag and scanned the neighborhood. Every light was still off, except for my neighbor to the left. Skylar was always up at this time. She left with her kid before most people were even awake. I couldn't imagine that poor kid's life, that he was always running out the door so early. Did he get a proper breakfast?

Not that I should be thinking about that. He wasn't my concern. The only reason I paid attention was because of her connection to Rico. He would come around again, and when he did, I had to be ready for him. It wasn't a coincidence that Baz put her in the same neighborhood as the rest of the crew in the area. He had her under lock and key, and I had a feeling it had something to do with his business, not just that her kid was his grandson. But if that was the case, where did she fit into all this?

The screen door of her house jerked open, banging against the siding. The kid ran out, not even paying attention to his surroundings.

"Parker! I told you to wait!"

I shook my head as I watched her lock her door. Pathetic. How did a woman like that not only procreate with a loser like Rico, but then decide that it was okay to live amongst criminals? That was a shitty way to raise a kid. I would know. My parents were the absolute worst of humanity.

She rushed down to the car, grabbing her son by the arm as she turned him to face her. I couldn't see what she was saying, but she looked pissed. My fists clenched as I watched her scold her son. I waited for her to make a move, to lift her arm in anger. It would be the last fucking thing she ever did.

But just as I thought it was all coming to a head, she wrapped her arms around her son and pulled him in for a hug. Grinning, the kid planted a kiss on her lips. That wasn't what I expected at all. She tucked him into the backseat and got in her car, but when she started the engine, it wouldn't turn over. She slammed her hand on the steering wheel, then tried again. It wasn't going to work.

I took another drag of my cigarette, the orange light catching her attention. Fuck, I knew it was a bad idea to sit out here. She made a call, clearly frustrated with the situation. I don't know why I pushed off the step, or what possessed me to walk over to the woman. Just talking to her was dangerous. I didn't need to be wrapped up in her mess with Rico. The only thing I wanted was to gain intel on his father. But getting close to her might be the best way to get more intel into Baz's operation.

Knocking at the window, I ignored the way she jerked at the sight of me. I motioned for her to roll down her window. I saw the hesitation in her eyes, the way they flicked to the back seat first. She was nervous and that was a fucking good thing in this neighborhood. I was a little disappointed when she decided to trust me. She didn't know that I was the good guy. Hell, in this neighborhood, I was the furthest thing from someone trustworthy.

“Yes?”

“Your battery is probably dead.”

“Yeah, I...uh, called for a tow.”

“That's not likely to happen this early in the morning.”

Her jaw clenched in anger. “I know. They said they wouldn't be able to get here until after nine.”

“Do you need a lift?” *Why the fuck had I just offered?*

“I can call an Uber.”

I stepped back, shaking my head at her stupidity. A fucking Uber. And she was going to place her son in that stranger's car, and then let him drive her around at the ass crack of dawn. Jesus, it was like this woman was doing her best to get them both killed.

I grabbed the handle and yanked the car door open. “Get out. I'll give you a lift.”

“That's not necessary,” she snapped, reaching for the handle.

“Lady, it’s not even six o’clock. There’s no fucking way you’re going to get someone out here quickly. Not to mention, you don’t know who’s going to show up here to drive you home. You have a kid in the back seat that you need to protect, and you’re not making smart decisions.”

Her cheeks flushed in anger and her eyes lit up, but not in a good way. “And you’re so much better? I don’t even know you.”

“You’ve at least met me before,” I snarled. “Which is more than I can say for whoever shows up at your door.”

“Listen—“

I wasn’t about to take this any further. I said my piece, tried to help her out, but I was done. I turned and walked away without another word, pissed that I had even made an effort with this woman. I climbed the stoop to my door and walked inside, slamming it behind me. Sliding my fingers through my hair, I cursed the fact that I had to live next to these people.

It wasn’t just that they might be involved with Baz. It was so much more than that. I saw how this would end, how that kid could pay the price for his mother’s involvement with Rico. It was the worst kind of situation, one that could get them both killed.

Just like my sister.

I pressed my back to the door and closed my eyes, trying not to remember the day I got the call. I wasn’t even home. I was overseas, too far away to be there for her in the end. It was my fault she was killed, my fault that I chose to serve instead of going to prison. I thought I was making the right choice for us, but all that did was leave her vulnerable.

A soft knock at the door jolted me out of the memories. I sucked in a breath, refusing to let Skylar see how rattled I was. Shaking off the dread I felt in my stomach, I swung the door open and rested my forearm across the doorframe.

“Yeah?”

Her tongue darted out, licking the edge of her mouth. I narrowed my eyes at the gesture, doing my damndest to ignore

how that affected my cock. With her hands thrust into the back pockets of her jeans, she looked so damn sweet. I would not be played by this woman and her innocent act.

“If...that offer still stands...for you to drive me into work, I’ll take you up on it.”

I wanted to tell her to go pound sand, but that wouldn’t get me any closer to finding out what was going on in this neighborhood. I snatched the keys off the table by the door and jerked my head.

“Thank you,” she said softly, turning back to her car.

I didn’t bother locking the door on my way out. I didn’t have anything of importance. However, I did have cameras hidden in the vents. I was curious to see if anyone would come snooping, and now was the perfect time to find out.

I got in the truck and slammed the door, expecting to find her in the passenger side, but she was over by her car, getting her kid. Fuck, I already forgot about him. She was leaning over in the backseat, struggling to get the car seat out. It was clearly stuck, and the longer I sat here watching her, the longer this would take. Shoving the door open, I got out and walked around to her car. I did my best not to stare at her ass as it wiggled in front of me, but it was damn hard.

“Are you giving my mama a ride to work?” the kid asked.

I glanced down at him, quirking an eyebrow. Last time I talked to this kid, I was at eye level with him. Now, I towered over him, yet he didn’t seem scared or anything. “Yeah,” I grunted.

“Do you have a truck?”

I sighed, wondering how fucking long this was going to take. I didn’t want to have a conversation with this kid at the crack of dawn. I wasn’t in the mood for any of this bullshit. Grabbing Skylar by the arm, I pulled her back, ignoring the flinch of her body.

“Move aside.”

“I—“

I reached in and easily unhooked the straps attached to the safety latch between the seats. Once it was loose, I pulled it out and walked across the yard to my truck, throwing open the back door and tucking it in place. It looked strange in my truck, even though I'd only owned it for a few weeks. I turned and looked at the kid who had his arms raised for me to lift him up, then shook my head and stormed around the vehicle. This had to be the fucking stupidest thing I'd ever offered.

I wasn't a kid person. They were fine for other people, but I made a point to avoid them at all costs. I was never going to have any of my own. That's why it was so easy to work for Rafe. With my home life as a kid, I knew I never wanted to put my kid in danger the way my parents had. And no matter how old I got, it never really felt like I left that trailer park.

"I'm really sorry about this," Skylar said as she got in the passenger side.

"No problem."

But the tone in my voice was basically a big *fuck off*. I shifted into reverse and backed down the driveway. It wasn't until we reached the stop sign that she told me where we were going.

"I just have to drop Parker off first."

"I figured he wasn't going to work with you," I said dryly.

She cleared her throat, shifting like she was nervous on the other side of the truck. Goddamn, I wasn't about to drive us into a lake, and I had absolutely no desire to kidnap the woman and her kid. What sane man would? I drove in complete silence, refusing to offer up any conversation. The last thing I needed was to know more about this woman.

"Goddamnit," I muttered, earning me a scowl from her. I did need to know more about this woman. It didn't matter that I didn't want to know her. For the job, I had to find out if she knew anything, and being an asshole wouldn't help.

"What hospital do you work at?" Fuck, even to me that came out too harsh and demanding. If I was going to get on her good side, I would have to work on my people skills.

“St. Mary’s,” she said quietly.

My eyes flicked to the rear view mirror to watch her kid. He was quiet, a little too quiet. Which had me wondering why. Didn’t kids usually talk your ear off?

I pulled into the preschool and parked in front of the door. A lady opened the door as we pulled up, waving at Skylar as she got out. I rested my head back against the seat as she unbuckled her kid and walked him inside. She held his hand as she walked him to the door, then bent down and smiled at him, giving him kisses as she said goodbye. That didn’t exactly line up with a woman that was attached to Rico. Something was definitely off about this.

She hurried back to the truck as the kid disappeared inside with the woman. For just a second, she smiled at me. But as if she just remembered who I was, that smile faded and the light left her eyes.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t have to keep thanking me,” I grumbled.

“I just really appreciate the lift. I couldn’t afford to be late today.”

Glancing over at her, I asked, “Are you late a lot?”

“Hardly ever. If I’m not early, I’m late. But having a little kid doesn’t always make it easy.”

I grunted in response. “What about Parker’s father?”

“I already told you, he’s not in the picture.”

“Just wondering if he would be around to help out if you don’t get your car back today.”

It was a lie. I didn’t give a shit if he would be around, but it did the trick. She huffed out a laugh, pressing her face into her hands. “I’m so sorry. I just...when people ask me about it, it always seems like gossip.”

“That’s because most people are assholes.”

“And you’re not?”

“I didn’t say that.” I stopped at the light and looked her in the eyes. I knew she wanted to look away, but something about her wouldn’t allow it. Some form of pride or something. I had to give her credit for being strong. She had to be as a single parent. I knew, and I only acted as a parent for a short time. I didn’t go through diapers and potty training, or any of the early stages of life. I dealt with a kid who was far too grown up for her age, and she knew that she had to be an adult if we were going to survive.

“The light is green.”

I stared at her for just another second, then adjusted my gaze to the road and continued driving. I had to stop thinking about the past. It wouldn’t help me with my current job, nor would it change a damn thing. I couldn’t bring my sister back or make up for what happened to her. It was too late.

“So, why did you move here?”

“What?” I snapped, a little too wound up from my thoughts.

“I just asked why you moved here.”

“Just got out of prison,” I answered.

“Oh.”

I could feel her unease across the truck. Yeah, she wouldn’t have taken the ride if she knew I was in prison for murder.

The rest of the ride was uncomfortable at best, and I didn’t learn a damn thing. I pulled up to the emergency room and let her out. She grabbed her bag, then stood awkwardly at my door.

“Do you need a lift home?”

“Um...no, I’ll find a ride.”

Sighing, I held out my hand, waving her closer with my fingers. “Phone.”

“What?”

“Give me your phone.”

“For—”

“Christ, I’m not gonna steal it,” I snapped. She reluctantly handed it over. I punched in my number, then handed it back. “If you need a ride, you have my number.”

She nodded, then shut the door and turned her back on me. Fuck, that was way too much work. I tore out of the parking lot and didn’t look back. But somewhere deep in my gut, I hoped she’d call me tonight.

I STRODE THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR OF MY HOUSE, THEN SLID open the sliding door at the back and slipped outside. Keeping an eye on the rest of the houses, I took the chance to slip into Skylar’s back yard. It was still early enough that most people in this area would still be asleep. Criminals tended to work at night, which was convenient for me.

Jimmying the lock was easier than it should have been for a woman living alone with her kid. Since she was Rico’s woman, I expected her to have better security at her house. Stepping inside, I was surprised at what I found. Every surface was clean—not just tidy, but immaculate. While there wasn’t a lot of shit decorating the walls, she’d made it feel homey in this tiny house with curtains and throw pillows.

Even Parker’s toys were picked up and stacked neatly in a bin. The only sign of anyone really living here was the rack of drying dishes. I took a quick tour of the house, coming up with the same thing in every room. Both beds were made, towels were neatly hung, even the toilets were clean.

If Rico ever stayed here, there had to be evidence of it. There would be a man’s razor or beer in the fridge. But I came up empty there too. The need to find something on this woman that would make sense sent me digging through everything in her house. I started in her bedroom—the place I imagined a woman would keep private notes or a journal. Her nightstand held only a few books with some odds and ends. There wasn’t even so much as a dust bunny under her bed.

I flung open her top dresser drawer, certain I would find something under her neatly folded socks. And when I came up empty there, I searched the rest of the drawers. I was obsessed, almost pissed that I couldn't find a damn thing connecting Rico to this woman. The closest I came was a shoebox on the shelf in her closet.

I grinned as I pulled it down, lifting the lid to find...a vibrator. I swallowed hard as I pulled out the long, pink toy. I pressed the button, curious as to what I would find. I didn't exactly read up on this shit. I was never interested in using toys in the bedroom, but as I felt it vibrate in my hand, I could see the appeal, especially for a single woman.

Lifting it to my nose, I inhaled. Soap. It smelled like soap. Christ, she was clean in every way. It was disappointing, and I refused to acknowledge that the reason was because I wondered what she smelled like when she came. Shoving the toy back in the box, I replaced it in the closet and stormed out of the room.

"This is fucking ridiculous," I muttered. I wasn't going to find anything here. But just as I talked myself into leaving, I decided that a peek around the kitchen might shed some light on the situation.

I yanked open the drawers one by one until I came across the junk drawer that every house had. There were dividers, separating the drawer into six sections, each one designated for something specific. I was beginning to think there was something seriously wrong with this woman. Who organized a junk drawer?

A noise outside caught my attention and I slowly closed the drawer, slipping through the house quietly to peek out the front window. Rico was walking up the steps to the house with a key in hand. Releasing the curtain, I rushed to the back door, barely able to close it as I slipped outside. I left it open just a crack, hoping I would overhear something that would give me some insight into this man or his business.

"Yeah, I'll be there soon," he said on the phone, walking straight into the kitchen. As if he'd been in there a thousand

times, he walked right over to a jar up on the corner shelf and took it down. Fanning out the bills inside, he grinned as he pocketed nearly half of it. “Yeah, I got the money.” He spun suddenly, and I ducked back out of sight. “Don’t fucking test me. I said I got it, and you know I’m good for it...No, my old man has nothing to do with this. I’m going solo on this one.”

Still yelling at the guy on the phone, he started for the front door. As soon as his back was turned, I pushed the sliding door closed the last inch. I got out of there, slipping back into my house without anyone noticing. Even though I didn’t want to talk to Rico, it wouldn’t do me any good to hide out in my house. I grabbed the keys for my truck and headed out the front door. Rico was just hanging up when he saw me.

“Yo!” With a grin on his face, he jogged over to me, slapping his hands on the hood of my truck. “Good to see you, man. How’s it going?”

I grunted, pretending I didn’t give a shit about talking.

“Hey, you got any jobs lined up yet?”

“No, why?”

He glanced over his shoulder nervously, then jerked his chin at me. “I got something going down in about an hour. You want in?”

“What’s the payday?”

“Half a mil. I’ll cut you in at ten percent.”

“Half,” I negotiated.

“Man, I did all the leg work. All we have to do is deliver.”

I jerked my door open and started to get in. “Then find someone else.”

“Hey, hold up,” he said, rushing around the front. “Hey,” he chuckled. “We can work something out. I’ll go twenty percent.”

“Half or nothing.”

He was really jumpy, standing in front of me like this job could make or break him. If this really had nothing to do with

Baz, then he was working around him, trying to cut in on his territory. That had disaster spelled all over it.

“How about this? I go thirty percent and if things go right, I’ll cut you in as a partner on the next one.”

This could give me the ammunition I needed to get deeper into Baz’s operation. I could work both sides, keeping Baz in the loop under the guise that I’m looking out for his kid, making sure he doesn’t get sent back to prison. I had to play it carefully, making sure he didn’t see me as a rat.

“Thirty-five percent. And as a partner, I want full details on all jobs. You don’t make a move without me,” I demanded. “If I get the feeling you’re making a bad deal, I’m out.”

He grinned, pointing his finger at me like an idiot. “Yeah, man. This is gonna be good.”

“So, where are we going?”

Twenty minutes later, Rico drove us to the location in his car. I fucking hated not having control, but I had to play this smart. He wouldn’t give up the location. In fact, he was too damn quiet about the whole thing. If this didn’t lead to something good, I was going to end up doing jobs for him that wouldn’t lead me to anything useful.

“How do you know these guys?”

We drove through a shady part of town, passing warehouses and buildings that had been boarded up long ago. Nothing was being done to revitalize this part of the city, probably because criminals had overrun it, making it impossible for other businesses to move in.

“Friend of a friend,” Rico answered. “I met a guy before prison. I was working on a deal with him, but it fell through when I got sent away.”

My gaze slid to his curiously. “Is that why everyone kept going after you?”

“That and my old man, but I’m trying to get out from under his boots. Ya know, make a name for myself.”

“What’s the product?”

“Mustard gas.”

What the fuck? I narrowed my eyes at him. He had to be fucking crazy. “Who the fuck are you selling that shit to?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m getting paid, and that’s all that matters.”

“Do you even know what happens when that shit is released? Do you know how to handle it?”

“I’ve read up on it,” he scoffed. “Anyway, this is just a test to see if my guy comes through, which he will. And when he does, we’re moving on to better things. Bigger things.”

Bigger things than mustard gas was a disaster waiting to happen. The problem with guys that made this shit, they were like Rico. They read up on it, but they didn’t realize just how caustic this shit was until they accidentally spilled that shit in whatever homemade lab they were using. I was sure he was trying to piggyback off his old man’s business, but this was so much worse. If this was just a test, that meant there was a small target. What would these guys request next, and what would the target be then? This was a fucking disaster that I couldn’t walk away from. Hundreds—hell, thousands of people could be killed depending on what these buyers were looking for.

“I’m meeting my guy here,” he said, pulling into an abandoned parking lot.

I scanned the area. No cameras, no buildings anywhere close by that were still open. There would be no way to track whoever was producing this shit. He shifted into park and turned to me.

“Wait here.”

“Bullshit. I said partner, not shithead that sits in the car. If you want me in on this, I go where you go.”

“This guy is jumpy.”

“Yeah? He’s gonna be really fucking jumpy when I shove my boot up his ass.”

Rico laughed, shaking his head at me. “Man, I knew you were right for this job. Let’s go.”

I shoved my door open and walked over to the man waiting by his car. He glared at Rico, who was just a few steps behind me.

“What the fuck is this shit? I told you to come alone.”

“Hey, don’t worry. This guy is cool. He saved my ass a dozen times in prison.”

“I don’t give a fuck who he is. This wasn’t part of the deal!”

He was a skeevy fucker, barely looked like he could drive a car, let alone handle chemical weapons. And if this asshole was the one creating chemical weapons, we had a bigger problem because that meant that whatever shit he was giving us was most likely not created by someone that knew what the fuck they were doing.

“I’m here to authenticate the product,” I answered smoothly. “Which means you better be really fucking sure of what you’re giving us. If not, you won’t have to worry about getting any more business because you won’t have any fucking fingers to work with. Ya hear me?”

His eyes flicked to Rico. He was scared as hell, not confident like a man in his position should be. I hated when amateurs got in the game and fucked things up.

“Fine, but you should have told me before.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a vile. It didn’t look large enough to hold much, but this could just be a sample, something to trial the effects with. It would be the smart way to play it for any buyer.

Rico took the vile, then handed it over to me. I held it up to the light. While it was impossible for me to tell out here if what was in the vile was real, it had all the right properties. The liquid was an amber color and appeared to be oily. Without a lab and someone who actually knew how to test this stuff, that was as far as I could go.

I handed it back to Rico. “It looks like the right stuff.”

Rico slid his hand behind his jacket, and for just a moment, I thought he was reaching for a gun. Instead, he pulled out an envelope and handed it over. "I'll be in touch."

I memorized the man's plate before he got in his car and drove away. With any luck, I could get some information on this guy before he started producing quantities that could have mass casualties.

"Let's go get paid," Rico laughed, slapping me on the arm.

"You know, I don't get it. You have a legacy with your old man. Why are you going this route?"

"Because Baz Gelbero only thinks about himself. I've known ever since I was fifteen that none of the business was actually going to come to me."

"Why's that?" I asked, sliding into the car.

"He promises a lot of shit, but never follows through. He's too fucking anal to ever hand his business off to anyone else. I overheard him telling his lawyer that he'd rather sell the business to a competitor than let it fall into my hands. I'm just a fuckup."

That was the truth. Hell, he was buying chemical weapons from a nobody on the streets. Instead of working his ass off to prove his father wrong, he ended up in prison. After seeing what Rico was really into, I wasn't sure this would lead me any further into Baz's organization. If what Rico was saying was true, then the only reason Baz wanted me around was to keep his son out of trouble.

SKYLAR

THE DAY WAS STRESSFUL, to say the least. Mostly because I was late to work, which never happened, and then I had to deal with my boss who hated me. Denise hadn't liked me for whatever reason since the day I was transferred to the ER. I didn't know what her problem was. I kept my head down and got my work done. I had no interest in workplace drama or the gossip mill that continually turned in this place. My only goal was to work hard and earn enough money to escape far away from Baz Gelbero and his dimwitted son.

"I need you to check on bed three," Denise said as she strolled over to the counter, sipping her afternoon coffee.

"I have to leave," I reminded her. This was not a new thing. I had been leaving at the same time every shift since I started. It was the only stipulation I had when I took the job in the ER. They were desperate for more nurses and I needed to work someplace in the hospital that could allow me to work ten hours instead of the usual twelve-hour shift.

"You know, everyone else around here pulls their weight. I hope you realize that every time you leave early, you're dumping more work on the rest of us."

I finished typing in the notes for my final chart and closed out the program. "I'm not leaving early. This is my shift. I worked it out before I accepted the job. If you don't like it, take it up with administration."

"I would," she said snidely, "but somehow, you seem to have them under your thumb."

I rolled my eyes at her tone. I didn't have anyone under my thumb. Nobody treated me any differently in this hospital. Yes, I worked a shift that was conducive to my son's schedule, but I also took a pay cut to do it. That was the only way to make everything work out. I understood that working for the same hourly pay as everyone else, but having the opportunity to work less hours would seem like favoritism, so I accepted the terms of my assignment. It wasn't ideal, but it made the most sense for my situation.

I clocked out, ignoring the daggers Denise sent my way as I left the nurses' station. Gina met me down the hallway, walking with me toward the locker room. "Girl, you're seriously trying to get fired, aren't you?"

"Not at all. Why would you say that?"

"Everyone knows not to argue with Denise."

"I don't have a choice. I can't leave my son at daycare because she wants to punish me."

Gina grabbed my arm, pulling me to a stop. "She could have you fired."

"She would have to prove that I've done something wrong."

"And you don't think she can do that?" Gina asked. "Look, I know you think you're covering all your bases. I'm just asking you to be careful. She has it out for you."

"I don't know why. I am the epitome of a good employee. The fact is, Denise doesn't like anyone, and she sees me as some sort of...threat to her. I don't want her job. I don't even want to stay here," I said, lowering my voice.

Gina knew all too well about my plans to leave the area and disappear. Despite being my best friend, she was behind me one hundred percent, knowing it was the only way for me to really live my life.

"Just be careful. If you lose your job, everything you've worked so hard for will fly out the window."

Sighing, I shook my head. “There’s nothing more I can do. If she has it out for me, there’s no changing her mind. All I can do is continue to do my job and make sure there are no mistakes.”

“Like that would ever happen,” she scoffed. “I don’t know anyone as anal about their work as you.”

“I like to be thorough.”

“By the way, there’s an extremely good looking man waiting for you outside. I told him not to come in, but I don’t know if he listened.”

“Who?”

A grin split her lips as she wagged her eyebrows at me. “A certain cop that just happens to have an infatuation with you.”

“He’s not infatuated. He probably has some questions for me about what happened.”

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s it,” she laughed as she walked away.

I was already running a few minutes behind, so I hurried to the locker room and changed into my clothes from this morning. Sometimes, I just wore scrubs to work, but I had grocery shopping to do after I picked up Parker, and I hated walking around in the grime of the day. I showered quickly and dressed before heading for the parking lot. As Gina said, Officer Thorson was waiting at the entrance, and immediately stood tall as I approached him.

“Hey,” he grinned. That handsome smirk on his face was back, along with a disheveled look that only made him more roguishly handsome.

“Hi,” I returned his smile. “What are you doing here? Did you bring in another suspect? Or maybe you’re here to save another woman that’s bound to be attacked by someone hopped up on drugs.”

“Actually, I’m here to see if you would like to go out to dinner.”

“Oh,” I said, a little taken aback. “Um...I actually have to go grocery shopping and—” Shit. I just remembered that I didn’t have my car.

“Everything okay?”

“Yes, my car broke down this morning. I completely forgot about it.”

“Oh, well, in that case, allow me to give you a ride home.”

“I actually have to pick up my son.” And grocery shopping was now out. We’d have to order takeout, which I hated to do. It was a waste of money, and I only spent extra on special occasions.

“Okay,” he nodded. He held his hand out for me to walk ahead of him.

Confused, I headed for the parking lot as I pulled out my phone to call an Uber. When I stopped, he stopped and watched me. “Um...you don’t have to wait. I can call for a ride on my own.”

“No, I meant *okay, I’ll take you to pick up your son.*”

“Oh, that’s not necessary. I—”

“It’s not a big deal. It’s actually what I do.”

“Really?” I asked, my voice holding a note of teasing. “So, you drive around and look for damsels in distress that need saving.”

“On a slow day. But you’re not a damsel in distress, and you definitely don’t need saving.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Hey, I watched you fight off a guy who was about to shove a scalpel into your neck. I think that pretty much takes you out of the running for Queen Damsel.”

“I had no idea there was such an honor.”

“There is, but since you’re not qualified, I figured I’d just be a gentleman and help you out.”

I really didn't want to rely on this man or let him think that I needed his help. I had every intention of getting as far away from this place as possible, and that meant breaking all ties with the people I knew. He was a police officer. There was no way he would just drop it if I told him I was leaving and he could never contact me again.

"That's really very nice, but—"

He groaned, rolling his head back. "It's a ride. No other intentions other than helping you out. I promise, I'm not trying to pick you up."

I highly doubted that, and he could tell by the look on my face.

"Okay, that may not be entirely true, but I actually am the type of guy that would help you out just because you need it."

Pursing my lips, I thought about it for all of two seconds before deciding he really was a good guy and there was no point in turning down his offer. "Then I accept," I said gratefully.

"Good, then let's go get your son. Then I'll take you out for a hot meal. No strings attached, of course."

The only reason I agreed was because I didn't have much in the house to eat. The doors opened behind me and I glanced over my shoulder, catching the look of disdain on Denise's face as she stared at me from the nurses station. I was going to pay for this tomorrow.

"I'LL BE RIGHT BACK," I SMILED AT PETE AS I OPENED THE car door and headed to the preschool. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw his eyes following my every move. I flushed bright red as I turned back to the school. I would not allow some girlish fantasy to get in the way of what my objective was. Not to mention, I couldn't allow him to keep coming around the house. That would only end badly.

Ms. Sally was waiting for me at the door, but lacked the usual happy demeanor she usually greeted me with.

“Hi, Ms. Sally. Am I late?” I asked, checking my watch.

“Not at all. I just wanted to talk to you before Parker realizes you’re here.”

“Why? Did something happen?”

Her face twitched with worry, which spiked the growing anxiety in my belly. “Not exactly. Parker didn’t do anything wrong, but some of the other kids in class can be...cruel.”

“In what way?”

“Parker isn’t always a very good listener. Now, you and I both know he doesn’t have the same social skills some of these other kids have.”

She was right about that. Parker tended to get irritated listening to kids his own age. While he was busy reading books from National Geographic and watching shows on the Discovery Channel, other kids wanted to talk about their favorite dinosaurs. And Parker would be fine with that, but he tended to correct the other kids when they couldn’t pronounce a dinosaur name or named the wrong one. And while he was very matter-of-fact about it, the other kids seemed to take offense to his blunt way of correcting them.

There was nothing I could do about it. As much as I told him it wasn’t polite to always correct others, he just couldn’t understand why not. He knew the right answer, and therefore, he felt he should say something. It was a frustrating battle that would take years for him to fully understand.

“Do you have any suggestions?”

“I’m working with him in class on allowing other kids to answer. He’s just not old enough to understand these things. He’s as smart as a whip in some ways, but in others, he was just a four-year-old kid without the understanding of how his words affect others. I don’t want you to worry about it, but you should be aware that it’s happening.”

“Thank you,” I smiled, trying not to feel completely deflated. My son was incredibly smart, and at the request of Ms. Sally, we had him tested. His IQ score was one hundred twenty. It was not at all what I was expecting, and ever since

we found out, all these little things that always seemed so strange to us finally made sense.

It wasn't that Parker didn't want to be a kid. He just got along better with adults because they knew more, had a better understanding of the things he wanted to talk about. While he had fun playing with kids occasionally, eventually, he got bored with their lack of meaningful play. Fantasy play was not something Parker had ever taken an interest in. But at least now that we knew, we could start to navigate situations and figure out how to put him in an environment that would help him thrive.

“Mama!” Parker called out, smiling as he ran over to me. “Ms. Sally said I could take this book home tonight.”

He shoved the National Geographic *Weird But True* book in my face. I couldn't help but laugh at how excited he was. And by the end of the night, I would have more knowledge of things I didn't care about, but meant the world to him.

“That's awesome. Did you tell her thank you?”

His eyes went wide as he turned and ran back to Ms. Sally, throwing his arms around her legs. “Thanks, Ms. Sally!”

He released her and ran over to his locker, grabbing his backpack and jacket from the hook. Two seconds later, he was back by my side, dragging me to the door. I barely got to wave to Ms. Sally before Parker pulled me out the door toward the parking lot.

“Where's our car, Mama? Is Jack picking us up?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

He shrugged, opening his mouth to say something when he spotted the police cruiser waiting. “Oh my gosh! Mama! It's a police car!”

“I know—” He grabbed my hand and jerked me forward, running to the police car. Pete must have seen his reaction because he opened the door and got out, grinning at my son.

“You drive a police car!” he screamed.

“Yeah, I do. It's pretty cool, huh?”

“Did you know police used motorcycles before cars?” Parker asked.

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“And did you know that it’s impossible to steal a police car?” Parker questioned him.

“Not completely impossible,” Pete laughed.

“And did you know that you can’t open the back door from the inside?” he said excitedly.

“Yeah, I did know that,” Pete grinned.

“And did you know—”

“Okay,” I cut Parker off. “I’m sure you have a lot of interesting facts about police cars, but we need to get home.”

“After dinner,” Pete interrupted. A twinkle in his eyes sent butterflies swarming in my belly. It had been a long time since I felt anything other than annoyance with men. Other than Aaron, I tended to view men as idiots who only wanted to get in my pants. And while I knew that wasn’t true, my experience with Rico made it difficult to accept any man into my life.

“Right,” I nodded. “Officer Pete is going to take us out to eat. Going Dutch,” I added quickly, making sure he understood this was not a date.

“We’ll see,” he grinned.

I hadn’t even thought of the car seat situation until right this minute, so I was surprised that Pete had. A five-point harness car seat was buckled into the back, ready for Parker to use. It looked brand new, but it was probably one they kept at the police station in case someone needed it on a call.

After strapping Parker in, I got in the front seat. Parker thought it was fascinating to be trapped in the back. “It’s like I’m a criminal!” he giggled.

“You’d better be careful. Officer Pete might take you to jail and fingerprint you.”

Parker’s eyes went wide. “Can we?”

I rolled my eyes as Pete laughed at my son's enthusiasm for a peek inside the police department.

"Maybe another time," I answered. "We have to eat and get home. We have an early day tomorrow."

"And the zoo on Saturday!" Parker said excitedly.

"Right, the zoo," I nodded.

"Can Officer Pete come with us, Mama?"

This was one of those awkward moments where your kids got you in a situation that there was no easy way out of. Sure, I liked Pete, but I didn't want to give him the wrong idea. And Parker would get attached if we spent too much time with him.

"Honey, Officer Pete probably already has plans and—"

"No, I don't actually. I'd love to go to the zoo. That is, if you want me," he said, winking at me before turning back to the road.

It wasn't about whether or not I wanted him to. There was a way to handle this, and him volunteering was not it. I didn't even know Pete. Yes, he was nice and charming, but I wasn't ready for Parker to start spending time with him. He didn't have a father, and I didn't need him getting attached to a man who may not stick around.

We pulled into the restaurant parking lot before I had a chance to think of a good response. I didn't want to say anything in front of Parker. He wouldn't understand. And this was really a conversation I needed to have alone with Pete.

With my head lost in thought, I mechanically removed Parker from the car seat, then took his hand as we headed into the restaurant. Pete held the door for us, then asked for a booth as we waited to be seated. I was so uncomfortable now. I wished I could go back to when he showed up at the hospital and tell him this would never work. How did something so innocent turn into a day together at the zoo?

"Skylar?" Pete said, holding out his hand to me.

"What?"

“They’re ready to seat us.”

My eyes flicked to the waitress, who was already walking toward a booth. I gave her a tight smile and followed her, keeping Parker close to me. If I didn’t, he’d stop at every booth to see what they were eating. He jumped across the booth and I slid in beside him, ignoring the look the waitress shot me when she blatantly stared at my left hand.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t the only person that noticed the nasty look she was giving me. “We’re good for now,” Pete said to the waitress, staring at her until she scurried away. Shaking his head, he scoffed at her. “I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s not that unusual.”

“You know, you’d think with how many people get divorced nowadays, there wouldn’t be so many judgmental people out there.”

“Oh, they’re still out there,” I chuckled humorlessly. “That’s why I stay offline.”

“Tell me about it. We’ve turned into a society that feels it’s okay to belittle people online simply because they feel their identities are hidden.”

“I liked it better when we didn’t have all this technology,” I said whimsically. “Remember when you were a kid and the only thing you had to do was watch TV or play outside?”

“I never watched TV,” he laughed. “My parents didn’t allow it. If I was awake, I was doing chores or outside playing. In the summer, I wasn’t allowed inside unless it was to go to sleep.”

“It makes me sad that our childhoods were so much simpler. You know, everyone says technology is so good for business and growth, but my child will never know what it’s like to play baseball with his friends after school or catch lightning bugs with the neighborhood kids.”

He shook his head. “Not where you live. And I’m not criticizing. I just mean, that’s a rough neighborhood.”

“I know.”

His brows furrowed as he ran his fingers up and down the condensation on the water glass. “Do you mind me asking what made you decide to live there? I’m sure there are other areas of town that are better.”

This was one of those times that I couldn’t talk about my situation. I didn’t really know him, and he was a cop. If I told him who Parker’s father was, things would never be the same between us. That was a silly thing to even think about considering how I was just trying to figure out how to get him to back off.

“It’s a complicated situation.”

Luckily, he didn’t press the issue. He must have known it was a sore subject because he turned to Parker and started talking to him about what he was drawing. I took the opportunity to breathe while reading the menu. This felt like a date. Granted, not a typical date since my son was with me, but I still felt like he was feeling out where I stood on the dating scene and working up to the big question.

“Well, I think I’m getting the burger,” Pete told Parker. “A big, juicy one.”

“I like chicken nuggets.”

“Those are good too. What about you?”

For a moment, I was lost in his bright blue eyes, and almost forgot to answer. “Um...probably the pasta.”

“Pasta is girl food,” he said, covering his mouth with his hand as he whispered to Parker.

He giggled beside me, but kept his face down as he concentrated on his drawing.

“So, how long have you been with the department?” I asked, shifting to a safer topic.

“Since I was twenty-five. I went to college and figured I’d become a contractor. I like to work with my hands and build things. It was fun for a while, but then it became work, you know what I mean?”

“You didn’t love it as much.”

“Exactly,” he nodded. “I knew I made a mistake within the first year. I had a good job, but there was no creativity in what I was doing.”

“You could have built your own business.”

“Yeah, but I knew by then that I’d never truly enjoy it as long as I was working for other people. So, now it’s a hobby.”

“And you just tossed your hat in the ring?” I asked.

“More or less. I was at a parade for the Fourth of July when I saw a man stuff a gun in the back of his pants.”

“Well, this is Texas.”

“Yeah, but there was something strange about it. I just had this feeling that something bad was going to happen. So, I followed him through the crowds until he stopped and just stood there.”

Captivated, I rested my chin in my hand. “What was he doing?”

“Staring at his girlfriend and her new boyfriend. I saw him draw the gun and I didn’t even think. I ran hard at him, tackling him to the ground.”

“Wow,” I said in amazement. “That’s so brave.”

“And incredibly stupid,” he chuckled. “I ended up getting shot. It was just a flesh wound, but it could have been so much worse. The chief told me that if I wanted to take down the bad guys, I should join the force and then he’d teach me to do it the right way.”

“So, you joined the department.”

“Against my family’s wishes,” he grinned. “My mother still gets upset when I talk about my job, and my father tells me at least once a week that I should go back to being a contractor.”

“Wow, that’s...”

“Yeah, they don’t like it, but I can’t blame them. It was never on my radar. It just sort of happened. What about you? Why did you take up nursing?”

“Well, I originally wanted to be a vet. But then my dog got sick and I realized I would have to see other animals suffering just like he was. I was there when the vet put him down. It was the saddest thing I ever saw. So, I decided to stick with people.”

“Because it’s not sad when they die?” he asked cautiously.

“No,” I laughed. “Because people can be asses. But animals are sweet and innocent.”

“Not all of them.”

“Maybe not, but they also don’t open their mouths and yell at you when you stick them with a needle.”

“Mama, can we get a dog?” Parker asked as he continued to color.

“No, baby. We wouldn’t be home enough to take care of him. Dogs are a lot of work and they need a lot of attention and love.”

“But I would love him.”

“I know you would. Maybe in a few years.”

His shoulders slumped as he dug his crayon harder into the paper with every stroke. I hated disappointing him like this. After my dog passed away, I thought about getting another one, but the timing was never right.

“Hey, buddy. If you want, I can take you to the police station sometime and show you our K-9 dog. You’d love him.”

Parker’s gaze whipped to Pete’s in excitement. “Really?”

“Of course. We’ll set something up on my day off.”

I almost kicked him under the table. He had to stop offering to do things with my son. We barely knew him, which made me uncomfortable. And on top of that, he had enough disappointment in his life without another man stepping in and offering things I had no idea if he’d follow through on.

It was one thing to mess with my head. It was another to do that to my kid.

JACK

I CHECKED the time on my phone again. It was almost seven and Skylar still wasn't home with her kid. Not that it was any of my concern. I didn't really care, but it was unusual. Skylar wasn't the type to stay out late or party. She was very focused on work and her kid.

I grabbed the socket wrench out of the toolbox and kneeled down next to the bike. I wasn't out here waiting for her. I was just trying to keep busy, to stop myself from thinking about heroin. Today was actually a good day, which surprised me considering the way it started. Usually, stress drove me to the edge, but to my surprise, making sure Skylar got to work actually relieved some of that ache.

It had to be that I'd accomplished something. Ever since I was in prison, it didn't feel like I did anything productive. Sure, I was doing my job, but actually taking care of someone who needed help was something I hadn't done for a while.

A police car turned down the street and I tensed up, waiting for it to drive past. Instead, it stopped at the curb right in front of Skylar's house. My eyes narrowed on the pretty boy who stepped out of the driver's side, walking around to open the door for Sky. She was smiling when she stepped out, so I could assume she wasn't in trouble. Maybe he just offered her a lift home.

I gave her my number. She could have fucking called me. I grunted as I turned back to the bike and ignored the woman and her kid. But the cop...I watched him out of the corner of my eye. I didn't like the way he was looking at me, like he

was going to cause trouble for me just because of the way I looked. I fit the part well, but that didn't mean I was anything like the man I was portraying. That was the downside of being the bad guy. Everyone looked at you like a piece of shit, and eventually, you started to believe it was true.

"They didn't pick up my car," Skylar said, pressing her hand to her head as she stared at the vehicle.

I had assumed that someone had picked it up while I was gone and then returned it.

"Who did you call?"

"It doesn't matter. I'll have to find someone else," she said, brushing him off.

I did my best to ignore them as he walked her to the door like a fucking gentleman. I tried not to look over my shoulder or shift to the other side of the bike for a better view, but despite my restraint, I couldn't help myself.

"Can Officer Pete come inside?" Parker asked excitedly. The kid was bouncing up and down like he'd just won a toy. It shouldn't bother me how happy the kid was, but it did.

"Parker, we have to get you to bed."

"Maybe another time," the guy grinned, bending down to give him a high five.

I snorted, shaking my head at how obvious he was being. I'd seen it before. If you wanted to sleep with the single mom, you had to get the kid on your side. He was doing a hell of a job with that.

"Go inside and start getting ready for bed," Skylar said, shooing him through the door.

If she kissed him, I might lose my shit.

"Pete, thank you for tonight..."

"But?"

"But I need you to understand that Parker doesn't have any men in his life."

“Okay,” he said warily, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I need you to stop offering to do things with him.”

I did not see that coming, and from the look on Pete’s face, he didn’t either. Fuck, I wanted to move closer, but there was no way to do that without drawing attention.

“Look, you’re very sweet, but if you promise him you’ll do something with him and it doesn’t work out, he’ll be devastated.”

“I would never—”

“Not intentionally,” she cut in. “Look, I don’t even know you.”

“That’s the point of hanging out—to get to know each other.”

“Yes, but it’s not the same. I have a son involved. I can’t hang out without my son getting ideas in his head. I need to get to know you first.”

“Skylar, I like you. I’m not saying I want to marry you or move in. I just want to get to know you.”

“And I...I appreciate that. I need some time.”

Ooh, rejection. It was a bitter taste in any man’s mouth.

“Hey, I’m not trying to push in,” he said, gripping her bicep in a gentle way. Man, this guy had all the moves. “I get it. You don’t want him to get his hopes up. I promise not to say anything to him. If I want to do something with you, I’ll talk about it with you in private.”

“Thank you.” The relief on her face wasn’t exactly what I’d been hoping for.

I dropped the wrench on the ground when I thought about what just ran through my head. I shouldn’t be hoping for anything. I was just her neighbor, someone that didn’t have any place in her life. There wasn’t a damn thing about her that should be affecting me on such a personal level. If anything, she was just part of the job. She was connected to Rico, and that’s what I needed to focus on.

I was so wrapped up in my personal revelations that I nearly missed him leaning in for a kiss. She turned her cheek at the last minute and all he got was a peck to the left of her lips.

Not that it mattered. She was only my neighbor.

I heard his boots headed my way and tried to ignore him. I knew this song and dance all too well. Hell, I'd done it a million times before. He thought he could intimidate me, make me stay away from her. Not that I had any intention of spending time with her or talking to her.

“Hey, man.”

I glanced up, quirking an eyebrow at him. “Yeah?”

“You're new in town.”

He had that sort of right. “In a way.”

His eyes skimmed over my body, taking in the tattoos peeking from under my shirt. “I looked you up. You were in Beaumont for murdering a cop.”

I slowly stood, wiping my hands on the rag I had slung over my shoulder. “Your point?”

His eyes flicked over his shoulder to Skylar's house. “Do you know her?”

“Whatever the fuck you want to say, just fucking say it.”

“Okay,” he said, stepping forward to try and intimidate me. “Stay the fuck away from them. They don't need your shit in their lives.”

“And why would I go near them?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. This guy was sticking his nose where it didn't belong. But I admired the hell out of him for protecting them in his own way. He wouldn't be here at night, though. That's when it would be most dangerous.

“Look, I don't like you on principle. You shot a cop—”

“A fucking dirty as hell cop,” I corrected.

His jaw twitched in anger. Yeah, it was always hard to admit that one of your own was crooked. I knew. It happened more than anyone wanted to admit. Hell, sometimes it was hard to make excuses for Rafe's behavior when he went off the rails.

"He was dirty," he admitted. "And that fucking sucks for everyone in the department. But you were fucked up on heroin. That shit can never touch that woman or her kid. Do I make myself clear?"

I really fucking wanted to hate this guy. Just the fact that he was interested in Skylar made it really fucking hard to find even a single fucking thing about him that I could tolerate. Yet, he barely knew her and was here, standing up to a murderer for her. For all he knew, I had friends scattered all over the place, ready to jump him and dump his ass in the river. It was a bold move.

And that made me like him even more.

"I'm just working on my bike. I've been clean for a while now."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better about you living next to her?" he hissed. "I know what this neighborhood is. You tell your friend Gelbero that we have eyes everywhere."

"I'm sure you do," I grinned.

"I consider her under my personal protection, and if anyone lays a finger on her, I will make sure he suffers. Do I make myself clear?"

Movement in Skylar's living room caught my attention. She was standing at the window, watching the entire thing. But that wasn't why this guy was trying to intimidate me. I could read people well enough to know when someone was putting on a good show, and that wasn't what this was about. He genuinely liked her and feared for her safety.

"You have my word that I will never allow anything to happen to her or her kid," I swore.

A flicker of unease flitted through his eyes. He was trying to read me, trying to understand why a man like myself would

make a promise like that. Maybe it was the wrong move—making such a bold statement—but I didn't like the idea of this officer leaving and constantly worrying about Skylar and her kid. Maybe I was becoming too soft, or maybe I just liked this guy too fucking much. He was one of the good ones, a man who would do anything for someone he cared about. It reminded me of the man I used to be.

But that was a long time ago before I met Rafe and decided to sell my soul to the devil. The greater good took over and destroyed that piece of me that could feel sympathy for a single person. Maybe that part of me was starting to reach the surface again.

“I'm watching you,” he said before turning away.

He got in his car and drove off, his eyes never leaving mine until he passed my house. Even then, I was positive he was watching me in the rearview mirror. I looked back at the window just as the curtain shifted back into place. Fuck, I'd just signed myself up for protection duty.

A smile touched the corner of my mouth. Somehow, it didn't bother me.

DARKNESS SURROUNDED ME, SUFFOCATING ME IN THIS SMALL space. With only enough space for a bed, there was hardly room to work out my frustrations. Pushups only went so far. The overwhelming need to run made my skin crawl, but I had at least another three weeks down here. Three weeks of staring into the darkness at night or counting the bricks on the walls during the day. There wasn't even a window to let in the natural light.

I rolled to my side, trying to find a comfortable position. Even locked in a cell alone, it was still hard to believe no one would attack me in my sleep. Countless nights of watching my back made it harder to keep my eyes open as the hours dragged on.

“Jack.”

I was lost between reality and my dreams, all leading back to one thing—my sister.

“Jack, you have to come back to me.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered. Her voice morphed into a blurry vision of the girl that was once happy. With her hair tied in pigtails at her shoulders and a smile on her face, I could almost believe I was there with her, before she was attacked. That beautiful smile was replaced with fear and sadness. She lost something that day that I could never help her recover. That monster stole her innocence for his sick and twisted desires.

“Jack, when are you coming home? I miss you.”

“I miss you too, Hannah.”

I held out my hand to her, hoping she would grab it. I was so close. I could almost feel her fingers wrapped around mine when she was snatched away from me. Screaming, she fought hard, desperate to get away from her attacker as she kicked and punched, but it was never enough.

“Hannah!” I screamed, fighting to get to her. But I was immobilized, unable to get any closer, no matter how much I ran through the fog. “I’m coming!”

Her body was thrown to the ground, melting into the earth right before my eyes. She clawed at the dirt, trying to force her way to the surface as more dirt fell over her head. I ran harder, pushing through the thick fog to get to her, but I was too late. Her screams died down to muffled whimpers until she went silent.

I finally broke free, rushing to her side. My fingers dug through the earth until I saw her face still etched in terror, even in death. “Hannah,” I whispered, running my hand down her cheek. “Come back to me.”

“You didn’t save her,” a voice laughed from behind me.

I spun around, seething when I saw the very man who violated my sister, lording over her grave in glee. “You killed her.”

“No, I just took what I wanted. You killed her. You left her alone and scared. She’s dead because you weren’t there to save her.”

I jumped to my feet, running straight at the man, but as I swung, he disappeared in the fog of the night. I spun around, searching for him, but I was all alone. The grave where my sister rested was nothing but a pile of dirt.

The only sounds around me were her distant cries for help.

I jolted upright in bed, breathing hard as if I was still running through the fog. Sweat dripped down my face, soaking the collar of my shirt. I tossed off the covers, practically falling out of bed in my urgency to find some heroin. I tore open my dresser, throwing every last piece of clothing onto the floor. When I saw it was empty, I moved to the next drawer, only to find the same thing. There was nothing in there.

I knew it was pointless. I’d flushed the last of my stash the night Johnny showed up. There was nothing here, but in my desperation, my mind begged me to find something to take the edge off.

“Goddamnit!” I shouted, yanking the last drawer out and tossing it against the wall. I gripped my hair, pulling it hard as tears pricked my eyes. I couldn’t keep up with this, seeing my sister’s face as she pleaded for me to save her. My world was crumbling around me and I just wanted it all to disappear.

I slowly sank to the floor, tears pricking my eyes as I kept hearing her voice over and over again in my head. Squeezing my eyes shut, I rocked back and forth, counting down from one hundred, trying to regain some control. I was losing it. This job was tearing me apart even though it had nothing to do with my sister. But the moment I took that heroin, I started reliving her death, and the only way to erase it from my memory was to take another hit.

I shoved to my feet, snatching the cigarettes off my dresser. I wouldn’t give in to the cravings. I wouldn’t destroy the life I had built for myself. Continuing to fight the hard battles was the only way to honor her memory.

I yanked the front door open and stepped out into the early morning light. The hiss of the lighter immediately calmed my nerves, but the nicotine I sucked into my lungs was what finally took the edge off. I closed my eyes, sucking down the black tar as if it would dull my senses like the heroin.

I pulled out a second cigarette after finishing the first, putting it out on the stoop. Feeling a little calmer, I sat down and slowly took a drag. The neighborhood was quiet again this morning, aside from the little kid laughing next door. I ignored him, not ready to hear that kind of joy when I was feeling so shitty.

A rusted gray car turned down the street, stopping right in front of Skylar's house. The man waiting inside looked just as shady as I felt at the moment. Whatever he was waiting for, he wasn't getting it. I didn't think twice as my legs ate up the grass to his car. Slamming my fist against his window, he jerked, staring at me like I was a serial killer.

I motioned for him to roll down the window. Reluctantly, he did as I asked, but stopped short of leaving enough space for me to reach my fist through. Not that a window would stop me.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Uber," he stuttered. "I'm an Uber driver."

"Are you fucking kidding me? In this piece of shit?"

"I..." His eyes flicked to Skylar's house, then back to me. "I'm just here to do a job."

"Let me see your license."

"What?"

"You fucking heard me," I growled.

"Fuck you, man."

I bent over, getting as close as I could. "You don't ever come back here. Do you understand?"

"I was just taking a job!"

“Not here. Get the fuck out of here before I pull you out of this car and beat the shit out of you.”

His eyes went wide and he shifted into drive, tearing off down the street. I stepped back from the curb, turning to see Skylar glaring at me.

“That was my ride. What did you do?”

“I got rid of him.” I walked back to my property, ignoring the look of shock on her face.

“But I need a ride to work! Why would you do that?”

I spun, glaring at her. “Why the fuck would you take a ride from a stranger?”

“Because my car isn’t fixed! I have to get to work!”

“Not from him,” I snarled. “I’ll get my keys.”

Her mouth dropped open, but I didn’t give her a chance to argue further. It was my fault her ride was gone, and the only way to make it right was to take her and her kid into town. I grabbed my pants, pulled them on over my boxers, then slid my feet into my shoes. I couldn’t blame her for looking at me like a psycho. I was outside in my underwear yelling at a man.

When I stomped out of the house, her son was by her side, watching me in that way kids do when they don’t trust an adult. I was doing a bang-up job of protecting her the way I promised that cop I would. I was about to ask her to get her car seat when I remembered it was still in my truck. I opened the back door and turned to the woman, raising my eyebrow at her.

Between my bad mood and running off the Uber driver, I was really making her question the type of man I was. Sighing, I tried to go another route. “Will you please get in the truck? I’ll make sure you’re to work on time.”

The questions swirling in her eyes made me feel like shit. I had to get better at this neighbor thing, if only so I could keep an eye on her without her flipping out on me. In the end, she didn’t have much of a choice but to go with me.

After she got her son buckled, we took off toward the preschool. The tension rolling off her came in strong waves. I was really fucking this up. I didn't need the complication of a neighborly relationship with this woman, but I swore to that cop I would keep her safe. In order to do that, I needed her to trust me.

"I'm sorry about that," I said gruffly. "I slept like shit."

"Shit is a bad word!" Parker said from the backseat.

"Yeah," I huffed out in laughter. His mom was not impressed. "Sorry about that, kid. I'll clean it up."

"Mama says you have to run a mile for every bad word you say."

I glanced over at her, seeing the small smile threatening to burst free. "Is that so?"

"Yep, and you said the f-word to my mama."

"I did."

"And you swore at that man. He swore too, but he drove away before I could tell him the rules."

"So, you're saying I owe you three miles."

"Uh-huh," he said, grinning at me in the rearview mirror.

"So, if I run three miles, am I forgiven?"

He pursed his lips, tapping them with his pointer finger. "You also have to buy me an ice cream."

"Parker!" Skylar scolded, twisting in her seat to face him. "That is not okay. You don't manipulate people to get free things."

His face dropped and he stared at his fingers. "Sorry, Mama."

I, however, thought it was hilarious. The kid knew how to get his way, and I admired that. But as soon as Skylar saw me grinning, she shot me that disapproving mom look I knew all too well.

I cleared my throat and focused on the drive to the preschool. Drop off was much faster today, and when Skylar got back in the truck, she didn't seem nearly as mad as when she saw me by the Uber.

"Thank you for giving us a ride."

"No problem." It was kind of a pain in the ass, but that would not keep her on my good side. "So, what happened with the tow truck?"

"I don't know," she sighed. "I have to call when I get to work."

"Let me take care of it," I said, snatching my phone from the console.

"That's really not necessary."

But I was already dialing the number I had programmed into my phone. "Mike, it's Jack. We met the other day—"

"Yeah, I remember. Are you calling to take me up on that job offer?"

"Not yet," I answered, though it would be a good way to get my mind off other things. "Listen, my neighbor's car broke down. I'm pretty sure it's just the battery. Can you tow it and check it over for me?"

"Sure, do you have the keys?"

"I'll bring them by after I drop her off."

"Her, huh?" I could hear the laughter in his tone, but ignored it.

"Thanks. I'll see you in a little bit."

"Hey, I'll expect an answer on that job when you get here."

I hung up and tossed my phone back in the console. "Do you have your keys? I'll swing by the shop after I drop you off."

"Are you sure about this?"

"It's not a big deal. I just bought my bike off that guy."

"No, I mean, are you sure he's reliable?"

“Of course,” I grunted. I didn’t know him, but he was former military. He wouldn’t screw me over, knowing that I was military also. That would be bad business.

She dug around in her purse, pulling out her keyring. After removing her house keys, she handed over the car key. I could see the wariness in her eyes, and I hated that I did that to her. It was right for her not to trust a stranger, but I was usually a guy someone could run to for help. With just a glance in the mirror, I saw how shitty I looked, like I needed a hit more than anything. My eyes were sunken and bruised from lack of sleep, and my face was pale, giving me a gaunt look.

“I really appreciate this.”

“It’s no problem.”

And it wasn’t, but I had a feeling she would become a liability before too long.

JASON

“THAT’S THE HOUSE?” I nodded to the house adjacent to the one we were moving our shit into.

“Yeah,” Johnny muttered. “It’s a piece of shit.”

“It’s better than prison,” I pointed out. Not that Jack’s current life was anything to brag about. I hated that he was in this shitty town, surrounded by all these low-lives. He was supposed to be with us, working with people he trusted. I wasn’t leaving until he came home with us.

I walked through the front door with the box of IT equipment, grimacing at the rundown house. “This is home for the foreseeable future,” I muttered.

“Don’t worry. I had someone clean it first,” Rae said, carrying her computer to one of the bedrooms.

I glanced down the hallway, then to the kitchen. There was no way there were more than three bedrooms. “So, what exactly are the sleeping arrangements?”

“We’ll have to sleep in shifts,” Johnny answered. “I don’t trust a single fucking person around here besides Jack. And even he needs to be watched.”

Because of the drugs. I hardly believed it when he told me. It wasn’t like Jack to do drugs, but because of the circumstances...Fuck, I hated this.

“I’m gonna grab another box.”

I walked outside, keeping my eyes peeled as I made my way to the back of the truck. Someone at the end of the street

was watching us. He thought he was being discreet, but it wasn't hard to spot him with the reflection shining off his binoculars.

I climbed up the ramp and grabbed another box, then headed back inside. "End of the street. Someone's watching."

"That's Marco," Rae said, stepping into the hallways. "He's Gelbero's number one in this area."

"We need to get cameras up tonight," Johnny said. "And we need to make our move right away. We don't need everyone talking about us and questioning why we're here."

"Do you think they'll buy it?"

"Gelbero did. That's the only fucking reason we got this house."

"Well, don't get too cocky," Rae said, hauling another box in her arms. "He tagged all our accounts the moment he found them."

"Good, that's what we were counting on."

"Yeah, but it means he's going to be watching us like a hawk. Getting those cameras up is going to be difficult."

"I've got a plan for that," I grinned. "I doubt the neighbors will like it, but it'll get the job done."

"Good, let's get it done tonight," Johnny said, stepping outside.

"He's not taking this well," I said to Rae as Johnny disappeared into the truck.

"Neither will you when you see Jack."

"You've seen him?"

"I may have bribed a few people to check on him while he was in prison."

"Rae, do you realize what you could have done?"

"Yes, but I was careful. I kept an eye on him. That's all."

"And any connection to him—"

“And you think this is different?” she asked. “We’re literally right across the street from him. If anyone suspects us here, it’ll get us all killed. The difference is, the only way out for Jack is if we help him finish the job. Rafe’s gone. He’s doing his own thing with no regard for anyone around him.”

“You’re the one that helped him escape.”

“Yes, and it got him out of our lives,” she argued. “Like it or not, you, Johnny, and Jack have become a part of the OPS family. We take care of our own, and that man across the street has been on the brink of death just a few too many times in the past few years.”

She was right. I knew it and I agreed with our plan, but that didn’t make this any easier. One wrong move and our friend would be face down in a gutter somewhere. This was extremely risky.

“Look, let’s finish unloading and get set up. This isn’t going to be solved overnight.”

Johnny walked in at that moment, stopping when he saw we were in the middle of a heated discussion. “Did I miss something?”

“No, we were just talking about how we need to focus on ending this,” Rae answered, heading back to the room she was setting up.

Johnny carried the box over to the kitchen and set it down, staring at me curiously.

“What?”

“We’re gonna get him out.”

“I know,” I sighed. “Things could have been different.”

“How so?”

“With...there are things we all could have done differently.”

“You mean if we had never joined Rafe.”

“Exactly,” I grunted.

“And then I might not have met Tahlia. Sometimes the hardest road has the most rewards.”

I rolled my eyes at his philosophical bullshit. “Don’t start with that.”

“What? Choosing to look at this for what it is?”

“You know, not everyone gets what they want in life. I don’t regret working with Rafe. Yeah, he could have done a better job with a lot of shit, but look at what we’ve done.”

“Yeah, we’ve sacrificed everything for nothing.”

“That’s not true.”

“It’s exactly true. We’re no closer to getting rid of The Syndicate than we were three years ago. Rafe has run off with Libby and left us hanging. Jack’s a strung-out junkie. Tell me what part of that points to our successes?”

I didn’t have an answer for him. I wanted to tell him we’d done something great, but the truth was, this was a long battle. Even if we did manage to take them down, another would pop up within a week.

“That doesn’t mean we should stop fighting.”

“No, but it does mean that it doesn’t have to destroy our lives. Maybe next time you see Rafe, you should remind him of that.”

As he left the house, I had to wonder if he was right. What would my life look like if I wasn’t dedicated to Rafe and the job? Would I have stayed and had the life I always wanted? My mind drifted to *her*...to the few weeks I spent with her that felt like a lifetime of shit I would always be missing out on. Leaving was the only option. No matter what Johnny said, this life would never allow for simple pleasures. Danger and destruction was all we left in our wake.

JACK

“JACK!”

I spun around when Mike called out to me. He was under a car, rolling himself out. I glanced around his shop, impressed by what he had. I liked the smell of grease and cars. It grounded me, reminded me that you could finish a job and accomplish something without taking a life. How easy would it be to drop everything and disappear for a few years? I could vanish from my life and start over, pretend none of this had ever happened.

Mike said as he walked over. “Did you bring the keys?”

I dug them out of my pocket and handed them over. “Thanks for doing this.”

“I finished a job last night, so I had an opening. Any chance you thought about my offer?”

“Yeah. I’m kind of in the middle of something right now.”

He cocked his head to the side, studying my face for a moment. “How about part-time? I could use another set of hands.”

“That might work, but...”

“But you have something else going on,” he surmised.

“Something like that.”

He glanced out the front bay of the garage, then lowered his voice. “Look, whatever you’re into, you should know that

there are eyes everywhere. Don't go poking around where you shouldn't."

"I'll take that under advisement."

"Jack," he said, grabbing my arm as I started to walk away. "Just...be careful."

I nodded, taking his advice wholeheartedly. He'd been around this town long enough to know that the players on the board could ruin a life. But I had no intention of dying in this shitty town.

"I should have the car done by this afternoon. I'll give you a call."

"Thanks."

I took a drive around town, gathering information on the locals. Even though Baz was into selling weapons, that didn't mean the local gangs wouldn't have information. But you didn't just walk up to a gang member and ask for information. That would get you shot.

I stopped at the local watering hole in the shitty part of town. It didn't take more than a minute after sitting at the bar to discover who was the best person to ask about purchasing a weapon. Then again, the bartender always had good intel.

As soon as I sat down, he set a glass down in front of me and poured a whiskey. I hadn't asked for it, but I'd gladly take it.

"You lookin' for somethin'?"

I glanced around the bar, then slid him a hundred-dollar bill. "I need a gun."

He took it, stuffing it in his pocket. Nodding to the corner, he leaned on the bar, lowering his voice. "Talk to Rook."

I swiveled on the stool, downing my drink as I stared at the man. "Thanks."

Rook was watching me from the moment I turned to face him. He wasn't selling. No, he was the typical middleman, the

guy with connections. If I played this right, he would be a wealth of information.

I slid into the booth across from him and leaned back casually. “I hear you can point me in the right direction.”

The man was cool, not even glancing around to see if anyone was listening in. Not that there were many people here at ten in the morning. This was his turf, the place where he conducted his business. I’d bet half the people in here worked for him.

“What do you need?”

“A gun.”

“Unregistered?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Would I be coming to you otherwise?”

He watched me carefully for a moment before reaching into his pocket to pull out his cigarettes. I did the same, if only because I really wanted a hit right now, and this was keeping me level.

“Anything in particular?”

“Sig P365,” I answered, tapping the ashes into the tray.

“You know your guns.”

I knew all too well the look on his face. He was wondering if I was a cop—if I was looking to make a bust. I shoved my sleeve up, showing off my military tat, and giving him a good look at the track marks on my arm.

“I know a guy.” He scribbled down an address, then slid it across the table. “You’ll find him here. He’s not cheap.”

“Didn’t think he would be.”

I snatched the paper from him, then tossed another hundred on the table. At this rate, I was going to need money fast. I stood and walked away without another word. Nodding to the bartender, I walked out into the bright light of day and headed for my truck. It was only once I was inside that I cracked and thudded my head against the steering wheel.

Fuck, I needed just a taste—just enough to take the edge off. But if I did that, I knew I'd never be able to stop. It was hard enough the last time, but with the way I'd been waking up in the morning, the urge to erase everything from my memory was overwhelming.

I cranked the engine and headed to the location on the paper. I had cash from Baz that I fully intended to use against him, though he didn't know it. He called it a thank you for helping his son out in prison. I grabbed the cash out of the glove box and locked the doors on my truck.

They saw me coming as soon as I walked around the building. I wouldn't be surprised if Rook gave them a heads-up that I was on my way over. "I hear you can get me a weapon," I said, not bothering to look at the other guys surrounding the one that was clearly in charge.

"You hear from where?"

"A mutual acquaintance."

He looked at his gang-banger friends as he laughed. "I don't have acquaintances."

His friends shifted, moving to surround me. They didn't know who they were fucking with.

"You're in the wrong place."

"Is that so?"

"But I'll still take the money."

"That's not the way this works," I retorted, feeling them closing in around me.

The kid lifted his shirt, showing off his gun tucked into the front of his pants. He didn't even have the safety on. He'd probably shoot off his own dick.

"Is that supposed to scare me?" I asked.

"Hand over the cash and I'll think about letting you leave here alive."

I turned and slammed my fist into the kid coming at me from the right. Someone jumped me from behind, pressing a

knife to my throat. I slid my hand between my throat and the knife, pushing his hand away, then torquing his wrist up and backward. He cried out as the sickening pop of his bone cracking sounded above all the fighting.

Another kid aimed his gun at me and I grabbed it, ripping it out of his hands and slamming it into his forehead. He crumpled to the ground as I spun and threw the gun at another guy, hitting him in the face. The metal sliced into his skin, leaving a thick trail of blood dribbling down his cheek.

I spun and grabbed the leader's gun, not bothering to remove it from his pants. "You didn't think to put the safety on," I whispered. "And your gun is pointed right at your junk. Call them off."

"Dude," he called out, his voice wobbling. "Back the fuck up!"

"Good, now here's what's going to happen. I need a gun and you're going to get it for me. Sig P365. Got it?" He nodded furiously as sweat beaded on his forehead, trickling down the bridge of his nose. "Tell them to get it now."

"Someone get him the gun! You heard him!"

I didn't need to look around to see how terrified they all were. On the streets, they had no fear, but they never came across someone like me, someone who didn't play by their rules. It didn't take long for one of the guys to return with my weapon. I removed the gun from the kid's waistband and pointed it at him while taking the gun from the other guy.

"Do I need to worry about you jumping me again?" I asked.

He shook his head furiously.

"Good. All of you line up against the fence."

They scrambled to line up, all of them looking for a way out. They weren't going to find it. I looked over the gun, making sure it was in good condition. When I was satisfied, I pulled out the envelope and counted out half of what the street value was.

I tossed it at him, watching it scatter all over the ground. “If you had just given me what I wanted, you’d get the full price. Now, I’ll be taking this weapon with me also,” I said, holding up his gun. “Nice doing business with you.”

“SON OF A BITCH,” I MUTTERED AS I PULLED DOWN MY ROAD.

The moving van was a dead giveaway that I was screwed. Johnny standing on the front lawn glaring at me only heightened the fact that this operation was about to go south.

I pulled into my driveway, slamming the truck door as I got out and stomped to my front door, refusing to look back at the man invading my life. It wasn’t supposed to go this way. He was going to get both of us killed. The whole fucking point of me taking this job was to keep him out of danger.

I shut the door harder than necessary, pacing my small house as I tried to figure a way out of this. I didn’t have to wait long. The back door opened and Johnny strolled through, followed by Rae and Jason.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I snapped.

“Finishing the job,” Johnny replied, his eyes checking me over carefully.

“I’m clean,” I snapped. I was on edge enough of the time without him wondering when the last time I took a hit.

“Let me see,” he said, nodding to my arms.

I stormed forward and shoved my sleeves up, showing him the evidence. I had scars, but no evident bruising or fresh needle marks. “Do you want to check between my toes, too?”

“Actually, yeah.”

Gritting my teeth, I tore off my shoes and socks, then sat down and waited as he inspected my feet. Satisfied, he stood and nodded to me.

“So, how’s it going?”

“Fucking great,” I snapped, snatching my socks off the floor and pulling them on. “Why are you here?”

“I already told you, we’re here to help.”

“You’re going to get yourselves killed.” I glanced at Rae, pissed they dragged her into this. “And why the fuck would you pull her into Rafe’s shit?”

“We didn’t,” Jason sneered.

“I volunteered to come along,” she said, moving closer to me. “I love what you’ve done with the place. It’s very... homey.”

“Interior decorating isn’t a high priority amongst criminals.”

“Not true,” she grinned. “I once met a man who lived the high life to hide his frequent criminal activities.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, this isn’t the neighborhood for that.”

“So, what are we looking at?” Jason asked, shifting us off topic. “What do you know about everyone?”

“Not a lot, so far. They work at night. I’m just setting up, trying to get a feel for the place.”

“You mean, you’ve been trying to get clean,” Johnny muttered.

I surged to my feet, grabbing him by the collar and shoving him up against the nearest wall. “Do we have a fucking problem?”

“You mean, other than the fact that you’ve become a junkie to help Rafe?”

“I did what I had to do,” I snapped. “I got the job done. I did what was asked of me.”

“At what cost?” he asked, shoving me off him.

Rae whistled loudly, getting everyone’s attention. “Hey, enough! We’re here to do a job. It doesn’t help to drag up shit from the past. Jack did what he had to do. Now, let’s finish the job and get the hell out of here.”

I turned away, seething the longer I had Johnny in the house with me. I didn't need his unnecessary observations about how I chose to do the job. I did what I had to do and that was the end of it. His being here only made the urge to shoot up that much stronger.

"Look," Johnny sighed. "I'm not...I just want this to be over so you can come home."

"I know." I rubbed the prickle of unease from the back of my neck. With the three of them here, it would be harder to do the job, knowing my every move was under scrutiny.

"Have you had contact with Baz?" Jason asked.

"Once. He showed up last week, but it's not looking good so far. His interest is only in keeping his son on the straight and narrow."

"What about everyone else in this neighborhood?" Rae asked. "Has anyone shown any interest?"

"Only to the point that they watch me. I've got cameras in my house, but so far, no one's come near when I'm not around. Rico's been around twice. One time to ask me to keep an eye on his ex and the other to break into her house."

"Whoa, his ex lives here?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah, next door," I said, shaking my head. "She's got a kid with him."

"Who the hell would procreate with him?" Rae said in disgust.

"I don't think it was consensual."

"You mean he raped her and then forced her to live here?" Jason snapped.

That might be stretching it. "When I say it wasn't consensual, I mean, I don't think she knew anything about him. Maybe it was a one-night stand or a fling. I don't know, but she's definitely not the type to hang onto a guy like him."

"In what way?" Rae asked.

“She’s got a job,” I said with a huff of laughter. “She works her ass off as a nurse and a medic. In fact, I remember her from prison. I was taken to the hospital and she was the EMT that arrived on the scene.”

“When the fuck were you taken to the hospital?” Johnny spat.

“Would you calm the fuck down?” Rae snapped at him. “Jesus, you’re worse than a woman on her rag.” She turned back to me, taking a deep breath. “Give me everything you know about her. I’ll do some digging and find out everything I can.”

“In the meantime, you should use her,” Jason added.

“I’m not using her. She’s got a kid.”

“And that’s how you get to her. You have to make friends with her.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “Do you even hear yourself? She’s got her own shit going on. Making friends with her will only drag her in further.”

“I’m not suggesting that you hang out with her, but talk to her on occasion. Maybe offer to cut her grass,” Jason suggested.

Rae laughed. “Yeah, cut her grass, Jack.”

I ignored the sexual innuendo and moved on. “Okay, let’s say that I befriend her. How exactly does that help me? From what I can tell, she has nothing to do with Rico or Baz. She knows nothing.”

“Maybe not, but she lives here, and like it or not, she has a connection with Rico,” Jason said.

“And if Baz wants you to keep an eye on Rico, it might come in handy to keep an eye on his grandson also,” Rae added.

“You want me to spy on the kid for Baz?” I asked incredulously. “I’m sorry, but there is no way in hell I’m giving him access to that kid.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Rae said. “I mean that Baz clearly has an interest in what Rico does. So, you said that he broke into her house and stole from her. That’s something to keep in the back of your mind, and the next time Baz asks you what’s going on, it might be useful to point out that Rico is stealing from the kid.”

“No, that puts her on his radar even more,” I said immediately.

“We’re trying to help you out,” Johnny said angrily. “These aren’t your friends!”

“No, but she’s innocent. I’m sure of it. And I won’t use her or that kid to get to Baz. That could get them both killed.”

“By his own grandfather?” Jason asked.

“Maybe not the kid, but what if he decides to remove Parker from his mother?”

None of them looked convinced, but I knew this was the right decision. I would never put her in danger to take this guy down.

“Okay,” Rae sighed. “If getting to Baz through the ex is off limits, then you have to find another way to get inside.”

“I know,” I snapped. “What the fuck do you think I’ve been doing around here? I’m telling you, I don’t have a strong foothold right now. He’s not going to bring me in anytime soon.”

“Then what the fuck are you doing here?” Johnny snapped. “Just come home.”

“Just leave?” I argued. “If I leave now, what the hell did I ruin my life for?”

“That’s a good fucking question,” Jason snorted.

My phone rang and I turned away from them, checking the caller ID. “Yeah?”

“Hey, the car’s ready. The battery was dead, but there were some other issues with the connections. I fixed it all up, and you can pick it up whenever you want.”

“Alright, I’ll be there in a little bit.”

I hung up and turned back to my team who shouldn’t be here. “That was the mechanic.”

“Is that the name of a killer?” Rae asked.

“No, it’s literally the mechanic in town. I have to go pick up Skylar’s car.”

Rae’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Her...car?”

“Yeah, it was dead. I had to take her and the kid to preschool and work for the past two days.”

I already knew what they were thinking without them saying a damn thing.

“Don’t,” I snapped.

“I didn’t say anything!” Rae laughed.

“You think this is funny.”

“That you’ve already started doing shit for her? Yeah, I think it’s fucking hilarious. The man I knew didn’t help anyone.”

“And you said that you weren’t bringing her into this,” Jason added, hiding a grin.

“I’m not. I helped her with her car,” I corrected.

“Uh-huh. She could have gotten a ride.”

I rolled my eyes, already tired of this conversation. “If you really want to know, she called an Uber, but you should have seen this guy. He was shady as fuck.”

“And you swooped in to play the hero,” Jason laughed.

“I didn’t—I don’t swoop. I was fucking pissed that she would let her kid into the car with a stranger.”

“And you’re not a stranger,” Rae said.

“I know I’m not a serial killer,” I snapped.

Johnny, who was suspiciously silent, finally opened his mouth. “Not that I think this is a good idea, but since you’ve already got a rapport with her, it wouldn’t kill you to...”

“To what?”

“Hey, I’m not saying you like her,” he said, holding up his hands. “Although, I’ve never seen you help a single person in your life if it didn’t benefit you.”

That was mostly true. After what happened with Hannah, I just couldn’t put that much of myself on the line for anyone else. There was the job—always the job—but that’s all it was. These people I supposedly helped...I wasn’t doing it for them. I was doing it because the job was a means to an end.

Until now.

But that was something I kept to myself.

“This does benefit me,” I argued.

They all looked at each other, then me. “How?” Johnny asked.

Frustrated, I ran my fingers through my hair. “It just does. It...Do you have any idea what it’s like to work a job where a kid is involved?”

“Yep,” Rae grinned. “And it’s so sweet that you want to protect him.”

“That’s not what I’m doing,” I snapped.

“Right, you’re just...protecting the asset,” she grinned.

“This is stupid, alright? You’re not even supposed to be here. How the hell did you get in my house without the whole fucking neighborhood knowing?”

“We’re very good,” Rae nodded.

“Trained by the best,” Jason agreed.

“Just get the fuck out,” I said, motioning to the back door. “If anyone sees me with you, my cover is blown.”

Jason turned, snapping his fingers. “Speaking of blown... just...be prepared.”

“For what?”

He slid the door open and stepped out, followed by the other two. I shoved my head out and hissed, “Prepared for

what?"

But they were already gone.

SKYLAR

NURSE WEST to the nurse's station. Nurse West to the nurse's station.

I pulled my gloves off and stuffed them in the garbage as I walked away from the patient and closed the curtain behind me. I was almost done with work for the day, but I had a bad feeling that my day was about to get a whole lot worse.

Denise spun in her chair, narrowing her eyes at me. "You have a visitor."

"Who?" I asked, looking around.

She sat up, steeping her fingers as she stared me down. "You know, this isn't social hour. If you want to meet men, do it on your own time."

"What are you talking about?"

She jerked her head toward the ER doors, then stood and walked over to me. "Associations with addicts will get you fired."

Jack turned at that moment, his hand stuffed in his pockets as he studied my boss. I could see the disinterest in his eyes, as if she was an annoyance he didn't want to deal with.

"Your car is done," he said, walking over and sliding the keys across the counter.

"Oh, thank you. You didn't have to bring it over here."

"Well, you needed a way to get home," he shrugged.

Denise scoffed in disgust.

“Is there a problem?” Jack asked.

“Yes, we don’t fraternize at work,” she said snottily.

“I wasn’t aware that dropping off a vehicle was fraternizing,” Jack snapped.

“Thank you for dropping it off,” I interrupted, hoping to defuse the situation.

“No problem.”

He turned to leave, but shot Denise another hard look before finally walking away.

“I could write you up for this.”

“For what?” I asked. “For having my car delivered after it was in the garage to be fixed? I’d like to see you try.”

“For ignoring patients. You may be sucking the dick of every man in this hospital to get your way, but that doesn’t mean I’ll allow you to shirk your job.”

My face flamed at her accusation. “I’m not...sucking anyone.”

“Yeah? Then how is it that you get the best shift and fewer hours than every other nurse around here?”

“If you want to know that, I suggest you talk to the administration.”

“I already did. It seems you have everyone wrapped around your finger. Fortunately for me, I don’t have to go to them to have you written up,” she smiled maliciously.

“For what? I haven’t messed up even once on the job.”

“Tardiness. Having a personal relationship while on the job.” She then added, “How about your relationship with that cop?”

“I don’t have a relationship with a cop, but if I did, it would be none of your business.”

“Not when he shows up in my ER,” she said, storming off in a huff.

I didn't know what she was talking about, but the moment I turned around, I understood. Pete was in the doorway talking with Jack, and when he glanced my way, it was clear he was here to see me. This was not going to win me any points with Denise.

Ignoring them both, I grabbed another chart and headed off to see my next patient. The next hour dragged as I struggled to wipe Denise's scathing words from my brain. She could cause a lot of problems for me, which could delay how soon I could leave this godforsaken town. I needed to start over, to live someplace where I could be myself without worrying about backlash from a coworker who had it out for me.

Unfortunately, I didn't see that happening any time soon. I finished up for the day and thankfully, clocked out without having to see Denise again. However, when I walked out of the ER doors, I had another problem on my hands.

"Hey," Pete grinned, standing from the bench he was perched on outside the hospital. "I was hoping I would run into you."

"Not here," I said, taking his arm and dragging him into the parking lot.

"Why? What's going on?"

"My boss doesn't like me, and she'll use any excuse to get me in trouble. You can't show up here."

"Well, sometimes I have to," he chuckled. "It's part of the job."

"Just don't show up for me. And if you do have to come here, you can't wait around to talk to me."

He stopped, frowning at me. "Are you in trouble?"

"Not yet," I sighed. "But it's only a matter of time. She hates me, and she'll do whatever she can to get me fired."

"Then maybe I need to have a talk with your boss," he said, turning back to the ER.

I grabbed his arm and stopped him before he could do something stupid. "Do you really think that will help? Pete, if

you talk to her, you're only going to get me in more trouble."

"Why is she pissed? I didn't even talk to you."

"No, but Jack did."

"Yeah," he said warily. "I saw him. What was he doing here?"

"He brought my car to me. It was done and he knew I would need a ride home. He was just dropping off the keys."

"That was nice of him." But his tone said that he didn't like Jack helping out.

"It wasn't a big deal. Seriously, he dropped the keys off and left. But Denise was at the nurse's station and accused me of having a personal relationship when I should be working."

"Because of keys?"

"She's a piece of work," I muttered. "So, please, just promise me you won't stop by to see me. It has to be strictly professional between us."

"Of course. I get it."

"Thank you," I sighed. "Look, I have to go. I have to pick up Parker from preschool. But I'll see you tomorrow, right?"

He winced, ducking his head. "About that...I got called in. One of the guys got appendicitis and I have to fill in."

Irritation flamed inside me. "See, this is why I don't want you talking to Parker about these things."

"I know," he rushed on. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. But I can't get out of this."

"I'm not irritated that you have to work. I understand that. I just..."

"Don't like disappointing your son."

I looked up at him. "It's not me that's disappointing him. I have to go."

The look on his face almost made me feel bad. *Almost*. But I was a single mother and I didn't allow anyone to fuck with my son, intentionally or otherwise. I didn't know if anything

was going to happen between Pete and myself, but I had to protect Parker at all costs. I didn't need a man coming into his life and making promises he couldn't follow through on.

Even if that meant I was alone.

“AND THEN MS. SALLY SAID THAT I HAD TO LET OTHER KIDS answer,” Parker said as I unbuckled him and stepped back. He hopped out of the car and grabbed his backpack.

“Yeah, you have to give other kids a chance to answer.”

“But I knew the answer!” he argued.

“Buddy, I know, but other kids might know too. You can't hog all of Ms. Sally's attention.”

He hung his head, pouting as he kicked the pavement. “Fine.”

“Hey, are you ready for the zoo tomorrow?”

His depressing mood instantly lifted and a smile appeared on his face. “Yes!” he shouted, jumping up and down. “I can't wait to go to the zoo!”

“That's good,” I laughed. “I'm excited too.”

“And Officer Pete is coming too. He told me he was.”

“Parker—”

“I bet he knows all about tigers,” he said, chuffing just like one.

“He can't come,” I said, ripping off the bandaid.

He stopped and looked at me in confusion. “But he said he was coming.”

“Buddy, I know this is hard to understand, but he has a job and he got called in to work.”

“But he promised!” he shouted, stomping his foot.

Parker didn't throw tantrums very often, but when he did, they were massive. He was intelligent, but his emotional and social skills were the same as any other four-year-old

“Parker, you need to stop,” I said in a stern voice. “I know you’re disappointed, but screaming isn’t going to solve anything.”

“But he promised!” he cried.

“He didn’t promise. He said he would come, but he can’t.” Semantics that a kid didn’t understand. “Now, you can cry about it or you can be happy that we’re still going.”

He swiped at his nose, still moping about the change in plans. I held out my hand to him, trying to entice him inside, but something caught his attention and he bolted.

“Jack!”

I spun, calling him back, but he was already flinging himself at the man who was kneeling down beside his bike.

“Parker!” Rushing over, I peeled my son off Jack, who was covered in grease. Luckily, Parker hadn’t knocked him over, but he didn’t look too happy. “Buddy, you can’t jump on people. How many times do I have to tell you that?”

But he wasn’t listening to me. “Officer Pete can’t come to the zoo with us tomorrow. Will you come?”

He looked absolutely terrified. His face turned pale and his eyes flicked to mine for help.

“I’m sure Jack has plans for tomorrow,” I said, pulling him away.

“But it’s not fair!” He looked up at me with those pouty eyes and nearly broke my heart. It was times like this that I wished we had family and friends in the area. He shouldn’t have to go through life without a father or a male figure to teach him things that a man should.

“I wish I could,” Jack spoke up. “I’ve got things to do.”

He was watching me carefully, almost like he was waiting for my reaction. Not that I would be grateful if he said he wanted to come. I didn’t know Jack, but I knew this neighborhood. The people who lived here were all part of Baz’s criminal enterprise. The last thing I wanted was for

Parker to get attached to another man who would end up in prison.

And since he'd already been there, he wasn't the type of role model I wanted around my son.

"See? People are busy. Let's go get some dinner."

"Can you eat with us?" Parker asked, practically in tears.

Crap, this kid was killing me. "He's working."

Jack leaned down on his haunches in front of Parker. "Do you like pizza?"

My kid's eyes lit up and he jumped up and down with as much excitement as he had for the zoo. "Cheese pizza!"

"How about this...I'll order us a pizza and pick it up. But...you have to go inside and do everything your mom tells you to do."

"I promise! I will!"

"Okay, then. I'll be over in a little bit."

He took off toward the house without waiting for me to follow. I felt horrible for how Parker wrangled him in, but furthermore, I was wondering how I was going to stand having this man in my house when I knew nothing about him.

"You don't have to do that."

"The kid looked sad."

"Still, that's my problem to deal with. You've already done enough to help me out."

"It's not a big deal," he said flippantly.

"Look, Jack—"

"Do you want something other than cheese?"

I was about to give him this big speech when I realized it really didn't matter. This was a one-time thing, and I'd make that clear when he came over tonight.

"No, cheese is fine."

He nodded and turned his back on me. I wasn't sure what this meant for later, but I had to be very clear about my boundaries with this man. Not just for Parker's sake, but for mine also.

Parker was bouncing at the door by the time I got there. I let him inside and turned on the lights. "Alright, you need to get cleaned up and put all your school stuff away."

"I will." He moved at a speed that I hardly ever saw when it came to cleaning up. This was such a bad idea, but I didn't know how to keep him away from Jack without being rude.

I looked around the house and sighed. It was a mess. Well, not by other people's standards, but by mine, it looked like a bomb went off. I quickly washed down the counters and made sure the floor was swept clean. Then I folded the blanket that I'd left on the couch last night and draped it over the back.

I ran my fingers through my hair, grimacing at how greasy I felt. I lifted my arm and sniffed, grimacing at how much I smelled. I couldn't have Jack around me like this. I wouldn't be comfortable. And that had nothing to do with the fact that he was extremely good-looking.

"Parker!"

"I'm cleaning, Mama!" he called from his room.

"Baby, I'm gonna take a shower. You don't open the door for anyone."

"I know!" he called back.

I rushed into my room, tossing my dirty scrubs into the hamper. The water was still shockingly cold when I got in, but I didn't have time to take a nice long shower like I usually did. The problem was, as soon as I soaped up, my body tingled in ways I hadn't felt in years. I closed my eyes, running my fingers over my nipples, testing their sensitivity. They immediately turned hard and images of Jack's face flitted through my head.

He was dirty and hard, but in that sexy way that made me wonder what he could do to me in bed. My fingers slid between my folds almost involuntarily, eliciting a gasp from

me. My eyes flew open and I braced my hand on the shower as I circled my clit. Shocks zipped through my body and down my spine as I came just moments later.

It wasn't surprising. I hadn't had sex since before Parker was born. I didn't let any man near me now that I was a parent. And it had been just as long since I was actually turned on by a man.

Oh, God...I was attracted to Jack. That should have been obvious when I got in the shower and imagined his face as I got myself off, but for some reason, that particular nugget of information eluded me. But the attraction had to be purely based on his looks. After all, he was a criminal. I had been in the ambulance when he was beaten to a pulp in prison.

Prison!

I poured shampoo in my hair and scrubbed furiously. I couldn't believe I allowed myself to get off to his image. I didn't need a man like that invading my thoughts. Besides, I was sort of seeing Pete.

We hadn't actually gone on a date or anything, but it was implied that he wanted to. I knew that, and yet, Jack was still there, lingering in the back of my mind. Why did I have to think about him now when I was so close to leaving this all behind?

It didn't matter. It wasn't like I was actually going to sleep with Jack. He was my neighbor and nothing more. Besides, getting off to a pretty face didn't mean anything. It was no different than fantasizing about a character on a TV show.

I rinsed my hair and shut the water off, grabbing the towel from the back of the door. Wrapping it around myself, I stared at my reflection in the mirror. Pink cheeks and a sated look on my face...this was so bad. How was I going to face him after just imagining his fingers on me?

I'd just have to dress in the most comfortable clothes I had. I nodded to myself just as the doorbell rang.

He was here.

JACK

IT TOOK way too fucking long for her to answer the door. I was beginning to think she was hiding from me. It wasn't like I wanted to spend the night in the company of a four-year-old, but he looked so damn sad. And when I looked at Skylar, I just didn't know how to turn the kid away. She looked like she was having a bad day—not that having me around would make it better.

I was beginning to think this was a bad idea, and turned to leave when she finally answered the door. Water dripped from her hair down her shoulders and the bulky sweatshirt that was covering over half her body. She was swimming in the damn thing. I quirked my eyebrow at the flannel pajama pants she wore. It was still summer. I didn't understand the getup.

“Sorry, I was getting cleaned up.”

“No problem.” My eyes wandered back to the water dripping down her neck, and a sudden urge to drag her inside and push her up against the wall as I tasted her surged through me. “Uh...I can go. I just wanted to drop off the pizza.”

“No, it's fine,” she said in a rush. “I'm sure Parker won't stop talking about this for the next week.”

She opened the door wider and I reluctantly walked inside. Her house was just as clean as when I snuck in here before. I kicked off my boots, not wanting to get dirt on her floors.

“Oh, you can just...set them over here,” she said, rushing over to the table.

I followed her over, setting them down. My eyes involuntarily trailed over her body. She thought she was hiding from me, but I found her undeniably sexy. This look was doing nothing to dissuade my body from enjoying the sight.

This was a terrible idea. I needed to get out of here. “You know, I should probably just head home. I’ve got—”

“Jack!” Parker yelled, running out of his room.

I was prepared for him this time, bracing myself as he crashed into my legs. I’d never had a kid show so much excitement over seeing me. It was a little odd when I dealt with terrorists and drug dealers all the time. I couldn’t imagine what this kid saw in me.

“Did you bring me cheese pizza?”

“Yeah.”

Man, I was killing this conversation thing. I was fine with adults or even women that I only wanted to sleep with. But this kid and his mom were an entirely new beast that I didn’t know how to deal with.

“I’ll get some plates,” Skylar said, hurrying over to the cabinets.

“You can sit by me,” Parker said, taking my hand in his.

The unnatural feeling of a kid not only wanting to spend time with me, but also holding my hand freaked me out. I did my best to hide it, but I was panicking inside. What if this kid started thinking...things? Like, I would replace his dad or something. I might not be the son of an arms dealer, but I wasn’t much better. This kid needed a stable role model in his life like the cop.

We sat down at the table, Skylar and I both feeling the awkwardness of the situation. I don’t know what Rae was thinking. It was a terrible idea to spend time with these two. I didn’t fit in with them.

“Thank you for bringing my car by today.”

“Yeah, it was no problem.” I picked up a slice and set it on my plate. “Your boss looked pissed.”

“She’s got it out for me.”

“Why?”

“Because I worked out a deal with the administration that I could work ten-hour shifts instead of twelve, and I could work during the day. I took a pay cut for it, which she doesn’t know about, but she’s decided that I’m getting special favors.”

“Of the…” I stopped myself right before I said the wrong thing in front of the kid. “Um…toy variety.”

She looked at me funny, but followed my eyes to Parker and got the hint. “Yeah, she thinks I’m getting toys.”

“I haven’t seen any new toys, Mama.”

“That’s because I didn’t get any,” Skylar said, her eyes lighting with humor. “How much do I owe you for the repairs?”

She stood and walked over to the counter, taking down the jar that I had seen Rico take from the other day. She was going to be disappointed when she saw he took what was inside.

“Uh, you know, don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t even know you. I can’t accept such a big favor.”

I was about to stop her, but she’d already taken off the lid. I saw the panic wash across her face as she stared inside. Her whole body started to tremble, and she leaned against the counter for support. I was up in a matter of seconds, storming across the space.

“What is it?”

“Um…” She blinked rapidly, but it didn’t fight back the tears that were quickly forming in those beautiful eyes. “It’s gone,” she croaked out.

I tipped the jar in my direction. He had completely wiped her out. “How much did you have?”

“Everything,” she whispered. “It was…” She shook her head, replacing the lid before setting it slowly on the counter.

“Who had access to your house?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

I wasn't sure it was a great idea for her to know that Rico took the money. If she went after him, it could end badly. But it wasn't like I could hide the fact that the money was gone. If I had thought about it sooner, I would have stuffed some money in there, but I had no idea how much was missing.

Clearly distressed, she turned away from me, pressing her hand to her mouth.

“Mama, what's wrong?” Parker asked.

She quickly swiped at her face, turning to him with a smile. “Nothing. I just got something in my eye and it burned.”

“Your pizza is getting cold.”

“I know,” she smiled, sitting down at the table.

I walked back and sank down in my chair, watching her closely. My heart thudded in my chest with every second that passed. I hated seeing her like this, staring at the table as if she'd lost everything. It did something to me that I'd never felt for a woman before. I wanted to protect her and tell her everything would be fine, but I wasn't in the position to help her, not without blowing my cover.

I didn't touch a bite of the food as Parker chattered on, telling us about his day. Skylar tried to pay attention, but she was distraught. Maybe I could slip the money back inside and...and what? I didn't know how much she was missing, and since I was here when she discovered it was gone, she might assume it was me who took it.

Why did I even fucking care? My life had been torn inside out for this job. The last thing I needed to be worrying about was this woman and her kid. I had to focus on getting the information I needed to take down Baz. Anything else was just distracting and unnecessary, no matter what Rae said.

I tossed my napkin on the table and stood. “I think I should go.”

I didn't even bother saying goodbye to them. I walked out the door and stomped over to my house, glaring at the dark figure I saw standing on the stoop where my team had just moved in. I couldn't tell if it was Johnny or Jason, but they had eyes on me, and they would be watching my every move from now on.

THE EXPLOSION SHOOK THE HOUSE, JERKING ME AWAKE FROM where I'd finally passed out on the couch. "Skylar," I whispered, running to the door and throwing it open without even bothering to put on shoes. My feet ate up the grass to her house as I watched the house next to hers lit up like the Fourth of July.

"Skylar!" I shouted, banging on the door. When she didn't immediately answer, I slammed my shoulder into the door, then stepped back and rammed it again. The lock busted open and I rushed inside. "Skylar!"

I could hear Parker's cries from the living room and ran down the hallway to his room. Skylar was wrapped around him, trying to calm him down. "It's okay, baby. We have to go."

I rushed inside and picked him up in my arms, then grabbed her hand and pulled her through the house. Parker's hands wrapped around my neck, squeezing me tight as he cried into my neck. The kid was terrified, and I couldn't blame him.

I dragged them through the night to my house, not stopping until we were in the safety of my living room. Skylar pulled Parker out of my arms and walked around with him, trying to calm him down. I couldn't stop staring at her, thinking about how that could have been them. It was only one house away. They could have been injured...or died.

I ran my hand through my hair, feeling like my whole world was about to collapse, just like the night Hannah was attacked. I had to get away from them. I was too close, too fucking emotional about people that I didn't even know. I walked out of the house to give them space and watched the

flames burning in the distance. That was so fucking close...too close.

I slowly turned and faced the house across the street, adjacent to mine. "Son of a bitch," I muttered under my breath. I slid my hand into my pocket and pulled out my phone, dialing the number I had memorized.

"Jack—"

"What the fuck did you do?" I snarled.

"Nothing," Jason answered. "I swear. We had planned to do something, but didn't get the chance."

"You fucking told me that something would happen tonight. You expect me to believe that you didn't set the explosion that could have killed my neighbor?"

"We didn't. We were shooting for the end of the block, but we never got to set the charges. That fucker at the end of the street came back early from his run."

"If you didn't set the explosion, then who the fuck did?"

"Give us a chance to look into it. And don't call me again. It's too dangerous."

He hung up without another word. I had to believe he didn't do it. If I couldn't trust him, then I was truly alone, and that was a shitty place to be as I knew all too well.

Sirens blared in the distance, growing louder as they got closer. Skylar peeked out of the house, calling my name. "Jack!"

I ran back to her, hoping she was okay. "What is it? Is he alright?"

She shook her head. "He's scared. He needs his bear."

"His bear?"

"It's...on his bed," she said, her voice shaking as she tried to hold it together.

I didn't wait for her to finish. I ran back to her house, waving at the smoke that was already filtering inside. When I

got to his room, I was at a loss for what to grab, but I saw a small suitcase on the shelf in the closet. Pulling it down, I opened it on the bed and started stuffing anything I could inside.

By the time I got back to my house, I could hear Parker's cries growing louder. The kid was terrified. I opened up the suitcase and started digging around for the bear.

"That one," Skylar said, pointing to the dark brown bear with the floppy neck. I held it out to her, then backed up, not knowing what else to do. I wanted to wrap them up in my arms and tell them it would be okay, but I didn't have any right to. I wasn't with her and he wasn't my kid.

Car doors slammed outside and I recognized Officer Pete running to her door. I headed outside, meeting him halfway across the lawn.

"They're in my house. I got them out as soon as I heard the explosion."

"Did you see what happened?"

I shook my head. "It woke me out of a dead sleep."

"Are they okay?"

The concern in his voice dug at something deep inside. I shouldn't be jealous of how much he liked her. I wasn't good enough for her, no matter how much I wanted to be. Pete was a good guy, sticking around when most guys wouldn't. And for that reason, I had to walk away.

"The kid is pretty freaked out, but I think they're okay."

He cuffed me on the shoulder, squeezing tightly. "Thanks."

He took off without bothering to look back. I knew he didn't like me, but we came to a mutual understanding where all that mattered was the two of them. I promised him I would watch out for them, and I wasn't about to break that promise.

I stayed outside, watching the firemen put out the flames. Anger built up inside me with every second that passed. That could have been Skylar. Hell, that could have been me. I

needed to know what happened here tonight, and there was only one person I knew of who could get me that intel.

With everyone's focus on the blaze, I slipped through the shadows, backtracking through yards until I was across the street in the back yard of my team's house. Rae was waiting for me at the back door.

"I figured you'd come," she said, shutting the door behind me. "Johnny and Jason are installing cameras around the neighborhood."

"Now?"

"It was the plan all along. Jason was going to set off explosives at the end of the street, but someone beat him to it."

"Yeah, a little too close to home."

"While everyone's distracted, they're taking advantage," she said, walking down the hall to a room that was set up like the IT room back at OPS. They already had half the neighborhood online, and that included video footage inside the houses.

"Any idea who set the fire?"

"Not yet. I've got some feelers out, so it shouldn't be too long before we know what happened."

"This shouldn't have happened. That was way too fucking close to Skylar and her kid."

She didn't mock me this time, only nodded and got to work at her computer. "Who's the cop that ran into your house?"

"He's...interested in her."

She smiled, shaking her head. "That must rankle."

"It's not like I could ever be with her."

Rae stopped what she was doing and turned to me. "Is this one of those times we're going to talk about our feelings? Because I already did that with Johnny. It was disturbing."

"I'm just saying that the cop is the better choice."

“Right. Why would she want to be with a sexy, muscular military man who could not only save her life, but—”

“Jesus, I wasn’t asking for advice. Can we just focus on figuring out how to end this and forget about how sexy I am?”

She shrugged. “We can try, but I’m still a woman.”

“Don’t make me call Duke,” I muttered.

“Go ahead. He knows I’ve only got eyes for him.” She held up her left hand, wiggling her finger in front of my face.

“You married him?”

“Well, that’s what people do when they’re not terrified of love.”

I stared at the monitors, trying to figure out my next move. “They can’t stay in this neighborhood. It’s not safe for them.”

“Then you’re going to have to figure out a way to get them out,” Rae pointed out.

“Easier said than done. She’s not very trusting and I have enough problems with trying to get intel on Baz’s operation. I’m not even sure it’s possible at this point.”

“Why not?”

“Because Baz only wants me to keep his son out of trouble. I’m too far outside. Worming my way inside could take years. I’m not sure I’m up for that.”

“Can’t blame you there. I can’t believe you went along with Rafe’s insane plan to begin with.”

I scrubbed my hand over my face, trying to shake the feeling that this was all falling apart. If I couldn’t get inside, I would be stuck in this town forever, achieving nothing. I couldn’t live my life like that. If I wanted to get inside, I was going to have to make it happen, but that could be very dangerous.

“Maybe this isn’t the way to do this,” Rae finally spoke. “I’m not trying to tell you how to do your job, but if Rafe weren’t involved, what would be your next move?”

I stared at the monitors, trying to come up with a solution. The fact was, I couldn't see a way that this worked in our favor. Men went undercover for years and sometimes had nothing to show for it. My situation was no different.

“My next move would be too risky.”

“What's that?” she asked curiously.

I looked at her and shrugged. “Kidnap Baz and take him to Fox.”

“I don't think that will work.”

“I know. We'd have everyone in his organization coming after us.”

“And everyone from The Syndicate,” she pointed out. “Taking him out was never the solution.”

“If I take him out, another man pops up in his place, someone that The Syndicate can manipulate more than Baz. Not to mention that I'd have to go into hiding for the foreseeable future.”

“Maybe that's what we do then. We take out Baz and run. You'd be protected by OPS, and we could track their movements. Maybe we can only cripple them for now.”

“If that was the answer, Rafe would have done it a long time ago.”

“Yeah, speaking of Rafe...do you get the feeling that something more is going on that he doesn't want to tell us about?”

“Like what?”

I could tell something was eating at her, but she didn't want to say. “It's probably nothing.”

“You know how it is in this business. Even the smallest detail could give away a bigger story.”

I waited for her to say whatever was on her mind. It wasn't like Rae to hold back. Then again, she never spoke her mind unless she had all the facts. That had to be the problem.

“Look, I don’t know if it means something or not, but... FNG was supposed to do a job for Rafe. He was supposed to find a woman on an island. The plan failed because of how high the security was, and FNG knew it was likely to go sideways. Anyway, the job wasn’t to get the woman off the island, but to find her and keep an eye on her.”

That was interesting. Rafe had never said anything in all his years about trying to find a woman. It might not even have anything to do with The Syndicate. “Did he say anything about this woman?”

“No. He had no intel on her. Only that she was American, but no other details.”

“Then how could he be sure he was watching the right person?”

“I’m assuming because she was probably the only woman on the island. But like I said, I’m not sure if it means anything.”

“If Rafe went to all the trouble of faking FNG’s death, then she definitely means something.”

“Well, we can worry about that later. You should probably get back to your house before Skylar suspects something.”

“Yeah...Do me a favor and tell Johnny we might need to use his safe house again.”

“His safe house?”

I could see the curiosity in her eyes. Rae had probably run checks on all of us already, and from the look in her eyes, she didn’t know anything about this safe house, which didn’t surprise me at all. “Just tell him.”

“Be safe.”

I nodded and walked out the door. Safety was a relative thing nowadays.

SKYLAR

I WAS RATTLED MORE than I wanted to admit. Parker had finally calmed down and was now passed out in Jack's bed. I wasn't sure if it was okay for him to be in there, but he was exhausted and I needed to calm him down. I stared down at my son and tried to figure out my next step. That money was supposed to set us up for a new life, and now it was all gone. There was only one person who could have taken it.

"I can take you home with me," Pete offered, resting his hand on my shoulder.

Not wanting to wake up Parker, I took Pete's hand and pulled him into the other room, shutting the door slightly. "I don't want to move him. It took too long to calm him down."

"Are you sure? How well do you know this guy?" he asked, lowering his voice.

"I don't know him at all," I admitted. "But I don't think he'd do anything to hurt us."

"How can you be sure?"

I opened my mouth to defend Jack, but had a hard time coming up with anything significant. I knew he was a criminal. That alone made it hard to differentiate him from the rest of the people in this neighborhood. "Look, he's given us a ride a few times, and he got my car fixed. If he was really a bad guy, I doubt he would have done that much."

"That doesn't mean he's not involved in some shady shit."

“I know, but it’s only for the rest of the night. Parker needs sleep and something normal. If I move him again, it’s only going to make things worse.”

“And you’re sure this guy won’t mind you staying?”

I wasn’t sure at all. In fact, he’d pretty much done everything to get away from me as soon as we were over here. But he did run back into my house to get Parker’s things. Maybe he wasn’t a good guy, but he’d been far nicer to me than I expected.

“It’s fine.” Jack’s voice sliced through the air as he stood in the doorway of his house. “The kid is wiped out. Leave him for the night. In the morning, we can see what the damage is to your house.”

“Thank you.”

I heard Parker cry out and hurried down the hall to check on him. As soon as I was inside the bedroom, I saw him reaching for his bear in his sleep. I picked it up off the floor and tucked it back into his arms. Muffled voices caught my attention and I walked back to the door, staying out of sight to hear what they were saying.

“—make sure she’s safe.”

“She’ll be fine for the night. Whatever this is about, I’ll make sure it doesn’t touch her.”

“How can you be sure? Everyone knows this is Baz’s neighborhood. You’re on his payroll.”

“I know this may be hard for you to wrap your head around, but not everyone is in with Baz.”

“Then why are you here?”

It went silent, and I thought that maybe Jack walked away, but then I heard his voice.

“Baz owed me. I kept his son safe in prison, and he got me out. End of story.”

“Yeah, I’m not buying that. Look, just keep her safe.”

Footsteps sounded down the hall and I rushed back to the bed, sitting down beside Parker. When the door opened and Pete ducked his head inside, I got up and pretended I hadn't heard a word they'd said.

"Is he okay?"

"Yeah, he just dropped his bear."

"Alright, I'm gonna head back to the station and find out what I can. Maybe you should consider staying somewhere else. At least until we figure out what's going on."

That wasn't an option, but it wasn't his problem. "I'll think about it."

He pressed a kiss to my forehead, then walked away. I followed, wrapping my arms around myself as I waited for Jack to lock up the house.

"I'm really sorry about this," I said as he shut the door.

"It's not your fault."

"No, I mean barging into your house and taking over."

"If you recall, I brought you over here."

I tried not to stare at him, but it was impossible. Despite what I knew about him, I was drawn to him. His dirty blonde hair was messy, but gave him a dangerous vibe. It was odd to think of hair that way. But it made his cheekbones stand out, accentuating his eyes and pulling me in. When I realized I was staring, I dropped my gaze, but that was worse. My eyes trailed over his pecs, down the length of his torso.

I flushed, turning away from him at my blatant ogling of his muscular body. What was wrong with me? This man had been to prison! There wasn't a thing about him that I should be attracted to, yet I was. He protected us when he didn't have to. He drove me to work and took care of my car—something I still owed him for.

"Um...you still haven't told me how much my car was."

"What happened to the money in the jar?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

I licked my lips at the sight of his biceps straining against his shirt. I would not stare. “It doesn’t matter.”

“What was it for?”

“What do you think?” I asked, shoving past him to go...I had no idea where. I just didn’t want to be under his scrutiny.

“Who would take it from you?”

“Why are you pushing this?” I asked, spinning around.

“What was the money for, Sky?”

My breath caught in my throat at the nickname. “I...”

“Nobody keeps that much money in a jar. They put it in the bank.”

“I never said it was a lot of money.”

His eyes turned dark as he stepped closer, a little too close. My throat closed up with the urge to lean in a little closer. A fuzzy feeling made me sway and his hand wrapped around my arm, holding me steady.

“You were crying,” he gritted out. “Nobody cries over a few dollars.”

I swallowed hard, my eyes dropping to his lips that were just inches from mine.

“How much did he take?”

“Everything I had saved,” I whispered. “Twenty thousand dollars.”

“In a fucking jar,” he hissed. “What was it for?”

It was none of his business. I wasn’t even sure why I revealed as much as I had. But the way he was staring at me, it was like I was unable to lie or tell him to leave it alone. And then his hand ran down my arm, his fingers linking with mine for just a moment.

“Tell me.”

“I was leaving,” I said quietly. “I was saving up to disappear. Baz has eyes everywhere.”

“And you think twenty grand will be enough?”

“No, but it’s a start. Or, it was.”

He stepped closer, our bodies flush against each other. His hand slid around my waist, pulling me even closer. My eyes fluttered shut as his lips feathered over mine. It was all too much. The intensity of his gaze, the heat of his body, the way his hands molded to my back...I was dizzy with the intensity of it all, desperate for just one kiss to end the torture.

“Why did you stick around to begin with?” he whispered against my skin.

Why did I...I pushed my hands against his chest, putting some space between us. “I never said who took the money from the jar.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“Why?”

My heart hammered in my chest as I waited for his answer. If he was a spy for Rico, I’d just divulged everything to him. I would never see my son again.

He grabbed for me, but I stumbled back. “Stay away from me.”

“Sky—”

“Why would you do that to me?”

“Do what?”

“You’re spying on me for him.”

“Not a chance in hell.”

“Then how did you know? Huh? How did you know Rico was the one who—”

“Because I saw him!” His voice boomed through the house like a battering ram, and then everything turned silent.

“You...what? You saw him take the money?”

He sliced his fingers through his hair, turning away from me. “I saw him here the other day.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it’s none of my business!” His eyes flicked to the hallway, then he moved closer, lowering his voice. “He came by last week. He wanted me to keep an eye on you.”

“And you’re just now bringing this up?”

“I told him to fuck off,” he snapped. “It sure as hell isn’t my job to watch you for him.”

“Or apparently, to tell me when you see him breaking into my house!”

“How the fuck was I supposed to know he wasn’t allowed inside? It’s not like we’ve had an actual fucking conversation.”

He was right on that. We both only said as much as necessary. I knew what he was, and he wasn’t exactly the type of guy to get to know a woman.

“You’re right,” I sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m just...pissed that he’s taken away my chance to leave.”

“Why are you trying to leave?”

I widened my eyes as if to state the obvious. “Because I don’t want to be here. I never have.”

“Then you chose the wrong man to sleep with.”

“Tell me about it.” Sighing, I sat down on the couch. It wasn’t any of his business, but after all he’d done for me, it felt like I owed him an explanation. “I met Rico at a club. I had just passed the NCLEX.”

“What’s that?”

“An exam to become a nurse. I’d been an EMT, working my way through nursing school. I went out to celebrate with some friends, had a little too much to drink, and had a one-night stand that turned out to be the best and worst mistake of my life.”

“Because you had Parker,” he acknowledged, sitting down beside me.

I nodded. “I was shocked when I found out. I thought I would do the right thing and find him. That was a big mistake. If I had never found him, Baz wouldn’t have so much control over me.”

“What is he holding over your head?”

“Parker,” I said quietly. “He threatened to take him away from me.”

“But you’re his parent. Baz is his grandfather.”

“And he has money and enough lawyers to make my life hell. So, I figured I would save up the money and then just disappear one day. And it would have worked, too.”

“So, what’s the plan now?”

“Well, since I just found out, I haven’t formulated a new plan yet.”

“What about family?”

“My parents are in Florida, but I don’t want them involved. My dad doesn’t have the best health, and the stress would probably sink him.”

“And you don’t think it’s stressful when he’s worrying about you from halfway across the country?”

“Trust me, I’ve considered that, but if I left, Baz would follow. I won’t put my family in danger because of one stupid decision.”

“Just your son.”

My head snapped in his direction. I shoved off the couch, ready to snap when he grabbed my hand and pulled me back down.

“That’s not how I meant it. I was just saying that your son is caught in the middle of all this. Your parents are safe for now, but he will always be in danger, even if you decide to leave. There’s only so far you can run from a man like Baz.”

“If that’s true, I’m sunk.” I pressed my fingers to the throbbing at my temples. The stress of the last few days was catching up, and now I didn’t even have the comfort of my

own home. I couldn't see a way out, and that was the biggest problem at the moment.

Jack's hand gently wrapped around my arm, pulling me back into the couch. With only a few inches between us, it was hard to ignore the heat building between us. I expected him to let go of my hand, but instead, he brushed his thumb over my hand in a soothing gesture. I sank back into the cushions and took a deep breath, relaxing for the first time in days.

JACK

SHE LOOKED WAY TOO FUCKING perfect on my ratty couch. She didn't belong here. She was too good for a place like this, wrapped up in something she never signed up for.

And now I knew why.

None of it made sense before. I assumed that she'd had a relationship with Rico that soured, but it turned out it was a twist of fate she was never expecting. This whole fucking time, I looked at her and wondered what the fuck she saw in Rico. Now that I knew the whole story, I couldn't let this go on. I'd find the money and get her the hell out of here.

Her eyes slid shut, her head falling to my shoulder as she drifted off to sleep. I didn't have the heart to move her, not when she looked so peaceful. Sitting beside her, it was easy to imagine what my life would be like if I let all of this go and just tried to be a different man.

But even if I did that, she would never be safe. I needed leverage against Baz, some way to take him out and bring his operation to its knees. Any attempt to kill Baz would be difficult at best. He always had men surrounding him, and taking out Rico would only anger Baz. I would either have to take them out at the same time or make sure that it would never lead back to me.

As the hours passed, the sounds of the firefighters grew distant. Slowly, everyone left until all that remained was the silence of the night. But I was wired, unable to sleep when all I could think about was the woman in my arms and the kid in

the other room. The internal struggle over whether or not I could be the man they needed was driving me insane.

“You were at the prison.” Her voice was low and scratchy, barely discernible above my own thoughts.

“Yeah.”

“I remember you from the ambulance. You called out for a woman named Hannah.”

My eyes drifted shut as memories overwhelmed me. I didn’t want to think about her right now.

“Who was she?”

“My sister,” I answered quietly.

“Is she...”

I nodded, but she couldn’t see it. “She died a long time ago.”

“How?”

I never spoke to anyone about this. It was too painful, knowing I wasn’t there for her, that I could have saved her.

She sat up, turning to face me. I hadn’t even realized how I’d laid back against the corner of the couch and pulled her with me. Now, I missed the feel of her body against mine, the way her hair tickled my chest as she snuggled against me. I’d never been so attracted to a woman the way I was to her. It was a strange feeling that I didn’t want to admit.

“Jack, what happened?”

“She killed herself.” I finally said the words out loud—admitted to myself that she didn’t want to be in this world... that I had failed her for a second time.

“Why?”

“Because she couldn’t handle the pain. We grew up with terrible parents. And when they were gone, I was left to raise my kid sister. I thought I had it all under control. It was hard, you know, but we had each other. And then it all went wrong one night. She was hurt, and I wasn’t there.”

“That’s not your fault.”

“It was,” I said with a self-deprecating smile. “I was supposed to pick her up. Anyway, I lost my shit and nearly killed the guy that attacked her. The judge gave me the choice of going into the military or going to jail. I thought it would be safer for her if I went into the military. She would have a family around her, people who understood how hard it was when someone left.”

“But that didn’t happen,” she surmised.

“For a while. I thought things were getting better, and then one day I got a call...” I huffed out a laugh. “You know, I always thought it would be her getting the call. Or someone would drive up to the house and tell her that I’d been killed in action. I never thought...”

She shifted her leg, slinging it across my lap until she was seated right over my cock. Her hands came up to rest on both sides of my face as she stared intently into my eyes. “Why do I get the feeling that you’re not at all who you appear to be?”

“This is who I am,” I answered gruffly, my hands gripping her hips, digging into her flesh.

“It can’t be. I see this good man underneath all this. I don’t understand...”

“What?”

Her eyes flitted back and forth as she stared at me. Then she crushed her lips to mine, kissing me with so much need that it was impossible to deny her. My hands slid under her top, memorizing every inch of her skin. But it wasn’t enough. Just a taste of her would never satisfy the hunger growing inside me. I wanted her more than any woman before her.

I spun her, dropping her down on the couch as I nestled my body between her thighs. My cock pulsed with the need to be inside her, to feel her warmth wrapped around me. I didn’t need to feel it to know it would be like touching heaven.

I jerked upright, stopping myself before I could take things any further. I couldn’t do this to her. I wouldn’t be like Rico, taking advantage of the situation and taking something I had

no right to. I couldn't offer her more than a night or two. This job was all that mattered, and she was tangled up in every aspect of it, which would only get her killed when I had to choose between doing what was best for her or finishing the job.

“We should—”

“Mama?”

Sky lurched upright, straightening her top as she tried to pull herself together before her son saw her. “In here, baby.”

Through sleepy eyes, the kid appeared around the corner, holding his bear in the crook of his arm. That was enough to kill my erection. No matter how much I wanted her, I would never mess with her kid. I stood and headed into the kitchen.

“I'll make some coffee.”

I got lost in thought as I started breakfast and made the coffee. The gnawing itch under my skin was absent today, making it easier to focus on the task at hand. This was another reason I couldn't be with Sky. I was a junkie, and even though I was clean, there was always the possibility that I would relapse. The need to shoot up would rear its ugly head again, leaving her to pick up the pieces if I relapsed.

“Are we still going to the zoo?”

I took a sip of my coffee and flipped the bacon in the pan, ignoring the woman sitting at my table. I was fucking crazy to bring her over here last night, and even crazier to allow her to stay the night. That couldn't happen again.

“I don't know, baby. I have to check on the house first.”

I didn't need to turn around to see the disappointment on the kid's face. I shut off the burner and dished the eggs out on three plates. As much as I tried to resist, I snuck a peek at Skylar, seeing the stress on her face. It was her only day off and she had promised Parker she'd take him to the zoo, but with everything that happened last night, it was clear that was the last thing she wanted to do.

“Okay.”

The sad look on his face had me doing the stupidest fucking thing I'd done since last night. "How about I check out the house with your mom, and then I'll take both of you to the zoo?"

His face lit up instantly, but Skylar stiffened. Shit, I had overstepped. This was exactly what I hadn't wanted to do.

"Yes!" he shouted, pumping his fist in the air. "I'm gonna go to the bathroom!"

He leapt out of his chair and ran to the bathroom, leaving me alone to deal with the fallout of my stupidity.

"Sorry about that. I was just trying to help."

"No, it's fine," she said quickly. "I just assumed after... after what happened..."

I dropped my head, chastising myself for being so fucking stupid. The point was to put distance between us, but I'd just made that harder than ever.

"Look, he's a great kid, but you don't need someone like me in your life."

"Then why did you offer?" she asked accusingly. "I didn't ask you to take us to the zoo."

"I know. I just...he looked so fucking disappointed and you..."

"Me, what?" She scoffed, standing from her chair. "Don't tell me you're one of those guys that feels like he has to save women. I'm not some wallflower that needs you to come in and save the day."

"I know that."

"Really? Because you're acting like I can't take care of myself."

"I know you can. I see you doing it, but—"

"But what?" She crossed her arms over her chest, and even though I hadn't been in many relationships, even I knew the defensive stance that told me saying anything else would be fucking stupid.

I turned to the stove and grabbed the bacon that was on the verge of burning. I thought it would buy me enough time to get her to stop glaring at me, but I was wrong.

“What?” I asked, tossing the pan in the sink.

“Just say it.”

“Say what? You’re trying to pick a fight, but I’m not the guy to do that with.”

“And why’s that?”

“Well, first of all, I’m not your fucking boyfriend.”

“And second?”

“Because I’ll tell you the truth and you won’t like it,” I snapped.

“Since you know everything, tell me the truth. Tell me how you think I’m fucking this all up.”

“Well, yeah, Sky,” I said angrily. “You want to get away? You’re being fucking stupid about it. You hid twenty grand in a jar on a shelf in plain sight. All that hard work to make a better life for your kid, and you threw it away like that,” I snapped.

“I didn’t throw it away,” she said, her eyes tearing up. “I... I was just...”

Sighing, I walked over to her and wrapped my arms around her body, pulling her close to me. Her fingers dug into my shirt as she cried, leaving a wet mark that soaked through to my chest. I fucking hated saying that shit to her, but the fact was, she couldn’t do it all on her own, no matter how much she wanted to.

“I’m so stupid,” she cried. “I just...”

“I know,” I whispered, rubbing my hand up and down her back.

“I thought I could get away.”

“You will,” I promised. “I swear to God, you will.”

“Mama?” Parker was standing in the hallway, his chin quivering as he stared at his mom. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Sky said, swiping the tears from under her face as she smiled at him. “Mama was just having a moment.”

“Because of the fire?”

“Yeah, it scared me.”

He nodded at her with wide eyes. “It scared me too, Mama. It was so loud.”

“I know.” She knelt down in front of him, taking his hands in hers. “But we’re going to forget about all that today and just have fun.”

“Come eat some breakfast,” I said, carrying the plates over to the table. I was just sitting down when the doorbell rang. I strode over, pulling open the door only to find a package sitting on the stoop.

I didn’t see anyone around, but that didn’t mean someone wasn’t watching. “I’ll be right back,” I said over my shoulder, closing the door behind me. I slid my finger under the seal and pulled out a phone. Turning it on, I was relieved to see it was from Rae. Based on the video feed they’d installed last night, she’d already gotten some intel on what probably happened.

The man who lived next to Skylar was caught skimming from the coffers, selling the weapons at a higher rate and pocketing the difference. Baz was sending a message to everyone else in the area.

“Rae,” I answered the phone as it rang.

“It’s Johnny. All eyes are on you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The chatter from last night indicated that Baz’s guys suspect you.”

“Of what?”

“At this point, none of them know. But they’re definitely doing some digging.”

“What about you?”

“We’re solid with Baz, but these guys don’t know the deal we made with Baz. They’re definitely suspicious.”

“What exactly was the deal you made with him?”

“We’re independent contractors. We fed him intel on one of his guys, and when it panned out, he decided to place us in the neighborhood to keep eyes on everyone that might have worked with this guy.”

I glanced over at the burnt house. “Was the intel on the guy who was just burned to death?”

“No, just a pure coincidence. His interest lies in his number two at the end of the street.”

“So, if anyone finds your cameras in their houses—”

“Baz won’t suspect a thing. This is what he hired us to do.”

“Thanks.”

“Watch your back.”

“That’s what I have you for,” I said as I hung up. If Johnny was right and they all suspected me of working against Baz, it would only be a matter of time before they came at me, and anyone I was involved with. Skylar and Parker weren’t safe around me, but they weren’t safe with Rico either. It was time to give Officer Pete a call.

“MONKEYS! MONKEYS!” PARKER SCREAMED, PULLING US down the trail to the monkey exhibit.

We’d already been here for three hours. I didn’t know you could spend so much time at a zoo, let alone collect so much crap. I was already carrying around three stuffed animals and had a monkey backpack slung over my shoulders that Parker insisted I wear.

“Ooh! Jack! Look at that!” Parker pointed to Hi-Striker. It was that Ring the Bell game they had at fairs, but this was supersized. “Can you do it?”

“Don’t waste your money,” one of the dads standing nearby said. “Seriously, it’s rigged so you can’t win.”

I glanced at the man, examining his clothing choices. Khaki shorts with a plaid shirt tucked in, paired with argyle socks and loafers. And let’s not forget the fanny pack. It was no wonder this douchebag thought it couldn’t be done. He didn’t have the upper body strength to bench press five pounds.

“The winner gets to choose from any of these stuffed animals,” the woman running the game said, winking at me.

I narrowed my eyes at her, pissed that she was hitting on me when I was with a kid. She didn’t know that Skylar and I weren’t married.

“Can you do it? Please, please, please?” Parker begged.

“Buddy, that one’s really hard. I’m sure Jack can’t win the prize,” Skylar said seriously.

Okay, now I was just offended. I didn’t need to prove myself with a stupid game, but this was a question of my manhood. I knew damn well I could ring that bell, and I would prove it to her and all the dads around here who watched with their cocksure attitudes.

I held out a five-dollar bill and picked up the hammer, stretching my arms before stepping up to the bell.

“This is such a waste of money,” one of them sneered.

“Who does he think he is?” another whispered loudly.

“He thinks he’s Superman,” another laughed.

I swung the hammer over my head, slamming it down with more force than was necessary. The ball zipped to the top, clanging against the bell. It rang throughout the park and lights flashed with the sirens, signaling I’d won.

Parker jumped and cheered, running up to me like I was his hero. I swooped him up in my arms and walked past the other dads, knowing they could never do better.

“That one!” Parker shouted. “I want the Flamingo!”

The lady grudgingly walked over and grabbed the life-size Flamingo, handing it over. I hadn't considered that I would have to walk around with the fucking thing the rest of the day, but when I saw how happy it made Parker, I didn't really care.

The rest of the dads shook their heads at the new guy—that would be me—probably pissed off that I showed them up. I felt slightly bad for their kids that they weren't strong enough to play the game. But not bad enough to stick around and commiserate with them.

“Where to next?”

“The monkeys!” Parker shouted. I slung the kid over my shoulders, grinning as he laughed and wrapped his hands under the bottom of my chin so he didn't fall over.

Skylar walked beside me, linking her arm through mine as she leaned in closer. “Are you showing off for the other dads?”

“No,” I scoffed, completely ignoring that she said *other dads* as if I was a dad.

“Right,” she laughed. “It was all for Parker.”

“I mean, come on. You practically egged me on with that whole *he can't do it* routine.”

“I would never do something like that. I was trying to save you the pain and humiliation if it couldn't be done.”

“Do I look like a guy who can't ring the bell?” I teased as I turned to her, but memories of sliding between her legs this morning came rushing back, reminding me of how much I wanted her.

Her smile faltered as she looked anywhere but at me. And that's when I saw the fucker, right across the park, wearing all black and blatantly staring at us. He was one of Baz's men. I knew it without any further proof. He was probably having her followed, and since I was here, this fucker probably thought he had something to go back to Baz with.

“You know what? I gotta take a leak,” I said, hoisting Parker over my head. “Why don't you head to the monkeys and I'll meet up with you.”

Skylar followed my gaze, but the guy was already gone. She wasn't an idiot, though. She knew something was wrong. "Are you sure?"

The fear in her voice almost made me change my mind. I didn't want to scare her, but I had to take care of this now. "Yeah, I'll just be a minute." I leaned in, whispering in her ear, "Stay around a group of people."

She nodded and took Parker's hand, pulling him in close. "Do you want me to take those?" she said, motioning to the stuffed animals.

"No, keep your hands free."

I watched her walk up to the group of people just entering the exhibit. She bumped into one of them, then started chatting them up, introducing Parker to the other kid. When I was sure she was as safe as I could make her, I headed across the zoo.

I disappeared into the crowd of people, taking off the button-down shirt and setting it on a bench, along with all the stuffed toys I'd won for Parker. When the seller from the street cart wasn't looking, I grabbed a hat, pulling it down over my eyes. The man was ahead of me, searching the crowds for us. I snatched the sunglasses off a nearby table and slid them over my face, then circled around the fountain, meeting up with the guy on the other side.

He passed right by me without noticing a thing. I turned and grabbed him by the back of the neck, steering him to the bathrooms at the other end of the snake enclosure. He hissed as I yanked his arm up behind his back as he reached for his weapon. When we were out of sight, I slammed him up against the bathroom wall, never allowing him to see me.

"What's your play?" I hissed. "What are you after?"

He smiled through the grimace on his face, so I torqued his arm even higher. "You, asshole."

"Why are you after me?"

"Because you're with the kid."

"So?"

“She’s off limits,” the man said, yelping when I bent his hand backward, snapping the bone.

“She’s off limits to everyone, including you,” I hissed. “You don’t follow her anywhere.”

He struggled to get free, but couldn’t outmaneuver me. “I was just doing what the boss asked.”

“Who’s your boss?”

“Same as you, man.”

Baz. He was having her followed. “You tell the boss that if he wants to have words with me, he comes to me. He doesn’t follow around Skylar or the kid.”

“Are you fucking serious? Do you have a death wish?”

“What I have is the fucking sense to spot some ass like you, thinking you’re following me around discreetly.”

I yanked hard on his arm, dislocating the shoulder. He whimpered in pain, nearly collapsing to the ground. I spun him, slamming his back against the wall, then yanked off my sunglasses. “You tell Baz that this is my message to him.” With a kick to the side of his knee, he collapsed to the ground, crying out in pain. I heard someone ask if he was alright, but I was already disappearing back into the crowd.

“Is everything alright?” Sky asked as I joined them in the monkey cages.

“It’s fine.”

Parker was pressed up against the glass, mimicking the monkeys inside. We had a few minutes to ourselves, but then we needed to get the hell out of here.

“Jack, don’t keep things from me. If you know something—”

“Baz has guys watching us.”

“Watching us?” Her eyes flicked to her son, then back to me. “Why?”

“He’s testing my loyalty.”

“I thought you said you had nothing to do with Baz.”

I could see the need to run clear in her eyes. “I’m not, but that doesn’t mean he thinks the same thing.”

“Jack—”

“I’ll handle it,” I promised. “This won’t come back on you.”

“You shouldn’t be with me. If I had known...”

“Sky, all we’re doing is giving your son a good day out after this shitstorm of last night. If he has a problem with that, he can talk to me like a man.”

“But—”

“End of story, Sky. I’m not talking about this anymore.”

She nodded, glancing at all the animals I was holding. “Did you discuss this when you had stuffed animals in your hands?”

A small smile tilted my lips. “No, I set them down. I was just lucky it was all still there when I was done.”

She grabbed my hand, looking at my knuckles for damage, but she wouldn’t find any. “Just promise me you’ll be safe.”

“Sky...”

How the fuck did I tell her that I had to walk away? There wasn’t really anything between us. She had a shot with the officer. At least he could protect her in a way I couldn’t.

“You’re breaking up with me, aren’t you?” she grinned.

“Can you break up with someone you’re not with?”

“I appreciate you giving him this.”

“It was a good day.”

“But it has to end,” she surmised. “You have to take care of this thing with Baz.”

“And you have to take care of Parker,” I nodded in his direction. “He won’t even remember me when he gets home and stuffs all those animals in his room.”

“I think you’re underestimating your effect on him.”

For just a moment, our fingers brushed against each other. I could feel the spark between us, the desire to hold her and never let her go, but just as soon, Parker called out to us and whatever was between us was broken.

SKYLAR

“WHEN ARE we going to see Jack again?” Parker pouted on the way into preschool on Monday. “He didn’t even come over and see my Flamingo.”

“He was probably busy, Parker.”

“That’s what you keep saying,” he grumbled.

I felt like I was letting Parker down at every turn, but what was I supposed to do? Men were following us around, and while that wasn’t Jack’s fault, it wasn’t doing us any good to be around him either. After I dropped Parker off, I headed to work, not at all ready to start my day. I was exhausted from lack of sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, I thought I heard an explosion and ran to check on Parker. Luckily, he managed to get a full night’s sleep and was ready to go this morning.

I was a good ten minutes early when I clocked in, but one look at Denise’s face, you’d think I was an hour later.

“You’ve been requested for the day,” she said, shooting me the stink eye.

“By who?”

“The police,” she said, tossing a file at me. “I guess you called in a few favors.” Her eyes slid up and down my body suggestively.

“I didn’t call in any favors. I don’t know what this is about.”

“Save the choir girl act for someone that buys it. It’s bad enough that you have that officer hanging all over you, but

then you let your neighbor come in here and get me in trouble.”

“What are you talking about?”

She scoffed, grabbing her files and walking away, ramming into my shoulder on the way. I steadied myself on the counter, doing my best to breathe through the anger so I didn't shove my pen through her eyeball. That would most definitely make it difficult to keep my job.

“Hey,” Gina said, rushing over to me. “I heard about your job today.” She wagged her eyebrows at me, grinning like a goofball.

“That's more than I've heard. Denise tossed this folder at me, accused me of sleeping my way out of work, and then having my neighbor call HR to get her fired.”

“Wow, can I have your pull?”

“We both know I don't have any pull around here,” I said, opening the file. “Do you know what I'm supposed to be doing?”

“Only that you're going with a cop somewhere.”

I skimmed through the file, reading over it. “It looks like some kind of medical day at a school. But why am I going? Shouldn't they have a doctor go?”

“And take away from their precious time at the hospital while us lowly nurses do all the menial labor? I doubt that's a good use of the hospital's dollars.”

“I'm not sure this is either,” I sighed. “I guess I should look at it like a field trip.”

“Ms. West?”

I turned and nodded to the officer approaching the desk. “You must be here to take me to the school?”

“Yes, ma'am. Do you need to grab anything before we go?”

“Yeah, I'll be right back.”

He nodded, tipping his hat to me. I hurried to the locker room and grabbed my things, but before I could leave, I was slammed up against the lockers and something sharp was pressed against my neck.

“You tell him he has until midnight,” a low voice hissed in my ear.

“Wh...what are you talking about?” I asked, my voice shaky and unsure.

“Just tell him,” he hissed.

His fist slammed into my side, making me double over in pain as he disappeared, leaving me alone and gasping for breath. I pressed my hand to my side, wincing at the pain in my ribs. On trembling legs, I lowered myself to the floor, leaning back against the lockers. I pressed my hands to my cheeks, wondering what he was talking about. Who was I supposed to tell? And why would he assume I would know?

“Hey, girl, I just—” Gina sucked in a breath when she saw me sitting on the ground. I shot her a shaky smile, hoping she would think everything was fine, but she could always see right through me. “What happened?”

She rushed over to me, hopping over the bench to kneel beside me.

“Nothing. I just got a cramp.”

“And decided to sit on the ground instead of on this nice, sturdy bench?” she asked in a disbelieving tone.

“I just...”

“Don’t you dare lie to me. I’ve seen enough women come through this hospital with the same old lies. I don’t need to hear that from you.”

“Gina,” I said, gripping her arm. “I need you to forget about what you saw.”

“Why would you ask me to do that? Girl, you know I have your back. Whoever did this, we’ll hunt them down and show them what it’s like when two strong women gang up on him.”

I chuckled, wincing as my side flared in pain. “I would love to do that, but I don’t know who it was.”

“You mean, someone came in here and attacked you? We can get the video feed from the—”

“No,” I said sharply. “It was a man. He told me to tell him he has until midnight.”

“Him who?”

“If I knew that, I would tell you. I have no idea what he was talking about.”

“Wait, does this have something to do with the baby daddy?”

I was about to tell her no, but that actually made sense. “Maybe. I don’t know. I don’t ever see him. We don’t spend time together. But...”

“But what?”

“My neighbor saw him go into my house. And then all the money I had saved up disappeared. It had to be him.”

She knew exactly what it meant to have all that money disappear. I wouldn’t be able to run, and that meant sticking around for longer or taking my chances with nothing. “But if he stole all that money, why would someone come to you and tell him to hand it over by midnight?”

“I don’t know. I’m not even sure if he was talking about money.”

She hoisted me up by my elbow, helping me to the bench. “Is there any chance this is about your neighbor?”

“Why?”

“Well, he lives in your neighborhood,” she said, shooting me a knowing look. “That alone means he’s bad news. And he saw your ex go into your house and that he took the money. How does he know that? I’m just saying, maybe it was your neighbor that took the money, and he’s blaming it on your ex.”

“But why?”

She cocked an eyebrow at me. “Um...because he’s not stupid. He knew that you’d find the money missing, and then you’d start questioning everyone around you.”

“But he saved us...” I said, trailing off as I thought about how I discovered the missing money, and not long after, he ran out of the house. “No, it couldn’t be,” I said to myself.

“You don’t know him,” Gina pointed out. “I don’t think you can rule anything out right now.”

She was absolutely right. I didn’t know Jack, and as much as I wanted to believe there was something beneath that hard exterior, I couldn’t say for sure that he didn’t do it.

“I can’t think about this right now. I have to get to work.”

“Whoa,” she shook her head, trying to push me back down. “You were just attacked. No one would blame you for taking the rest of the day off.”

“Denise would. She already thinks I tried to get her fired!”

“Girl, nobody likes Denise. Anyone could have tried to get her fired, and the rest of us would throw a party for whoever succeeded.”

“Still, I need to focus on work. If I go home, this is all I’ll be thinking about.”

She gave me a disapproving look as I stood, ignoring the pain in my side. I thought maybe she would at least help me get my purse, but it was like she was trying to prove a point, just as much as I was. I got my stuff and slammed the door, leaning in to hug her.

“Thank you.”

“For what? Being unable to convince you you’re being stupid? You’re right. I deserve a medal.”

I chuckled, then walked out of the break room. I felt like everyone was watching me, like they knew what happened. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as I checked out every single person I passed, wondering if the person who attacked me was still here.

“Are you ready?” the officer asked, smiling a little too widely at me.

I shot him a wary look, wondering if he could be the one. He knew where I was going. He could have followed me into the locker room, then slipped back out here completely unnoticed.

“I can drive myself.”

“That’s okay. No need for you to waste your gas when we already have the car outside.”

He reached for my arm, but I jerked it away. “Really, I’d feel better driving myself.”

His face turned to stone as he grabbed my arm a little too hard. “Don’t make this hard on yourself. Just get in the damn vehicle or I’ll be forced to arrest you.”

I didn’t want to make a scene, but now I was really freaked out. I wished Gina was around to witness this, but all the nursing staff seemed to be absent at the moment. And if Denise were at the desk, she’d probably smile and wave to the officer.

“Alright,” I answered shakily. “Where are we going?”

“To the station.”

I’D BEEN SITTING IN THE INTERROGATION ROOM FOR AN HOUR. Now I understood why they requested I go with them. They clearly thought I was somehow connected to something that happened, and they wanted to trick me into coming to the police station. The only thing I couldn’t figure out was why they didn’t just tell Denise I was wanted for questioning?

The door swung open and a man strolled in wearing a suit. The officer that brought me in was right behind him, glaring at me like I was the scum of the earth.

“What am I doing here?” I asked, looking only at the man in the suit.

“Ms. West, I’m Detective Wilson. Thank you for coming in.”

“It wasn’t like I had a choice,” I snapped, glaring at the officer.

The suit chuckled like this was all funny. “Sorry about that. We wanted to preserve your cover.”

“My cover for what?”

“For why you left today.”

I leaned forward, pressing my arms into the table. “I left because I was forced to.” I jerked my sleeve up, showing him the bruises left on my arm from the officer.

His eyes turned glacial as he looked at the officer. “I’m sorry, ma’am. That never should have happened. Officer Smith, please step out of the room.”

“But I was just—”

“Now!” the man yelled, leaving no room for argument.

If looks could kill, I’d be speared to the wall. The officer stormed out, slamming the door behind him. The suit turned back to me and sighed.

“Ms. West, I’m very sorry about Officer Smith. This was not meant to be a hostile interview.”

“I don’t even know what’s going on.”

He nodded and opened a folder, turning it around for me to look at. “My name is Detective Wilson. I’ve been investigating illegal weapons sales in the area for the last five years, trying to pin the sales on a man named Baz Gelbero. Do you know him?”

It was clear he knew I did. “Yes, but you already know that, so why are you asking?”

“How close are you with Baz?”

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Closer than I’d like to be. My son is his grandson.”

“Did you know who Baz was when you had a child with Rico Gelbero?”

“I didn’t even know who Rico was. It was a one-night stand. And while I’m not proud of that, I never thought having one night of fun would ruin my life.”

“So, you didn’t know anything about him.”

“I still don’t. I’ve heard rumors.”

“Yet, you live in a neighborhood known for housing Gelbero’s associates.”

“Not by choice,” I gritted out.

He seemed surprised by that, interlocking his fingers as he leaned on the table. “Maybe you could explain the situation to me.”

“And how do I know you’re not going to use the information I give you to pin something on me? Maybe you’ll decide to take away my son.”

“I’d like to help you out, if you’ll let me.”

I stared at him for a moment, wanting to believe him. But my dealings with Baz were enough to teach me that there was no escaping a man like him. “Listen, I’m sure you mean well, but the only thing you’re going to accomplish by pursuing this is ending up dead.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No, that’s just experience from being connected to a man that will threaten your life for daring to live a life away from him and his criminal organization.”

I could tell he didn’t trust me. I didn’t expect him to. To outsiders, it probably looked like I was staying silent to protect him. The truth was, Baz probably knew I was here right now and would question me about this later.

“Ms. West, I’m sure you love your son...”

My whole body stiffened in anger, waiting for the other shoe to drop. He must have sensed that he was walking on

eggshells with me right now, because he immediately changed tactics.

“I just want to help protect you. If we can take Gelbero down, you’ll both be safe.”

“And if you don’t, I’ll be dead and my son will be in the hands of a maniac,” I retorted.

“Then just tell me,” he said, shifting the papers in the folder. “Do you know this man?”

A picture of Jack slid in front of me. He was smoking a cigarette, standing on his front stoop. I picked it up and studied it, wondering what this man could want with Jack. It wouldn’t do me any good to lie to this man. He already knew that I knew Jack.

“Yes, he’s my neighbor.”

“How well do you know him?”

“As well as anyone knows their neighbors.”

He shuffled the papers again, then pulled out another picture. “This was taken the other night. That’s you, isn’t it?”

It was a picture of Jack guiding us over to his house during the fire. “Yes.”

“That doesn’t look very innocent.”

“It is,” I said, shoving the picture away. “There was a fire, and it was right next to my house. Jack got us out and brought us to safety.”

“Why do you think he did that?” he asked, his eyes searching mine.

“Seriously? Why did he help someone out? You know, if this was anyone else, you wouldn’t question why a neighbor helped out someone during a fire.”

He tapped the picture, pointing to the concerned look on Jack’s face. “This doesn’t seem like a man that’s being neighborly. Are you aware that Gelbero hired a lawyer to get Jack McClain out of prison?”

“Why would I know that?”

“And are you aware that Gelbero owns the house Mr. McClain lives in?”

I sighed, tired of the mind games this man was playing with me. “What are you getting at?”

“I think you know what I’m getting at. This man is working for Gelbero, and if you get too close to him, you could end up caught in the crossfire.”

I thought back to the locker room, about the man who shoved me up against the lockers. I was already in the middle.

“Ms. West, what is it?”

I licked my lips, wondering how much I could tell this man. “I...When your officer came to get me, I had to go to the locker room to grab my things. Someone grabbed me from behind and slammed me up against the lockers.”

Interested, he leaned forward. “What happened?”

“He told me to tell him that he had until midnight.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know, but he seemed to think I knew. He wouldn’t tell me anything else.”

“And then what happened?”

“He punched me in the ribs and left.”

He shoved out of his seat and walked around the table. “Ma’am, would you mind showing me?”

I lifted the hem of my scrubs, showing the large red mark that was quickly turning into a bruise. He let out a low whistle, shaking his head. “He wasn’t messing around.”

“I know,” I gritted out. “I felt it in his fist.”

“Would you allow us to photograph that?”

“For what? I have no idea who did it.”

“It’s all part of building a case against Gelbero and his men. If we can prove that Mr. McClain—”

“It wasn’t him,” I said immediately. “I’d recognize his voice.”

“Okay, then what did the man sound like?”

I thought back, remembering his hands on me, how he hissed in my ear. “Dirty.”

“Dirty?”

I nodded. “He made me feel dirty. His voice was...creepy, like he got off on scaring people.”

“Anything else?”

“Um...I can’t be sure, but I would guess he was maybe only a couple inches taller than me. His body was pressed up against mine, and it didn’t feel like he was hunched over.”

“Do you think you would recognize his voice if you heard it again?”

“Maybe, but I’m not sure how—”

“If we get a suspect in custody, we would need you to come in and listen to him speak. He wouldn’t know you’re here.”

“And what about today?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. “How are you going to keep me safe today?”

“We pulled you in under the guise of a meeting for a school.”

“And you think Baz doesn’t have people watching me? He had men follow me to the zoo on Saturday. He’s probably already got men waiting outside for me right now. All you’ve done is put me and my son in danger.”

“Then you might as well help us take him down.”

I laughed at the stupidity of this man. “You really are naive. Weapons run through here, but this is only a small part of his operation. He lives in Canada. I don’t know what exactly is going on, but I know enough to tell you that this little piece of hell is only the tip of the iceberg. There is no way you’re going to bring him down on your own.”

“They got Al Capone on tax evasion. Trust me, if there’s a way, we’ll get him.”

I stood, slapping my hands on the table. “Well, good luck with that.”

“You can’t leave yet.”

“Are you charging me with a crime?”

His face turned hard as he stared at me. “If you’d only help us...”

“If you only had more to go on,” I snapped.

I grabbed my purse and walked out of the room. The officer that dragged me out of the hospital met me in the hallway, blocking my exit. “Will you please move?”

“He may think you’re innocent, but I know you’re protecting Gelbero.”

“Think what you want,” I snapped.

“When I take him down, I’m taking you with him.”

Supremely pissed off, I shoved past him and walked up to the front desk. The officer glanced up at me, surprised to see me. Apparently, more than two people knew I was coming in today.

“I’d like to file a complaint against an officer.”

He cleared his throat and grabbed a piece of paper. “Who is the complaint against?”

I looked up, my eyes locking the man who grabbed me. “Officer Smith.”

JACK

I WAS out on my morning jog when I first saw them. I knew immediately what was about to happen. It wouldn't help to fight, but I was never one to go down easy. If Baz wanted to talk, he could call me on the fucking phone like a normal person. These visits were getting a little old.

A car squealed to a stop right in front of me and another right behind me. Men got out, showing off their weapons like fucking gangsters. They all thought they were so tough, but put them in a situation where someone was about to blow them up, I'd bet they'd go running for the hills.

"Are we seriously doing this?" I asked, spreading my arms out wide.

"The boss wants you to come with us."

"Then tell him to call me on the phone," I said, attempting to push past them.

The first one stepped in front of me, trying to act all tough. The moment he put his hands on me, I grabbed his wrist and twisted it back, snapping the bone. He fell to his knees, crying out in pain. A second man approached with more vigor, coming at me hard. His left hook barely glanced off my face, and appeared to hurt him more than me.

"You wanna try that again?" I asked, pointing to my jaw. "Go ahead. Take your best shot."

Anger flared on his face and he stepped forward, swinging again. My head barely moved as his fist connected. It was a good hit, but I had a hard head. A slow grin spread across my

face as he realized I wasn't going to make this easy. He stumbled back a step, but not fast enough to miss my fist flying at his face. He fell backward, hitting the ground with a thud and it was lights out.

They came at me all at once after that, knowing they couldn't take me one on one. I enjoyed the fight, taking each hit easily and handing out twice as many. It was a rush I hadn't felt in a while. In prison, it was about survival, but out here, it was all about showing these assholes that it would take more than one hit to take me down. And I was winning against them. Not that I was expecting to go home without a few bruises. But then they brought out the tasers, hitting me over and over until I finally fell to my knees.

"Fuck," I groaned, shoving one foot under me, trying to stand. They hit me two more times before I finally hit the ground. I tried to stay awake, but that much voltage running through my body knocked me out for good.

When I woke, I was no longer on the ground, but sitting in a chair with my hands tied to the arms. This was a fucking shitty way to wake up, but I'd had it worse when I was in the military. It only took a minute to catalog how I felt.

Fried.

I could still feel the lingering effects of the shocks running through my veins, but if I had to go at it again, I could take them. Not that they would allow that. The fuckers stood around me, smirking like they'd won something.

"You think this is funny?" I mumbled.

"You're tied to the chair," one of them laughed. "So, yeah, I think this is funny." I laughed along with him until he looked at me in confusion. "What are you laughing at?"

"I'm laughing because I took on six of you and it took three tasers to take me down. Now, I'm tied to the chair because you fucking know if you let me loose, I'll beat your ass."

"That's enough," Baz said, storming through the door. He looked at me tied to the chair and shook his head. "It was a

simple fucking request,” he spat at his guys. “How hard is it to bring one man in?”

None of them spoke. At least they were smart some of the time.

He sighed and walked up to me, looking me over. “So, was it worth it?”

“Which part?”

“Getting your ass kicked.”

Again, I looked at his men. “Maybe look at them and then look at me. I don’t have blood dripping down my face, but you can’t say the same for your guys.”

“It was a simple fucking request.”

“Then maybe they should have phrased it that way.”

“And you would have listened?”

“Not at all,” I retorted.

Yeah, I was pissing him off, but that’s what I did. If I gave in like all his other guys, he would be suspicious of me. This way, I kept him on his toes.

“What were you doing with Skylar?”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“She’s my grandson’s mother. This wasn’t part of the deal when I got you out of prison.”

“There was no deal,” I spat. “You got me out, but I told you I wouldn’t work for you. Your son’s a fucking idiot. I’m not getting involved in his shit.”

“Yet, you’re spending time with his ex.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Really?”

He motioned for one of his guys to come over. The guy pulled out a phone, flipping through pictures of me smiling with Skylar and carrying Parker around on my shoulders.

“What’s your point?” I asked, staring at Baz with disinterest.

He stormed forward and slammed his fist into my face, cutting the corner of my eyebrow. At least one of them could hit. “Don’t fuck with me. I told you to stay away.”

“You told me to watch your son,” I retorted.

“Is that what you call following his woman around?”

“Last I checked, she’s not his woman, and he hasn’t bothered to check on her once. Unless you count him stealing money from her.”

His nostrils flared as he snapped his fingers. “Everyone out.”

The men left in a hurry, slamming the door on their way out. Baz walked closer, his eyes calculating with every step.

“What do you know?”

“You mean, besides the fact that your son is a fucking idiot?”

“Don’t test me right now,” he growled. “What do you know?”

Rico could get money from his daddy any time, and Baz knew he would ask unless it was something Rico didn’t want his old man to know. I weighed the pros and cons of keeping Rico’s idiotic scheme to myself. Rico stood to make a lot of money if he could follow through on his sale. But if it went sideways, it would be an even bigger problem.

On the other hand, if I snitched on Rico, it would make Baz happy. But there would always be a part of him that wondered if I would do the same to him. Loyalty meant everything to these people, and by showing Rico loyalty, I was doing the same for Baz.

“If you want answers, talk to your son.”

Rage burned through Gelbero. I’d never seen him lose control, but I was pretty sure I was about to witness it. He spun around, kicking me hard in the chest. The chair tipped

backward from the force, slamming me into the ground as my head bounced painfully off the concrete floor.

I shook off the dizzying feeling as best I could, but only seconds later, Baz had me by the hair, dragging me and the chair I was attached to over to the corner. I gritted my teeth, my hands gripping the chair as I fought the pain in my scalp. He tossed me against the wall, my head cracking against it and drawing blood this time. Red liquid dribbled over my cheek from the gash at my temple. I had a fleeting moment where I considered that maybe this wasn't the best route to take, but those thoughts were quickly banished when the door slammed open and a man strode in carrying a large case.

Baz bent over, getting right in my face. "You know, there's always been something off about you. I just can't put my finger on it."

"That's a fucking shame," I gritted out.

"What I can't figure out is whose side you're really on. You don't want to work for me, yet you protected my son in prison." He stood and stormed away from me, but didn't go far before spinning back around. "And then there's the fact that you spent time with Skylar, a woman you shouldn't want anything to do with. Yet, you protected her and her son."

"So much for trying to do the right thing," I muttered.

"But you don't do the right thing," he said, staring at me intently. "You shot a cop."

"I was fucked up," I said, my head swimming in pain.

"Yet, you don't touch the stuff now," he surmised. "A junkie always goes back for more. Especially one that shot a cop."

The sadistic look in his eyes showed me everything I needed to know. He wasn't after the truth about Rico. One thing always won out with this man above all else, and that was blood. It wouldn't have mattered if I'd told Baz about Rico's new job. It was me he really wanted to know about.

"I'm done with the lies," he spat. "I've waited through over a year of prison, hoping Rico wouldn't fail me, that he

would get something out of you. Do you think I'm stupid enough to believe that the profile you put together would stand up against my best investigators? Jack McClain, who was arrested multiple times and spent years in prison over the last ten years. Yet, when my men looked into your prison stays, not a single person could recall who you were. Not a guard, a warden, or any of the inmates. It's almost like you were only there on paper."

My cover was blown, and pretending to be trapped in this chair was no longer to my advantage. I wiggled my wrist, moving the connection of the zip tie to the edge of the arm of the chair, then yanked hard, snapping the plastic. Baz rushed me, expecting to be able to subdue me. My hand shot out, hitting him hard in the neck with the length of my hand. He stumbled back, gagging as he held his hand over his throat.

It gave me just enough time to snap the plastic around my other wrist, but my legs were still latched to the chair. The door burst open and his men came charging in, guns drawn as they ran toward me. It was only Baz's raised hand that stopped them firing at me. With no time to spare, I grabbed onto the chair, holding it to me as I jumped, throwing myself to the ground and snapping the leg off the chair. The wood from the arm dug into my side as I landed, cracking at least one of my ribs.

Ignoring the pain, I jumped to my feet, still attached by one leg to the chair. The leg of the chair was still attached to my other leg, clinging to it with the zip tie. I gave a hard tug, releasing it from the confines, then swung hard at the first man charging. Blood spurted at me, spraying across my face as I slammed it into his mouth. I spun and attacked the second man, almost knocking him out when I was tackled from behind. With limited mobility, I couldn't get the upper hand.

No matter how hard I fought back, I couldn't get away from them, and as more men poured into the room, I knew it was a lost cause. The wood was yanked from my hand as someone stepped on my wrist. I was being held down by five men, all of them using their entire body weight to contain me.

Baz's shoes clicked on the concrete and he walked over to me, loosening the tie from around his neck. "We could have had a good working relationship. But I don't deal with traitors."

The last thing I saw was his designer shoe inches from my face.

JOHNNY

“SOMETHING’S NOT RIGHT,” I said, staring at the screen. “Why the fuck hasn’t he come home?”

“He went on a run,” Rae said, placing an apple between her teeth as she ran a search of cameras in the area.

“Yeah, but he’s been gone for hours.”

“We just got into town,” Jason said, trying to reason with me. But even I knew he was worried about Jack’s sudden disappearance. He was trying to come up with a reason we shouldn’t be calling in every fucking person at OPS to get Jack out. “It’s entirely possible that there’s something he’s doing that is completely normal, and we just don’t know about it yet.”

“Like what?” I asked. “Unless you mean that he’s out getting more heroin.”

“He’s clean,” Rae snapped. “You have to trust him on that.”

“It’s not him I don’t trust,” I said, shoving away from the table. “Who goes out on a run and doesn’t return for hours?”

Neither of them said anything. There was always that point in a case where the team started to worry about the man who was undercover, in too deep for anyone to truly help him out. We were about ten steps past that point. Hell, the moment he shot that cop, I knew this job was going to kill Jack. I hated being powerless to stop it.

“Maybe the neighbor knows something,” Rae suggested.

“She’s a nurse. She wasn’t even home this morning.”

“No, but that doesn’t mean she’s not involved in some way.”

I wasn’t sure what to believe. Everyone here was a new player, ones that we had to vet to fully understand the scope of what was going on. That would take time that we didn’t have.

“Rae, bring up the footage from the house at the end of the street.”

She sat down, tucking her foot under her ass as she brought up all the feed. Speeding through it over the last twelve hours, it was clear something was going on there, but without more intel, we were flying blind.

“They left, but there’s nothing to indicate where they’ve gone.”

“What about traffic cams?” I asked. “There has to be something on that license plate.”

Her fingers flew across the keyboard again, moving faster with every new lead she found. “The vehicle made eleven stops in the last few hours,” she said, pulling up a map. The stops were each shown by a red dot at each location.

“This will take hours to comb through,” I said, getting frustrated.

“What’s at each address?” Jason asked.

“Um...” Within minutes, Rae had a list compiled. Most of the locations were stores of some kind. It was doubtful that Jack was at any of those. If he was in trouble, it had to be somewhere isolated.

“There,” I said, pointing to one of the few locations that wasn’t a store. “What’s that?”

“It’s...a hospital,” Rae concluded. “But I remember driving past this on the way here. Wasn’t it abandoned?”

I pulled out my phone, immediately dialing the number listed. When I heard the tone of a disconnected line, I knew that was the right place. “I’m heading over there now.”

I stormed toward the door with Jason hot on my heels.

“Hey!” Rae shouted, stopping both of us. “People, do you know nothing about working as a team?”

She opened a drawer and pulled out camera equipment and earpieces. “Seriously, I shouldn’t have to remind you that I’m on your side. Put these on,” she said, tossing the small cameras at us. “For god’s sake, it’s like working with amateurs.”

I slipped the earpiece in and attached the camera to my shirt. She was right. We weren’t used to working with others, not in this way. I nodded to her, not sure what to say right now.

She rolled her eyes and shoed us out the door. “Go. Geez, you’re making it impossible not to give you a gigantic hug and pat your heads like little kids.”

The smallest smile touched my lips, but I never once let her see it. First the wedding and now smiling...she was messing with my head.

“Any idea what we’re going to do when we get there?” Jason asked.

“No, but when do we ever have a plan?”

“I don’t know. I like plans,” he said, slamming the car door. “I mean, I’m not great at following them, but it’s always nice to have an exit strategy.”

“Our exit strategy is simple. Get out and don’t get shot.”

“I like the way you think,” he nodded as we tore down the road. “Not that I think this is at all the right choice, but do you think we should call Rafe?”

“For what purpose?”

“I don’t know. To tell him now would be a good time to get his ass in gear and help us.”

“Like he’s helped Jack so far?”

“I’m not saying he will. I’m just saying...maybe it wouldn’t be a bad thing if he was aware that Jack is possibly going to end up dead.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it,” I gritted out. The last fucking person I wanted to see was Rafe. I was too pissed at him to allow him anywhere near anyone I cared about. I couldn’t believe that I used to admire the way he was. His lack of loyalty to anyone other than the job was always something I revered. I could always trust in his lack of faith in anyone other than himself. Now...I just hoped that same loyalty I showed him for years wasn’t about to get one of us killed.

“Here,” Jason pointed at the white building. I pulled into the parking lot, keeping to the back of the lot. The whole fucking place was abandoned, the perfect place to take someone if you didn’t want to draw attention to yourself.

“Rae, we’re at the hospital. Do you copy?”

“Loud and clear. And I agree. You shouldn’t call in Rafe just yet.”

“Were you listening the whole time?”

“Well, that’s what happens when you get earpieces from me. No offense, but I don’t exactly trust the two of you to keep me in the loop. I had to make sure you didn’t leave me out of anything important. Like...say the two of you getting yourselves killed.”

Ignoring her comments, I moved on. “Did you find out anything about this place?”

“I’m trying to triangulate a satellite, but not having any luck. The only eyes I have are from you.”

“Looks like we’re going in,” Jason said, scanning the parking lot.

“We don’t have a lot of firepower with us. How do you want to do this?”

He sighed, running his hand along his jaw. “Scope it out. It depends on how many guys they have on the inside. *If* this is even the place.”

“Let’s head for that entrance,” I said, pointing to a door at the end of the building. It was out of sight of the road, which

made it more likely we'd be able to get in.

"If he's there and we spook them, things could go south fast."

"Recon only," I agreed. "If we can't get through easily, we call in reinforcements."

"Meaning Rafe," Rae added over comms. "We could always bypass Rafe and go straight for OPS."

I would but... "The whole fucking reason Rafe hasn't involved Cash is because he has deniability about what Rafe's doing. If we bring him in, it would put a target on everyone's backs. We need to leave him out of it if possible."

"Fine, but you know Cash is going to yell at you when he finds out."

"I'll deal with the consequences later."

I shoved open the door and pulled my weapon. Together, Jason and I made our way across the parking lot to the unguarded door. So far, no one was watching. That all changed the moment I picked the lock on the door and peered inside.

"What the fuck is that?" a man shouted, rushing toward the door.

I closed it and pulled to the side, nodding to Jason who stood on the other side. The door burst open and a man rushed out. I grabbed him by the back of the neck, flinging him to the ground as another man followed, pulling his weapon on me. Jason took him out from behind, slamming his gun into the guy's skull. I kicked the guy on the ground as he scrambled to get up. With my gun trained on him, he complied.

"Who are you?" I asked.

His eyes flicked between me and Jason, and he slowly raised his hands as he laid on his back. "Man, I ain't gotta tell you nothin'."

I didn't want to draw attention with my gun. I pulled my knife, slamming it down in his thigh, nicking his femoral artery. His screams were instantly muffled by Jason slamming

his hand over the guy's mouth. "You have maybe two minutes. I'd talk fast if you want to live."

He shook his head, trying to grab his leg. I held his hands back, refusing to let him help himself.

"Tell me what I want to know or you're going to bleed out and die right here!"

His grunts soon turned to pained cries. Tears dripped down his face, but he sucked back the tears as he stared at me. "It's—it's...some dude," he answered, his panic controlling him right now.

I grabbed his jaw, forcing him to concentrate. "What is this dude doing?"

"He's—fuck, he's in a room! They...they took him!"

"Why?" His eyes slipped closed and I shook him. "Tell me why!"

"Fuck, I don't know!"

"What are they doing?"

"Baz...getting...inform...ation," he said, his voice shaking with every breath he took.

"How many guys are inside?" The guy was fading fast. This would be the last thing I got out of him. "How many?"

His face grew paler by the second. With his last breath, he stuttered out, "Everyone."

He stilled, dropping to the ground with his eyes open. I looked at Jason, knowing there was only one thing to do.

"Fuck," he groaned, pulling his knife and slitting the other man's throat. "I really didn't want to call him."

SKYLAR

“ARE YOU OKAY?”

Startled, I spun around, clutching my throat as Pete ran over to me. “Geez, are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“I just heard what happened.” His eyes scanned my body worriedly, looking for any signs of trauma.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t do that,” he snapped. “You were attacked here and then Smith grabbed you hard enough to leave bruises?”

His voice boomed through the ER. Everyone stopped and stared at us, which was bad enough, but it also drew the attention of Denise. I knew she was going to be trouble the moment she saw Pete with me.

“Can we not do this here?” I asked quietly, urging him with my voice to let it go.

“We’re going to do this now. Why didn’t you call me?”

“Nurse West,” Denise bit out, giving me a dirty look. “Can you please restrict your personal relationships to outside the hospital?”

“I’m very sorry—”

“No, you’re not sorry,” Pete snapped. He turned to Denise, clearly in cop mode. “Are you aware that someone attacked one of your staff in the break room?”

“No, and I wouldn’t be aware unless she told someone.”

“She told the police,” Pete spat.

“And how was I supposed to know that? Besides, with this one, it’s more likely that she made it up.”

“This was why I didn’t want to discuss this here,” I hissed.

“You were attacked,” Pete said slowly. “You should have reported it to your boss.”

“And you should mind your own business,” I snapped. “This is my job. You can’t come barging in here, demanding that I give you answers when I’m trying to work.”

“If I don’t do it, who will?”

“Sir, you need to leave,” Denise said snidely. “You’re distracting my staff and impeding our work.”

“I’m here on official police business,” Pete said. “I need to see the cameras from yesterday in the hallway outside the locker room.”

Denise shot him a sarcastic smile. “Of course. Will there be anything else?”

“Yes, and I’ll let you know when I need it.”

He gave me a look that said this conversation was far from over, then followed Denise down the hall. With that out of the way, I got back to work, but it was impossible to concentrate, knowing that he was in the hospital on a crusade for me.

I was able to spend an entire hour free of Pete. I spent the time checking on patients and making notations in records. But when I returned to the nurse’s station, he was waiting for me, and Denise didn’t look too pleased.

“You need to come with me.”

“I’m busy,” I said angrily.

“We need you down at the station,” he said, his tone brooking no arguments.

With one look at Denise, I knew this would mean disciplinary action would soon be taken. Pete thought he was helping, but this could cost me my job.

“I’ve already called someone in to cover the rest of your shift,” she said, shoving out of her chair. “We’ll discuss this tomorrow,” she said in a low voice as she passed.

I didn’t say anything to Pete as I headed to the locker room to gather my things. He followed me the whole way, staring at me like I was the problem. He even stood outside the door, refusing to give me an ounce of privacy. It wasn’t until we were walking to his car that I finally snapped.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“Yes, I found the person who attacked you.”

I spun on him, anger flaring in the pit of my stomach. “What you’ve done is ensure that I’ll be put on probation!”

“For what?”

“Because I didn’t report it.”

“They can’t—”

“Yes, they can!” I laughed incredulously. “If there’s a way to do it, Denise will find it. She hates me, and by you showing up at the ER and yelling at her, you’ve guaranteed that she’ll come after me.”

“This is about your safety. What about this don’t you understand?”

“The part where you say you’re trying to protect me, but you’re ruining everything I’ve done to put distance between myself and the main problem.”

“Which is?” he asked angrily. “Did you ever think that if you trusted me, I might be able to help you?”

“No.”

Startled, he stared at me for a moment. “No. Just like that?”

“Yeah, just like that.” I stormed to his car, pulling on the handle. It didn’t open, which only irritated me further. I waited impatiently for him to come to my side and let me in.

“You know, you have serious trust issues,” he said as he got in his side.

“I’m aware.”

“It wouldn’t hurt you to share those issues with me.”

I stayed silent, refusing to discuss this with him further. I wouldn’t drag him into my mess of a life, nor would I allow him to sacrifice anything for me. I was leaving, and I wouldn’t even tell him goodbye.

“Skylar—”

“Don’t,” I said quietly. “Don’t ask me to tell you anything more than I can.”

“Which is what?”

I shifted in my seat to face him. “That depends. Are you asking as a cop or a friend?”

He suddenly turned down a side street, taking me away from the station. I checked the side mirror, noting we had a tail. Pete must have seen it too because he blew through the next light, then took a right turn, and then another left.

He pulled out his phone, calling someone I assumed he could trust. “Adam, I need you to meet me at the parking garage on Fifth... Yeah, level three.”

He glanced at me after hanging up the phone. “I’ll get you away from them, but then I want answers.”

“That sounds like a threat.”

“I just want to help you.”

I huffed out a laugh. “Why is it that every man wants to save me?”

“Maybe you’re worth saving.”

We didn’t speak any more on the way to the parking garage. As expected, a man was waiting for us on the third level. Pete parked and killed the engine. “We’re switching cars.”

I grabbed my purse and got out, looking warily at the man, who I assumed was Adam, walking to the driver's side.

“Do I want to know what this is about?”

“If I could tell you, I would. Just head west. If you pick up a tail, lead them away from my apartment.”

“Anything for you, man.”

We didn't speak the entire drive to his apartment. I didn't know what to say to him at this point. He was putting everything on the line for me, but how long would that last? What would happen when he realized exactly what I was running from? Would he run with me? And did I want him to?

“We're here.” He put the car in park, then turned to me, waiting on me to make the next move.

“Are you sure you want to know?” He stared at me like that was a stupid question, but I needed to know. If I shared this information with him, he would be involved. As a cop, that would put him in a horrible position, one that I couldn't afford for him to change his mind about. “I'm serious. There's no going back once you know.”

“Let's get inside.”

He grabbed my hand, leading me up to his apartment. I still didn't think this was a good idea, but he was insistent. Stepping inside, I took a quick look around, taking in the sparse furniture. It was like he only slept here and did nothing else.

“Are you going to tell me what's going on now?”

“You'd better take a seat.”

I took a moment to admire how good he looked in his uniform. Pete's muscles filled out his shirt perfectly and his dark hair and dark eyes gave him a dangerous look that completely countered the sexy smile that made me wish for a different life—one that included him.

“So, what's this all about?”

I took a deep breath and began. “I think you know that I’m linked to Baz Gelbero.”

“I assumed. There’s been talk at the station.”

“Parker is his grandson.”

He sucked in a shocked breath, running his hand over the coarse hair peppering his jawline. “You...”

“I didn’t know at the time. I met Rico at a club and it was just one night of fun. I had no idea who he was. And when I found out I was pregnant, I did the right thing and tracked him down, which turned out to be the biggest mistake of my life.”

“Why didn’t you just leave?”

I snorted out a laugh at that. “Nobody leaves Rico or his father. The moment they found out, I was screwed. Why do you think I live in that neighborhood?”

“I’ve been wondering that,” he said, letting out a deep sigh. “I assumed it was all you could afford.”

“Baz put me there to keep an eye on me. I was saving up to get away, but...”

“But what?”

“Rico broke in and stole my money. I guess I got comfortable over the years that he didn’t actually want anything to do with me. I got lazy, and now I’ve lost everything.”

He stood and started pacing around the room. I could see the wheels turning in his head. He was trying to come up with a plan to save me, but I didn’t want him dragged into this any further.

“I can get us out.”

“Us?” I asked with a smile on my face. “Pete, you don’t know what you’re suggesting.”

“I do.”

“No, you really don’t. Running means never seeing family again. It means never having a job that you love. Once I leave,

I can't go back to nursing. I can't be in the system. Are you prepared to give up your career for a woman you barely know?"

In two long strides, he was in front of me, holding my hands as he stared into my eyes. "I may not know you, but I know you're worth the sacrifice."

"That's sweet and so...I just can't."

"Why?"

"Because you don't know me, and I won't have you regretting your decision. Think of all the people you'd be leaving behind."

"I can—"

"No, you can't," I said immediately. "Leaving everyone is not an easy thing. My parents haven't seen me since Parker was born. They've never even met him in person. You have no idea what that's like, and I never want you to."

"I can make this work," he pleaded. "You just have to let me help you."

"Pete—"

His lips crashed down on mine as he pulled me tight to his body. I couldn't deny that there were sparks between us, but I didn't feel half of what I did for Jack, and that was the only sign I needed.

I pressed my hands to his chest, gently pushing him away. "I can't," I whispered.

"Because of him?"

My face flamed at his words. There was no accusation or anger on his part. Pete was a really good guy, and that's why I couldn't do this to him. "Pete, it doesn't matter what I feel for you or for him. The fact is, Baz is not someone you mess with. This is my problem and I won't ruin your life by dragging you into my mess."

"I'm already there," he whispered.

“Not entirely, and I thank God for that every second of the day.” I pressed my hand to his cheek, wishing things were different. “You have a gift, Pete. You’re an amazing cop. This is what you were meant to do. This city needs more men like you, and I won’t be so selfish to take you away from your calling.”

He huffed out a laugh, rolling his eyes. “I think you’re exaggerating my abilities and talents.”

“Not even a little,” I said sadly. “Trust me, if I thought this would work between us, I would take your offer in a heartbeat. But you’re going to meet a woman who will turn your world upside down and give you all the things I can’t.”

He stepped back, rubbing his hand along the back of his neck. “You sure have a nice way of letting a guy down when he’s willing to risk everything for you.”

“If you weren’t a nice guy, I would take you up on your offer,” I grinned, though we both knew it wasn’t true.

“So, what about Jack?”

“What about him?”

“Is he...worthy of helping you?”

“You don’t even like him.”

“We’ve come to a...mutual decision when it comes to you.”

That was fascinating to learn. “And what is that decision?”

“That your safety always comes first.”

“Another man trying to save the day,” I chuckled.

“Only because you’re worth it.”

“Well, you can relax. Nothing is going to happen between me and Jack.”

He seemed surprised by that. “Why’s that?”

This conversation was getting uncomfortable. While nothing was going to happen between me and Pete, I didn’t want to talk about what might have happened with Jack. I

could see myself falling hard for that man, but like Pete, I wouldn't drag him into my life.

"You know, I'm surprised you would want me with Jack. He's been to prison."

"I know, but...maybe he's the kind of guy you need. I mean, don't get me wrong, I don't like what he did, but maybe the best way to outrun a criminal is with a guy who knows how they think."

Even if that were true, that didn't mean Jack would want anything to do with me. He made it pretty clear that any kind of relationship with me was off the table. None of that mattered anyway. I had to focus on the one thing that I needed to accomplish to keep my son safe. I had to find a way to get out of the city without Baz finding out.

"You still haven't told me what happened in that locker room," Pete said, following me over to the window.

I glanced out at the cloudy skies, wishing I were anywhere but in Texas. "I really don't know. I was supposed to tell someone that he had until midnight."

"Last night," he surmised.

"I'm assuming so, but I don't know who this person was referring to."

"Could it have been Jack?"

"I guess. Or it could have been Rico. I never wanted to know anything about what Rico did, and when he was sent to prison, it was a relief."

"Is there any chance it was someone sent by Baz?"

I shrugged, turning to face him. "Like I said, I don't know anything about it. There was nothing more said to indicate what *he* was supposed to deliver."

"But we can assume that whoever this was thinks that you have regular contact with whoever was supposed to deliver by midnight."

“Does it really matter?” I sighed. “It’s past the deadline, and frankly, I don’t care what happens to whoever doesn’t deliver. I have to think about my son. He’s the only one that matters.”

“ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?” PETE ASKED FOR THE TENTH time as we pulled into the parking lot at the hospital.

“At this point, Baz already knows that I didn’t go to the police station.”

“All the more reason for you to come with me,” he argued.

“I need to go now,” I insisted. “I need to get Parker and run.”

“You said you don’t have any money. How are you going to get away?”

“I’ll pull out all the money I have in savings. It’s not a lot, but it’s enough to start over somewhere.”

I started to open the door, but he stopped me. “Just hold on,” he snapped. “There has to be something I can do to help you.”

I knew he felt bad for forcing my hand. If he hadn’t made me leave the hospital, I might have been able to get away with convincing Baz the zoo was just a way to make Parker feel better after his ordeal. But I evaded his men today, and he would have questions. There was nothing I could say at this point to change the outcome of what would happen. I had to pick up Parker and leave now.

“If you want to help...” I didn’t even know what to tell him. “Take care of Gina for me. I’m sure Baz will want to question anyone I knew from the hospital.”

He looked disappointed at the simple request, but that was the only thing I could allow him to do for me. That and...

“Can you get a note to someone for me?”

“Of course. But I wish you would let me do more.”

I kept this letter tucked into my purse at all times. It was for Aaron. As much as he'd helped me, I couldn't leave without telling him goodbye. This wasn't the way I wanted to do it, but I always knew when I decided to leave, I couldn't let anyone know what I was planning.

I slid it into his palm and leaned in, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "Thank you."

He studied the name on the letter, then looked at me. "Who is he?"

"A friend. He's an EMT. He knows about Rico."

"You trusted him," he said quietly.

"I've known him for years. He knew what happened from the start."

"I'll make sure he gets it," he said, holding his head high.

"Thank you."

I got out and headed to my car, my eyes scanning the parking lot the whole time. The good news about choosing to leave today was that I wouldn't have to deal with Denise anymore. She was one person I definitely wouldn't miss.

I had to get to the bank and then pick up Parker. He was safe at the preschool, so that's where he had to stay for the time being. I was a wreck the entire way to the bank. Deciding to leave was one thing, but actually doing it was another. I didn't know if I could keep him safe, but staying would only end with him in the hands of a father who didn't care about him.

My hands shook as I walked into the bank. I felt like everyone was watching me, like they knew what I was here to do. Even the kind smiles of the bankers didn't put me at ease. I filled out the slip, withdrawing as much money as I could without drawing any attention. Of course, if Baz and his men were watching, it wouldn't be long until they figured out what I was doing.

On shaky legs, I strolled over to the first open teller and slid the withdrawal slip across the counter to her. She glanced

at the amount, then smiled at me. "I'll just need a form of ID for such a large withdrawal."

"Of course," I said, fumbling around in my wallet for my ID. I shot her a smile and slid that over as well.

She looked at it, then slid it back. "I'll just need one moment."

"Of course."

She headed to the back, but I didn't miss the way she looked back at me before picking up the phone. Shit, this was bad. Cupping her hand over the receiver, she whispered to someone else, then shot me a reassuring smile.

A man in a suit walked over, smiling a little too nicely at me. "We just need approval first."

"For what?" I asked.

"Because of the amount," he answered smoothly.

"It's nine thousand dollars," I responded. "That's under the limit. I'm not sure what you would need approval for. It's my account and I showed my ID."

"It's just a formality," he answered.

This was wrong. Very, very wrong and it had Baz written all over it. He was watching me at the bank, which explained how Rico knew that I was taking cash and setting it aside. He knew I would have it because he had eyes at the bank.

I took a step back, grabbing my purse and slinging it over my shoulder.

"Ms. West..."

I didn't wait for him to finish. I turned and strode out of the bank, making sure not to cause a commotion on the way. I nearly fumbled my car keys in my haste to get out of there. If he was alerted, that meant that Parker would be under surveillance also.

I started the car and tore out of the lot, driving as fast as possible to the preschool. I wouldn't be able to grab anything from the house. We'd have to get out of town, leaving

everything behind. My phone rang in my purse and I almost didn't answer it, but I had this gnawing feeling in my gut that something bad was about to happen.

Without checking the caller ID, I answered the phone. "Hello?"

"Skylar, thank God!"

I recognized Ms. Sally's voice instantly, nearly slamming on the brakes at the panic in her voice. "What's wrong? Did something happen to Parker?"

"He's gone," she cried. "A man was just here and he pulled a gun! I'm so sorry! We did everything we could to stop him, but—"

Everything faded away as the sound of my own heartbeat filled my ears. My son was gone. Someone had taken him. My vision tunneled for a moment, and the only thing that brought me back to the present and made me concentrate was the loud honking of the vehicle I almost crashed into.

I couldn't afford to panic right now, no matter how much I wanted to. Parker was out there and he needed me. "I'll be right there," I said, trying not to allow the tingling in my limbs to render me completely incapable of functioning.

I was still five minutes away, but I couldn't handle this on my own. I needed help. I knew Pete would be there for me, but bringing the police in might only make things more dangerous. I needed someone who had no scruples, someone I knew would protect Parker with everything he had.

I squeezed my eyes shut for only a moment as I quickly flicked through my phone log, searching for the number I'd only had for a week. Another car honked and I raised my hand apologetically after nearly cutting him off. "Pull it together," I said as I pressed send.

The phone rang, but he never picked up. I dialed again, wondering if he was screening his calls. Things were strange between Jack and me right now, but I was so sure he would pick up the phone. But again, he didn't answer.

I was practically in tears, unable to think about anything else besides getting to the preschool. But the problem was, Parker wasn't there. Without another thought, I dialed Pete's number.

"Skylar?"

"Pete," I said, my voice coming out breathy and near hysteria. "He's gone. Parker's gone!"

"What? What happened?"

"I don't know. I just got a phone call from Ms. Sally at the preschool," I cried. The more I talked, the harder the tears started to fall. I could barely see as I turned down the road to his school. "She said someone came in with a gun."

"I'm close by. I'll be there soon."

"Pete..." I didn't know what to say. I was terrified. My child was more important to me than life itself. It was my responsibility to keep him safe. He should have been safe at that school, but he wasn't, and now I might never see him again.

"Just stay calm. I need you to breathe for me."

"I'm...I'm trying," I croaked out. I pulled into the parking lot, parking in two spots as the panic finally took over. "I'm... here," I cried. I couldn't have made it any further than this. And now...My whole body was in full meltdown mode, my heart was hammering, and the sick feeling swirling in my stomach threatened to make its presence known.

"Are you still there?"

I was now leaning my forehead on the steering wheel, just trying to breathe. I should be out of my car and running into the building, but I wasn't sure my legs would hold me up right now. Terror unlike anything I'd ever felt before was clawing at my insides.

Sirens jolted me upright. I saw Pete's cruiser pull in and screech to a stop just behind mine. I had never been so thankful for another person in all my life. He flung my door

open and pulled me bodily from the car, holding me close as the damn burst and I cried into his shirt, fisting it for dear life.

It was the worst reaction in the world, and I knew I needed to pull myself together, but my mind wouldn't allow me to think of anything other than the fact that my son was gone. Pete pulled back, gripping me by the arms.

“Skylar, we need to go inside. I need you to think, okay? We need to get Parker back, and the only way to do that is to concentrate. Can you do that for me?”

I nodded, but I wasn't sure I could do it. Not when every time I closed my eyes, all I saw was his face the day I had him in the hospital. But for him, I would do my best.

“Good. Let's go find out everything we can.”

JACK

I WOKE WITH A POUNDING HEADACHE. This was unlike anything I'd felt before. I could hardly open my eyes, and the light in the room was so intense that it amplified the strength of the headache.

I hauled my body off the ground, surprised that they'd left me alone and unchained. That was a mistake on their part, one I'd gladly rectify the moment the door opened. I pressed my hand to the white wall, squinting as I felt my way to the door on the opposite side of the room. With every step, my head throbbed harder. Just standing made me want to throw up. When I finally reached the handle, I gave it a jerk, but nothing happened. I expected it, but hoped they'd consider me too weak to fight back.

Clutching my head, I turned and pressed my back to the wall, about to sink to the floor when the lights intensified, making it too bright to even keep my eyes open. Even through closed lids, the light felt like it was driving nails into my brain. I clutched my head even tighter, trying to squeeze the pain out. My knees gave out and I fell to the floor as nausea rolled in my stomach. The pain was too strong. Bright lights flashed over and over, creating illusions that I couldn't distinguish from reality.

I gripped my shirt, pulling it over my head to darken the room. Then the music started. Heavy metal music burst through the speakers, worsening my headache by a thousand degrees. I wanted to pass out, but the crashing sounds made it impossible. I started to crawl to the corner of the room, my

fingers digging into the floor with every movement. But as my nails scratched the tiles, it brought relief. The pain in my fingers drew my focus, even if only for a brief moment.

But my relief was short-lived. I was hauled off my feet and flung over someone's shoulder. The sudden movement made my head swirl. I was flung on a table and my wrists were locked to the table. I made a fist, trying to break free, but whatever was holding me down was made of thick metal. My ankles were next, but the worst was yet to come. I didn't hear him coming until it was too late. My eyelids were wrenched open, then taped to stay that way. I yelled as the stabbing pain in my head dug deeper into my skull. Then the lights started to flicker, disorienting me so much that it felt like the room was twirling around me.

The music suddenly died, cutting off the pain just enough for me to focus on the man standing beside me. "You thought prison was hell. I'm here to prove you wrong." Baz chuckled, nodding to someone by the wall.

As he walked closer, the choices I'd made recently flashed through my head. I should have listened to Johnny. I should have stayed away from Rafe and ignored the job he wanted me to take. I never should have trusted Rafe.

Rico held up a needle, grinning as he yanked up the sleeve of my shirt and pressed the tip to my vein. "This will be a high like you've never felt before."

There were so many things I wanted to say to this fucker, but the words wouldn't come. The pounding in my head made it impossible to formulate any coherent thoughts, let alone vocalize them. I didn't see him press the plunger. I only felt the cold tip of the needle being pressed into my vein, and then the rush of the drugs entering my system. But this wasn't heroin. Whatever this was, I knew I was fucked. My heart rate kicked up, making me sweat as the whole room swirled at a dizzying speed. Lights burst before my eyes, but my body was slow, unable to react to anything around me.

"Enjoy," Rico laughed.

They headed for the door, flipping a switch on the way. I didn't know what the switch was for until moments later when a current flowed through the table. I felt it in my wrists first, that supercharged electric current that slowly built with every second that passed. It made my skin crawl until I wanted to scratch my own eyeballs out. I twisted and jerked on the table, trying to get away from the pain ricocheting through my body.

And then the music started.

I was trapped, unable to escape the torment that I knew I would be feeling until Baz either moved on to another form of torture or I died.

SKYLAR

I PACED the inside of the preschool, clenching my fists to keep from hitting anyone who came near me. The parents all came by to pick up their kids, all of them looking at me with sympathy when they realized my child was gone.

Against every instinct in my body, I allowed Pete to call the police. Not that I could have stopped him. With so many other kids involved, there was no way the police weren't going to get involved. Now, they were grilling everyone, including me. I told them what I could, but it wasn't any help. I didn't know where Rico would take my son. I had to assume it was him. I couldn't think of anyone else that would go after him.

Pete walked over, his hands on hips with a pained look on his face. "Well, we've talked with everyone. It wasn't Rico."

"What? That can't be right," I insisted. "Who else would take my son?"

"I don't know, but we passed his picture around. Everyone's pretty damn certain it wasn't him."

"Then it was someone that works for him," I shouted.

"Hey, you need to calm down," he said, his voice patronizing.

I knew exactly what would happen if I didn't find my son, and I wasn't going to listen to all this bullshit about how he was a cop and knew what I was feeling.

"When your son goes missing, you can calm down and keep your shit together," I snapped.

“Skylar, I’m on your side and I’m doing everything I can to help.” His eyes flicked around the room. “But if you don’t keep your shit together, my boss is going to make you go to the police station. So, calm the fuck down.”

I closed my eyes, feeling like an idiot. Christ, I was losing it. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he said, trying to soothe me. “Remember the incident in the locker room? It has to be him or someone he works for.”

My eyes flashed up to meet his. “The man who attacked me. Rico had until midnight to deliver something. This is payback?”

“It fits,” Pete nodded. “It’s gotta be him. We have the gang task force trying to identify him back at the station. With any luck, we’ll get a hit.”

I chewed on my nail, unable to stop the nerves rolling through my body. I just kept thinking of all the worst-case scenarios, how even if I found Parker, he might not be alive. That was something I couldn’t deal with, and if I kept letting my mind wander in that direction, I would come apart.

“Okay, what can I do to help?”

“You need to call Rico.”

That was the absolute last thing I wanted to do, but I knew he was right. “What if he doesn’t answer? What do we do then?”

“One thing at a time,” he said, walking me over to a table. He connected something to my phone and handed it to me. “What’s that?”

“Tracking. We need a lock on Rico’s location, so keep him talking.”

I nodded and found his number in my phone. I hadn’t dialed in all the years I’d known who Rico was. Now, I was calling to beg him to save the son he never wanted. As I waited for him to pick up, I kept eye contact with Pete. He was

my rock, the only thing that was saving me from losing my mind.

“Yeah?”

“Rico,” I said, breathing harshly. “It’s Skylar.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment. “Yeah?”

“Rico, I need your help.”

“You need my help?” he said laughingly. “How about you explain why you had all that money saved up at your house? What were you planning to do with that?”

As much as I wanted to turn the tables and yell at him for stealing from me, I had bigger things to worry about right now. “Rico, a man came to see me yesterday at work. I didn’t see who he was, but he said I had to tell him he had until midnight.”

The line was silent.

“Rico?”

“What about it?”

“Was that you?”

“If it was, you did a shitty job of delivering the message.”

“I didn’t know what this guy was talking about! I never even talk to you!”

“So, why are you calling now?”

“Because someone took Parker from the preschool! A man stormed in with a gun and—” I stopped right as I was about to burst into tears. “Please, if you know anything, you have to help me.”

“Sorry, not my problem.”

Anger welled up inside me at his careless attitude. “Fine, I’ll call Baz. Maybe he’ll help get your son back.”

“Wait!” He sighed heavily as if I was a burden he didn’t want to deal with. “Bitches are so fucking difficult.”

Yeah, he was a really good role model for my son. “Will you help me?”

“Fine. I may know who has him.”

“What’s his name?”

“What are you gonna give me?”

My gaze snapped to Pete. Was he serious? “Rico, I don’t have anything to give you. You already stole all my money. What more can I give you?”

“How about that prick living next to you?”

I didn’t know where he was going with this, but I didn’t like it. Whatever Rico wanted, I had no possible way of helping him. “Jack? What does he have to do with anything?”

“Fucking everything. He’s not who he says he is, and I think you know that. I want details before this goes any further.”

“Rico, I—”

But he had already hung up. Turning, I tried to compose myself as I thought of the monumental task ahead of me. How was I supposed to get details on a man I hardly knew in a timeframe that would guarantee my son’s safety?

“Pete...” I shook my head, unable to speak the words floating in my head. Parker was going to die. I would never see him again.

He pulled me into his arms, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. We both were thinking the same thing. Rico set an impossible task for me, and if I failed, my son was the one who would pay the price.

“YOU CAN DO THIS,” PETE SAID AS HE PARKED OUTSIDE MY house.

“You keep saying that, but if I can’t get the answers—”

“Then we’ll go to Baz. He seems protective of you and Parker, even if it is for the wrong reasons.”

I squeezed his hand, wondering where I would be if Pete wasn't here. He walked me through every step, keeping me focused on one thing—getting my son back.

“Alright, I’ll see what I can do. Are you sure you shouldn’t come with?”

He gave a slight shake of his head. “Anything he chooses to share with you, he’s not going to want to do it in front of me.”

Decision made, I opened my door and stepped outside. My steps were hesitant as I walked to his stoop. I was trying to find the right words to convince him to help me. But a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach told me that maybe I didn’t want to know who Jack really was. Deep down, I always knew there was something off with him. For someone who had been to prison, he was too nice. I expected someone hard and callous. But Jack looked out for us when he didn’t have to.

Still, that didn’t mean he would help me now.

I knocked on the door, expecting him to answer right away. His truck was in the driveway, and his bike was parked behind it. But when he didn’t answer after thirty seconds, I knocked again, this time much harder. I glanced back at Pete, shrugging helplessly. How long did I wait? I tried the handle, hoping it was open. I was shocked to find that it was.

Stepping inside, I called out his name, but got no answer. Very carefully, I tiptoed through the house, my heart thundering out of control. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but for some reason, I thought I might find him dead. But it was empty.

Feeling defeated, I headed back to the front door, stopping when a woman stepped inside, shutting the door behind her. Terrified of what I’d just walked into, I stood ramrod straight, desperately trying to figure out a way out of here.

“Skylar, right?”

I licked my lips, wondering if I should answer. She didn’t look like a psycho, though she was dressed in all black. I was no expert, but from where I was standing, she could be a killer.

“Who are you?” I went with.

“My name is Rae. You’re looking for Jack.”

“Wow. You deduced that just from me being in his house?” I snapped. Yeah, I was terrified, but I also felt irritated by yet another person’s presence. “Where’s Pete?” I asked suddenly.

“He’s out in the car.”

“No. He wouldn’t allow you in here with me.”

A smirk spread across her lips. “Yeah, I’m really good at my job. The whole point was that he wouldn’t see me come in here.”

“What do you want?”

“I’m here for Jack.”

My face flamed as I realized that while I was falling for Jack, he was with someone else. “O—oh. Um...”

“Not like that,” she chuckled. “I’m happily married as of a week ago.”

“Then what do you mean that you’re here for Jack?”

“I work with him.”

As far as I knew, Jack didn’t have a job. Then again, I’d only known him for a few weeks. It was very possible he had a life I knew nothing about. But still...wouldn’t he have mentioned...something?

“And where is that?”

“OPS.”

That was vague as shit, and didn’t help me at all with my current problem. “Well, that’s great, but I have to go.”

I walked past her, but she stopped me with just one sentence. “To find your son?”

I spun around, my heart hammering hard in my chest as I stormed over to her. “What do you know?”

“I heard about it on the police scanner.”

“And you just happen to know that it’s my son?” I asked. This was too suspicious. Her showing up here, my son going missing, and somehow it all led back to Jack?

“I don’t know where he is, but when I saw you drive up, I figured you were here for Jack’s help.”

“Yeah, well...he’s not here.”

“That’s because he’s gone missing. He went out for a run this morning and he hasn’t returned.”

“How do you know that? How do you know anything about me or—”

“Like I said, I work for OPS.” When I still didn’t say anything, she continued. “Owens Protective Services.”

“Protective—” I rolled that around in my head, trying to put the pieces together. Granted, I was a little jumbled after everything that happened, but that most definitely did not make sense. Jack couldn’t work for them. He was just in prison.

“I know what you’re thinking. I can explain, but there’s a lot going on that you don’t know about.”

“And you expect me to go with you?”

“If you want to find your son.”

My back stiffened at the request. There were a lot of those going around, and I was finding it rather irritating that I was being pulled into some sick game that I had no desire to play.

“Thanks, but the only way I’m going to find my son is to find Jack.”

“And why’s that?” she asked.

“Because—” Again, I stopped myself. The last thing I should do is start talking about Baz or Rico. That would only bring more pain into my life. “I can’t do this with you.”

I turned to leave, but she once again stopped me. “Would it make you feel better if your cop friend came in here? I’m sure he can verify who I am with a single phone call.”

I desperately wanted to believe that she could help, but my trust in people was seriously depleted.

“Just one phone call,” she repeated.

I pulled out my phone and texted Pete to come inside. Turning around, I crossed my arms over my chest. “You’d better be who you say you are. I don’t have time to waste.”

“Neither do I. I need to find Jack just as much as you do. And I think I know where he is, but I’m still waiting on confirmation.”

“Confirmation of what?”

Her brows furrowed for just a moment before her face cleared and that cool exterior returned. The door opened as Pete stepped inside, taking stock of the new situation.

“This...is not Jack.”

“Another astute observation,” I muttered under my breath.

“Officer Thorson, I’m Rae Dennon.” She stepped forward and held out her hand for him to shake. Being the good officer that he was, he studied her, then held out his hand.

“How is it that you know me?”

“Because I’ve been watching you. I’ll make this quick. I work for Owens Protective Services. I’m here with two other men, and our job was to give Jack backup in the event that he needed it, which I’m pretty sure he does now since he’s missing.”

“Jack works for a protection service?”

“He was undercover. The police chief knows of our involvement. If you could call him and verify that information, we can get to finding Jack, and Skylar’s son.”

And just like that, he was on the phone corroborating her information. I was shocked at how quickly everything moved from there. Pete was on the phone with the chief, getting some kind of rundown of the situation. Meanwhile, I stood in the living room with Rae, wondering what the hell Jack was really into.

“Alright, you’re clear,” Pete said, shoving his phone in his pocket. “The chief said I’m supposed to give support in any way you need.”

“Right now, what I need is for both of you to join me across the street.”

“You’re staying there?” I asked curiously.

“We just got into town. Honestly, I wasn’t expecting for this job to get upended so fast,” Rae said, heading for the door.

Not knowing what else to do, I followed her. “You do know that Baz has everyone on this street on his payroll, right?”

“Yep.”

“And they’re all watching right now.”

“Most of them are actually gone. I have them all under surveillance. But at this point in the game, I think the fact that they know we’re working together is a moot point, don’t you?”

Honestly, I had no fucking clue. I didn’t even know why she was here, other than to save Jack or something. And that was another thing that just didn’t make sense to me.

Once we were inside her house, I stared in amazement at the computers scattered everywhere. But this was only the beginning of it. I followed her down a hall to a bedroom that was set up like some kind of IT department. With monitors everywhere, I could see camera feeds from inside every house, including my own.

“You were spying on me?” I asked angrily.

“Again, this was just set up. And it was more for your safety. Jack didn’t like that you and Parker lived here by yourselves, and after Rico broke in and stole all your money, he wanted to be able to keep an eye on you.”

“You’re telling me that Jack—the same Jack that was in prison—had cameras installed in my house to look out for me?”

She sighed, walking around me to her computer table. “Look, this will go a lot faster if I don’t have to explain everything twice to you.”

I shook my head in baffled amusement. “I’m sorry, but... this is all...so...”

“I know. And you were never supposed to know who Jack was. Honestly, we thought he would be out here for years trying to gather information on Baz.”

“For what reason?”

She cocked her head at me. “To take him down.”

I was beginning to feel light-headed. This had to be some twisted joke. There were too many things happening all at once. I didn’t care about taking down Baz or why Jack was here. All I wanted was my son back.

“That’s what Rico wants to know about,” I whispered.

“What?”

“I needed Rico’s help to get my son back. He said he wanted to know details about Jack—about who he really is. I need to call him,” I said, pulling out my phone. But Rae snatched it out of my hands, throwing it to the ground and smashing it with her foot.

“What are you doing?” I screeched.

“You can’t call Rico.”

“I have to! My son is missing! He’s four years old!”

“And Jack is missing,” she said emphatically. “We think he was taken by Baz and Rico. All we know at this point is that he’s most likely inside an abandoned hospital. I’m guessing they already started interrogating him, which means—” She pursed her lips as she stared at me. “Which means torture. Jack’s been through enough shit. Do you really want to call Rico and tell him who Jack is when he’s already defenseless?”

I didn’t. But I also couldn’t let my son suffer. I pressed my hand to my forehead, turning away from her. I knew that Jack was a good man. I felt it when I was with him. No, it wasn’t

right to add to whatever was already happening to him. But my son...he was just a child. He didn't deserve any of this.

"I'm assuming you have a plan," Pete finally spoke up.

"We do. Sort of. We're going to extract Jack, but we need some additional guns."

"The police department—"

"No," she shook her head. "Sorry, but we can't afford any mistakes on this one. I'm sure you're qualified for a lot of things, but this is not one of them. I won't risk Jack's life."

Pete didn't look too pleased about that. "I may not be as qualified, but I'm not incompetent. I can still help."

"Fine, you can cover outside the hospital," Rae answered reluctantly. "In all likelihood, they'll need a quick getaway."

"I can do that," he said, turning to me.

I took a deep breath, blowing it out. "So, we get Jack back and then what?"

"We need to find out who would want to hurt Rico," Rae said.

"I can help with that," Pete spoke up. "The guys on the gang task force have been looking into Rico. They might have something for us."

"Good. In the meantime, I really need you to stay calm," Rae said to me. "I know you want your son back, but moving too fast could cost us in the end. We need to have good intel before we make a move."

I desperately wanted to trust her, but all I could think about was my son, scared to death, waiting for me to get him. Everyone else had a job to do.

Mine was to wait.

JACK

THE MUSIC STOPPED SUDDENLY and the lights dimmed. But the constant throbbing in my head was something that would never go away. I couldn't think of anything other than wanting to slit my own throat to make it all stop. It didn't make sense. There was no fucking way Baz could be this good at torture. He was just an arms dealer. This was military grade shit he was doing. When an arms dealer wanted information, he beat the shit out of people. He didn't strap a person to a table and tape his eyes open.

The door swung open and the man of the hour walked in. Not that I could see much at this point. My eyes were dried out and the pounding in my head made it impossible to focus on anything. But I recognized his gait, the way his shoes clicked on the floor when everyone else shuffled along.

“B—back for more?” I croaked out, unable to speak clearly from lack of water. It could have been hours or days. I didn't really know.

“Are you ready to tell me yet?”

“What...would you...like to know?”

“Who are you?”

I stayed silent.

“I thought you said this would work?”

He wasn't talking to me. There was someone else in the room I hadn't picked up on. My ears twitched as I tried to pick

up any signs or sounds. Whoever he was, he remained silent. But there was something in the air...a scent I recognized.

Fuck, I knew who was here.

“Trust me,” Rafe grumbled. “This is the way to break him.”

“I could cut off his fingers and he’d speak.”

“Actually, if you cut off his fingers, you’d just have a man lying on the table with no fingers,” Rafe chuckled.

“You say you know how to break him,” Baz snapped. “Then you must have some idea of who he is.”

“Yes, but I need to be certain.”

I really fucking hoped Rafe was on my side. It was hard to say at this point. It didn’t exactly make me feel very confident that he was standing next to Baz, watching him—no, helping him torture me. But Rafe always was a little unconventional.

“Fuck your ways,” Baz snapped. I heard the slice of the blade against metal right before it was slammed down into the meat of my thigh.

I clenched my jaw, trying my best not to scream. Holding back the pain wasn’t something I was unaccustomed to, but being strapped to a table with bright lights and music blaring had already done a number on my psyche.

Baz moved into my line of sight, his beady eyes glaring down at me. “Tell me who you are!”

The currents ignited again at my wrists and a blinding shock of pain tore through my body. My already clenched teeth felt like they were about to rattle out of my head. I pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth as best I could, praying I didn’t bite it off as the electricity wreaked havoc on my body.

“Enough!” Rafe shouted.

The current died and my body melted against the table. My breaths huffed out in heavy pants, but I knew it was far from over.

I heard a scuffle, and then a body thumped against the wall. “I fucking told you to let me handle this,” Rafe snapped.

“I would if you were doing your job. You assured me you could break him!”

I desperately wanted to close my eyes and drown out their voices. Every time they yelled, it felt like my brain was being scrambled again. I wouldn’t give up any information, but that didn’t mean this would end quickly. And Rafe was no guarantee that the pain wouldn’t continue. His agenda was much different than mine.

A tortured yell slipped from my lips as the electric current kicked on again, this time more powerful than anything I’d dealt with so far. My teeth rattled in my head and my whole body shook on the table. Little by little, I felt the room fading around until darkness finally covered my eyes. Death was close, and I welcomed it, praying for it to swallow me whole and end the pain.

“Don’t go yet,” Hannah whispered.

Her face appeared in front of me, her sad eyes begging me not to leave this earth. But I was tired of fighting other people’s battles. I was tired of always losing. The one person I vowed to protect was gone, and the woman and child I thought I could keep safe were out there all alone.

“You still have fight in you,” she pleaded. A tear slipped down her cheek, and that’s when I felt her hand in mine, squeezing me tightly. “My big brother never gives up.”

“It’s over,” I mumbled.

“It’s not even close to being over. Fight!”

“Just...wanna...go home,” I whispered to her. If only I could go back in time, if I could go back to when I was just a kid and...I would find a way to change what happened. She would still be here. My crazy kid sister who thought I hung the moon and stars. I wouldn’t let her down.

“You are home,” she whispered. “Don’t leave them.”

A loud crash filtered into my brain, reminding me where I was. Her face slowly dimmed until I was back in that room, all alone.

Except, I wasn't alone.

Johnny came crashing through the door, staring at me in horror. "What the fuck did you do?"

The tape was torn from my eyes and the metal cuffs were released from around my hand. I thought I saw Jason in my peripheral vision, but at this point, I couldn't be sure.

"It took you long enough," Rafe grumbled.

"If you'd fucking clued us in, we could have been here sooner," Johnny snapped. "You stupid fucker," Johnny grinned down at me. "Lying around on the job. Weren't you supposed to be breaking Baz?"

I grinned up at him. Well, it was more like a half-hearted attempt at a grin. I wasn't sure that my lips actually moved. "Took you...long enough," I breathed out. I was barely aware that the current had stopped. I hadn't even noticed.

"Blame Rafe," he said, sliding his hand behind my back and lifting me up.

The room spun as soon as I moved upright. Not even my eyes would close at this point, and the current that once flowed through my veins still rattled every inch of my body, making me feel like a live wire. I was so fucking tired. Not even the idea of getting out of this place could get me moving at this point. My body was breaking, and my mind was shattered.

"We have to move," Jason snapped.

Slowly, my eyes moved around the room until they landed on Baz. He was bleeding out on the floor, his eyes staring sightlessly at the wall. That wasn't a very encouraging sign for the job.

My arms were flung over Jason and Johnny's shoulders and I was hoisted off the table. But the moment my feet hit the floor, I knew I wasn't walking out of here. My legs gave out,

and if it weren't for my brothers, I would have collapsed on the floor.

"Hey, old man," Johnny snapped. "We have to get out of here. Make those legs work."

"Fuck off," I grumbled.

"I need you to get your ass moving," he commanded. "Parker was taken. We have to get him back."

The words flitted through my mind, but didn't really make any sense. Parker...what the fuck did he have to do with any of this?

Johnny gripped my jaw, forcing me to look at him. "I know you're fucking hurting, but you have to pull it together. Skylar needs you. You hear me?"

"They need you, Jack. You have to go."

I squeezed my eyes shut for the first time in hours, trying to push Hannah's voice from my head. She wasn't here.

"I'm always with you, Jack. You can't give in. Go get your family back."

"They're not mine," I mumbled.

"Who's not yours?" Johnny asked.

"You did the best you could for me."

"I failed you."

"But you won't fail them. You can do this. Try for me."

"I've got nothing left," I muttered. She didn't understand what she was asking.

"Okay, what's going on here," Jason said. "Who's he talking to?"

"My brother would never let down the woman he loves. This isn't you, Jack. You don't give up."

"Never said I loved her," I mumbled to Hannah.

"Alright, buddy. Time to get you out of here," Johnny said, hauling me up again.

“You may not love her yet, but I’ve seen the future. She’s the one for you. This is your chance to have what we never did. And that kid—he’s going to change your life for the better and give you the chance to truly be a father. Trust me!”

“Is he okay?” I whispered.

“He will be. You have to find him. You have the strength. Dig deep and find it!”

I wasn’t sure if it was her words or my inner strength willing me to move forward. My fingers dug into Jason and Johnny’s shoulders as I forced my feet to move, to get out of this hellhole. Sky was waiting on me, and I wouldn’t let her down.

JOHNNY

I WASN'T sure what lit a fire under Jack's ass, but he was moving, practically jogging to the exit with our help. But this couldn't last forever. He would crash when the pain became intolerable. The condition he was in...I couldn't stand the thought that he was in there this whole time, being tortured by one of our own.

Rafe turned back, the harsh look in his eyes unflinching as he swung the door open and cleared the hall for us to exit. Jason and I shared a knowing look. Rafe had some explaining to do, and he wasn't getting out of it with his usual bullshit responses.

"I need a weapon," Jack ordered, holding out his hand.

"Maybe you should let—"

I was cut off with a steely glare from Jack. Sighing, I pulled my backup piece and handed it over. "Just don't shoot us."

"I'm good," he said, checked the weapon, then nodded to Rafe.

Together, they cleared the corner and then the hallway. It wasn't lost on me that Jack should be at the back, not at the front where we were uncertain if he could hold his own. After what happened, no one would blame him. We made it to the exit, but we wouldn't be alone for long. The distraction we created would soon bring hell right to our door.

Rafe squatted next to the door and Jack followed. He was breathing hard and his eyes were bright red from whatever

drugs they pushed into his system. Sweat poured from his body, but he didn't seem to notice.

"I'll go left and draw their fire. You take Jack and get the hell out of here."

He started to stand, but I grabbed him by the shirt and yanked him back down. The menacing look on his face would have once had me deferring to him, but those times were long gone. "Not a fucking chance in hell. You have a lot of explaining to do. Not to mention, the job is totally fucked. We're going to need a miracle to get the hell out of this town alive."

"It shouldn't be too hard for you to get out," he snapped. "You're trained for this shit."

"Parker is missing," Jack snapped.

"Who the fuck is Parker?" Rafe asked.

"The kid...the grandson of Baz," he spluttered, his eyelids moving at a rapid pace. If he was coming down from whatever he was on, this was going to fall apart fast.

"He's not our problem."

"What the fuck do you mean?" Jack snapped, grabbing Rafe by the throat. With more strength than I thought he had, he slammed Rafe against the wall and squeezed. "You stuck me in that hellhole and put me in the middle of these people. Skylar and her son need help. They trust me."

"I didn't tell you to fall for her," Rafe gritted out, trying to pry Jack's hands from his neck. But Jack was superhuman at the moment. There was no stopping him.

"If you think for one fucking second that we're leaving them behind, I swear to God—Ah!" He ducked his head, his hands squeezing Rafe's neck even harder as he screamed in agony. Rafe was ten seconds from passing out, and the pain Jack was feeling didn't seem to be abating.

I wrenched one of Jack's fists from around Rafe's throat and forced him to look at me. "What's going on?"

"My head!" he screamed. "Fuck!"

Rafe was gasping for air, but I didn't give a shit about him right now. Jack was curled up on his haunches, squeezing his head as his face turned red. Jason grabbed his arms from behind, forcing him to sit upright as I tried to get through to him.

"Breathe! You have to breathe through it!" I shouted.

His bloodshot eyes were slitted as he stared at me in pain. Finally, after what felt like minutes, he gasped for air and his muscles loosened as he collapsed to the ground.

"That's it," I coaxed him. "Breathe through it."

He shook his head slightly, but it was clear that even that was an effort. I took the gun from where he dropped it on the ground and tucked it back into my ankle holster. If that happened again, he could kill someone.

"We need to move," I hissed at Rafe. "You're coming with us, and you're going to explain what the fuck happened in there."

His jaw was set hard and it was clear I was fucking with his plan, but until we had answers, he wasn't going anywhere. I'd make fucking sure of that.

"Let's go," he said, standing at the door.

I grabbed Jack's arm and hauled him upright, but didn't need to help too much. Whatever happened, his eyes were clearer now and he seemed to have pushed the pain away. He needed a doctor, but until we could get him to one, hopefully Skylar could help.

"I'll cover you," Jason said, eyeing Rafe warily. "Make sure Rafe doesn't skip on us."

I nodded and tightened my grip on Jack. "Let's move."

Rafe thrust the door open, firing as soon as we were clear of the door. I took off with Jack, keeping my hand latched around his arm in case he went down. But he kept up, pushing himself beyond his limits as we ran across the parking lot. Rapid gunfire spit at us, eating up the pavement under our feet, but nothing touched us.

“Fuck!”

At the sound of Jason’s voice, I spun, watching as he hit the ground. “Get to the car!” I shouted to Jack.

Men poured out of the building, all of them armed to the teeth. I fired off several shots, taking down the closest targets. Jason was back on his feet, firing at the men rushing us as he backpedaled toward us. Rafe, on the other hand, was nowhere to be seen.

Jason fired two more shots, then shouted, “Move!”

I emptied my magazine, then took off to the car. Jack was already inside, loading a weapon as Pete fired from the driver’s side over the trunk. As he covered me, I ran for the car, sliding across the hood. I flung the driver’s side door open, shouting for Pete. “Get in the fucking car!”

He fired two more shots, then got in the back. I heard him reloading his weapon as I put the car in drive.

“You up for this?” I asked Jack.

He shot me an irritated look, one that I knew all too well. He might not be back, but he was good enough for the time being. I hit the gas and spun the wheel as Jack lowered the window and fired at the enemy. Bullets hit the glass, shattering the windshield, but I punched the gas and drove right through the men headed for us. Some of them dove out of the way, but a few I ran over, and I didn’t feel bad about that at all.

I thought for sure Rafe would have ditched us, but instead, he grabbed Jason and ran for the car. I laid down cover fire as they got in, then got the hell out of there.

“Where to?” I asked Rafe, glaring at him in the rearview mirror.

He sighed, shaking his head. “The south side of town. Let’s go get the kid.”

JACK

“YOU KNOW WHERE HE IS?” I snapped, spinning around in my seat.

“Watch it,” Rafe said in a threatening tone.

That might have worked on me at one point, but now I knew better. Rafe was in that room with me. I didn’t know why, but I had the feeling that it didn’t really matter.

“If you knew where he was being held, why the fuck didn’t you say something?”

“Because the kid isn’t the job,” he said harshly. “Believe it or not, we’re not here for the little guy. This is about the big picture, something you keep conveniently forgetting.”

I had to laugh at him for that. “You think I forgot the objective? I could have gotten out of prison and run, but I went with Baz to get you information, not that it really mattered since you didn’t stay in touch one fucking time while I was on the inside.”

“I got the warden’s position,” he argued. “I was there.”

“Yeah, you really did a great job looking out for me.”

“You knew the job going in,” he snapped.

“Alright, let’s put this argument on hold until we get the kid back,” Johnny cut in. “We need to get him to safety, then we can hash out the rest of this.”

He was right. I had to think about Parker right now. Nothing else mattered at this point. “We need to get Skylar and

Rae out of there,” I said, trying to think despite the pounding in my head. “They’re not safe.”

“Rae’s already packing,” Johnny informed me.

“Is Skylar with her?” Pete asked.

“Yeah, she’s getting her out,” Johnny told him. “We’ll meet up after we get Parker back.”

“Bullshit. You can’t leave in the middle of the job,” Rafe snapped.

“There is no job. Baz is dead.”

“The job is to get inside the organization. Yes, it would have been easier with you on Baz’s side, but now that he’s out of the way, you have the opportunity to take over.”

“I couldn’t take over even if I wanted to. In case you didn’t notice, I just had my brain scrambled, and from what it looked like, it was on your orders!” I shouted, immediately regretting it when my head pounded even harder.

I squeezed my eyes shut and took a calming breath. I had to hold it together until we got Skylar and her son. Then I could lay low for a while and forget about all this shit.

“Think what you want about me, but this is our best shot. I’m telling you to go back in.”

I slid an angry look Rafe’s way. “I don’t fucking work for you anymore. You dropped us, and none of us have forgotten that.”

“Fucking pathetic,” he hissed. “What the fuck happened to the three of you?”

“I don’t think you want to push us right now,” Johnny said. “We’re all a little tired of your shit. The job is over. Your plans to take down the organization are over. You have no more people in place. No one’s coming to help you out anymore.”

“We’re getting closer. If you would just—”

“No,” I said, leveling a glare at him. “It’s over.”

He knew there was no point in arguing with me. There was nothing left to say at this point. A few years ago, we were by his side all the way. But things changed and Rafe was no longer by our side, leading us through all his battles. It changed my perspective, as well as Johnny and Jason's. If he hadn't sent us to work with his brother, we might never have changed. We'd still be going through life doing what he wanted us to do without any thought to what we could have if we only let go of the bloodlust Rafe taught us to carry around.

But those days were over. It was time to move on with life and try to live it as best I could while I still had a chance to.

"Here," Rafe said, breaking the silence in the car. "We'll have to be fast. If these guys have the kid, there's no telling what they've already done to him."

"Who are they?" I asked, staring out the window at the shitty apartment that looked condemned.

"People you don't want to fuck with. They've all been to prison and they're not exactly willing to live by society's rules. They dabble in anything from drugs to prostitution to slave trading. If they took the kid, it's because Rico fucked them over on something."

"Which means we don't have a lot of time," Jason surmised.

"If he's even still here," Rafe added. "If Rico didn't give them what they wanted, the kid could be dead already."

I hated to admit that he was right. It was likely that Parker wasn't here anymore. They would have wanted to get rid of him right away or send a message of some kind. But Rico was with me at the abandoned hospital. If he cared at all for his son, he wasn't showing it.

"What's the plan?" I asked Rafe.

"That depends on if you want to send a message to Rico."

"No," I said immediately. "We get the kid and get out. I'm not going to be the one to tell Skylar that her kid is still gone because we were too busy fucking around with her ex."

“Whoa,” Pete interjected. “As much as I want to get Parker back, we can’t just rush in there. These guys don’t fuck around. I’ve seen their work before. They cut their losses if they don’t get what they want. If we storm in there and don’t know exactly where Parker is, they could decide he’s not worth the trouble and kill him.”

I glanced back at the building, knowing that if Parker was in there, he was terrified. I was so close. I could get him and run. But Pete was right. We couldn’t take that chance with his life. We needed a plan.

“Pete’s right,” I sighed. “We need more intel.”

If Rafe wanted to argue, he hid it well. “Then we need to go to my safe house.”

I gritted my teeth in annoyance that he had a safe house nearby. After all the time that I’d been here, this was the first I was hearing about this. I nodded to Johnny and we drove away from the apartments. As much as I didn’t trust Rafe right now, he had more intel than I did.

“Did you find out anything useful while you were in the neighborhood?”

“You mean in the past few weeks?” I asked sarcastically. “No, if anything, it proved what a useless waste of time the whole op was. Baz was never going to let me into the fold. In fact, he already knew I wasn’t who I said I was.”

“I figured that might happen,” he grumbled.

“Thanks for letting me know.”

“Where am I going?” Johnny asked, interrupting our argument.

We drove the rest of the way in silence aside from Rafe giving directions. As angry as I was at Rafe, I had to shove it aside until we found Parker. That kid was innocent. He didn’t deserve to be used as a bargaining chip. I had seen a lot of terrible shit working for Rafe. The scenarios of what could be happening to the kid right now almost made me throw up.

“You okay?” Johnny asked quietly.

“What?” I turned to face him, watching his eyes drop to my shaking hand.

I hadn't even noticed, but as I took account of what was going on with my body, I could feel the usual withdrawal symptoms starting. It would only be a couple more hours before I needed a hit. Whatever we were planning, we had to do it fast.

“Fine,” I muttered, turning away from him.

Johnny pulled into a long driveway, past a fence that shut behind us. I immediately got out, stretching for the first time since we left that facility. The headache had receded slightly, but I could still feel it behind my eyes. At least with the sun setting, the light wouldn't be as much of a problem.

I started to move, but a rush of dizziness washed over me, causing me to lean hard against the hood of the car. Within seconds, Jason was at my side, holding me up in case I fell.

“I'm fine,” I snapped, not wanting his concern right now.

“Yeah, you keep saying that, but you're about to keel over.”

Dark spots flooded my vision the longer I stood there. The shakes I felt in my hand were now flooding my entire system, but this wasn't because of the drugs.

“I need some water,” I croaked out.

“Let's get you inside.”

“Just give me a minute,” I snapped as he tried to grab my arm.

Fuck, I wasn't a kid. I was just dehydrated. I hadn't noticed sooner because of the adrenaline flooding my system, but as I leaned against the car, it was clear as day. I took a deep breath, releasing it slowly as my heart rate started to slow. But even as I calmed my racing heart, my chest tightened painfully. Tingles pricked my fingers and nausea swirled in my stomach. Fuck, I was a mess.

I started to slide down the hood of the car, completely incapable of stopping my own momentum. I was going down,

and as the darkness swarmed me, it wasn't Hannah's face I saw.

It was Skylar, and she was pleading for me to save her son.

“HE’S BACK.”

I peeled my eyes open with a groan. I felt like I'd been hit with a truck, and that was putting it mildly. Johnny's ugly face was the first I saw, followed by Libby. She was staring down at me like I was on death's door. I was nowhere near that. I'd been there before, and this sure as fuck didn't feel anything like the peace I felt the last time I saw those pearly gates.

I started to sit up, but Johnny shoved me back down. “Just stay there, fucker. You have no idea how fucking heavy you are.”

“He can't be that heavy. He looks like he's lost a ton of weight,” Libby pointed out.

“That'll happen in prison,” I muttered, ignoring Johnny as I pushed into a sitting position. “Fuck, what happened?”

“You passed out in the driveway,” Johnny grunted. “Jason should have let your ass hit the ground.”

I winced as my elbow pinched when I bent it. A needle protruded from my vein, leading to a bag hanging on a hook beside the bed. That explained why I was feeling better. I wasn't going to pass out anymore, but the pins and needles under the skin were getting worse. I needed something soon.

“You were severely dehydrated,” Johnny snapped. “You could have fucking said something.”

My eyes flicked to Libby again. She was watching me like I was going to croak at any moment. “Nice to see that you'll visit me when I'm about to die,” I teased.

“Well, I would have visited sooner, but all the men in my life like to keep secrets from me.”

“As I recall, you kept a hell of a lot from all of us.”

“Touché,” she said with a grin. “Do you want something to eat?”

The last fucking thing I wanted was food, but if it got her away from me for a few minutes, I’d take it. “Bread,” I muttered.

She shoved Johnny out of the way and sat down beside me, wrapping her arms around my neck. Her hair tickled my face as she whispered in my ear, “Don’t ever scare me like that again.”

“You don’t get scared,” I grumbled.

When she pulled back, for just a second I saw the vulnerability in her eyes. “Everyone gets scared of something.”

Her thumb brushed the scruff of my jaw as she stood and walked away from me. As much as I respected Libby, she was a reminder of the events that led me here to begin with. She stood proudly beside Rafe, and for that, she would never truly be on our side.

“Now that she’s gone, what’s really going on?”

“I need a hit,” I admitted quietly.

“You want me to help you get fucked up?” he snarled. “Is that really all you fucking care about right now?”

“I didn’t ask for this,” I snapped, staring at him intently. “Why don’t you ask Rafe why the fuck he allowed Baz to shoot me up.”

He swore under his breath as he turned from me, pacing the room. “I didn’t know.”

“I haven’t been using,” I confessed. “Not since you came that first time.”

Johnny took off his cowboy hat, running his fingers through his long hair in frustration. “Heroin?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “It couldn’t have been just heroin. It didn’t mellow me out. It fucked with my head and

made everything so much more intense. I felt like I was burning from the inside out.”

“And now?”

Fuck, I hated talking about this shit, admitting that I couldn’t do what I needed to do without a little help. “I don’t need a lot. I just...need to take the edge off.”

“What you need is to stay here and get that shit out of your system.”

My head snapped up and anger washed over me. “No. There’s no fucking way I’m sitting it out while that kid is out there. It’s my fault he’s gone.”

“How do you figure? You didn’t get him into this shit. Rico did.”

“They were off the grid until I came along,” I snapped. “I started watching over them. I went with Rico to that meet. I should have known what he was up to and done something about it.”

None of it actually made any sense, and I knew that. But my job was to protect people, and even next door to the two of them, I still managed to fail. I would never be able to look Sky in the eyes again if I didn’t do everything possible to save her son.

Sighing, I put it all out there for him, knowing it was the only way he would truly understand. “I can’t sit here and do nothing. If we don’t get him back...” I hated to even say it. “If we don’t get him back, I have to be able to tell her I did everything I possibly could.”

“Fine.”

Surprised, I looked up at him, wondering what the catch was.

“I’ll get you what you need, but when we get him back, I never want to see you touch that shit again.”

That was a promise I could keep. “I swear.”

When he walked out of the room, I pulled the IV from my arm and slowly stood, grateful I could actually keep my feet under me this time. I shuffled across the floor to the bathroom, shutting the door behind me. The bright light of the bathroom nearly had me turning off the light, but the reflection in the mirror had me pausing.

The face that stared back at me was one I hardly recognized anymore. Hannah would be so fucking ashamed of how I turned out. Even trying to do good, I ended up failing her. Walking over to the sink, I rested my hands on the countertop, studying the eyes that stared back at me. I didn't like what I saw, so dull and lifeless. I had to make a change, and that meant no more working for Rafe. No more chasing causes that would get me nowhere. I had to live my life to make a difference, not tearing it apart to make me feel less.

I hadn't really realized until this moment that's what I was doing this whole time. Every job I did for Rafe tore me apart, punished the kid that messed up and got his sister killed. I was putting myself in these situations as punishment for what I should have done. It twisted me into a man my sister would have hated. It all had to stop now.

I turned on the tap and cupped my shaky hands under the faucet, then splashed the cool water over my face. The shock to my system wasn't nearly enough to take the edge off, but helped me focus on what I needed to do.

"You're better than this, Jack. You know what you have to do."

"I know," I whispered. "I won't let you down."

"You never have."

Her voice felt like it was right beside me. I knew the drugs had altered my brain, making me see and hear things that weren't there. But it still soothed something inside me to hear her voice again.

"She needs you. Her son needs you. Be strong enough to fight this and become the man she can depend on."

I nodded, closing my eyes. Hannah smiled at me and a wave of memories pushed through me. I gasped at the overwhelming feeling of love that surrounded me. I didn't know if any of it was real or if it was all in my head. But for a moment, it felt like Hannah was standing beside me, choosing to fight this battle with me. I could feel the soft touch of her fingers wrapping around mine, and I knew I wasn't alone.

“I will not let her down.”

RAE

“WE NEED TO GO!” I shouted to Skylar.

There was no time to take the equipment with us. Only the bare minimum could be brought, enough to keep me in contact with the team and out of enemy hands. If we didn’t leave now, there was a good chance we’d never be seen again.

Skylar rushed to my side. “What do you mean? We don’t have Parker back yet!”

“We’ll get him back,” I told her, slinging my backpack over my shoulder. “Right now, we have to get the hell out of here.”

I ran to the computer, uploading the virus that would spread to every computer in the house, destroying any information stored on the hard drives. I hit enter and ran for the front door. Peering outside, it appeared clear, but that didn’t mean it was.

Bending down, I grabbed the gun in my ankle holster and held it out to Skylar. “Do you know how to use this?”

“No,” she said, staring at me in disbelief.

“You’re gonna learn really fast. Only use this if you’re intending to kill someone.”

“I don’t want to kill anyone!” she shouted hysterically. “I’m not doing this!”

I grabbed her by the arms, shaking her to get her to focus. “Alright, calm down. Just...stay behind me. When I tell you to do something, you do it without question. Understood?”

She gave a jerky nod, then bit her quivering lip.

“It’ll be okay. I’ll get you out of here.”

I spun back around and carefully opened the front door, watching the shadows as I stepped outside. When nothing immediately happened, I started down the steps. I was most worried about the men staying in the houses at the end of the street. That’s where Baz’s top men stayed.

“Skylar, I need you to get to the SUV, now.”

I heard her move behind me as I backed up. When I was sure it was clear, I turned and ran for the driver’s side. Hopping in, I tossed my bag in the back seat and set my spare gun in the center console.

We were almost out of the neighborhood when I spotted the first tail. “I need you to get in the back and get down.”

“Why, what’s—”

Gunfire shattered the back window, forcing me to jerk the wheel and take a hard right down a street I didn’t want to take. I hit the gas, heading right for the interstate. I had wanted to stick to the side roads, keeping all the action off the major roads, but that wasn’t an option any longer.

“What’s going on?” Skylar shouted, covering her head as more gunfire pinged off the truck.

“Just stay down!”

I picked up speed as we took the ramp to the interstate. The single vehicle behind us became three, then a few more than that. “Now would be a really fucking good time for backup,” I muttered.

But when you were alone, you were forced to be creative, to take measures you normally wouldn’t. I swerved in and out of traffic, thankful that rush hour was in the other direction.

“Skylar, we have a lot of company, and I really need you to pull up your big girl panties and grab a gun.”

“What if I didn’t wear them?” she shouted.

“Then pull up that thong!”

I barely saw the shake of her head as she grabbed the gun on the console and held it in her hands. “Is this thing loaded?”

“I would be really bad at my job if it wasn’t.”

“Okay, so...I just point and shoot?”

“I actually need you to do something else for me. There’s a big black bag in the back seat. I need you to get a few things for me.”

“Okay,” she answered, her voice rattling as she climbed over the seat and pulled the bag onto the seat beside her. “What am I looking for?”

“Something that looks like tacks.”

I swerved around a car that was going slow in the fast lane. Laying on the horn, I nearly clipped another vehicle trying to get around the lady on her phone.

“I think I found them!” Skylar shouted, holding out a bag of silver tacks.

“That’s it. I need you to throw them out the window.”

“What?” she screeched. “That’ll cause an accident!”

“That’s the point,” I said, glancing back at her. “It’s them or us.”

I saw the indecision on her face, but she rolled down the window and dumped the bag out the window. I picked up speed, wanting to get out of the crash zone. It didn’t take long for chaos to erupt. Multiple vehicles crashed behind us, leaving a wake of destruction that was bound to slow down anyone following us.

With a good distance between us and anyone following, I grabbed my phone and dialed Dash.

“Rae, how nice of you to call.”

“Dash, I need a place to lay low for a while.”

“And you called me? That’s so sweet of you.”

“I called you because you’re the IT guy at the office right now,” I spat.

“I think you called because you need me. What’s wrong? Did you lose your equipment?”

“Dash,” I gritted out. “Find me a safe house.”

“Sure, sure. No problem. I’m pulling up locations right now.”

“I would already have them,” I retorted.

“You know, this rivalry you have with me is totally unfounded. You know I’m just as good as you.”

“If you were as good as me, you would already be sending me the address.”

“I don’t know if anyone’s ever told you this, but usually when you need someone’s help, you try not to insult them.”

“It comes naturally when I speak to you. Do you have a location for me?”

“I do,” he sighed. “Unfortunately, I’m not going to be able to say anything until you admit how much you need me.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Not even a little.”

I could hear the laughter in his voice, how much he was enjoying me needing his help. And if it weren’t for the fact that I had a woman relying on me to keep her safe, I would hang up the phone and take my chances, but I wasn’t that proud.

“Fine. I need your help, Dash.”

“Hmmm, that was okay, I guess. You can do better.”

“What more do you want me to say?” I snapped.

“I think you know exactly what I want to hear.”

When I got home, he was going to pay for this. I gritted my teeth, forcing the words from my mouth. “Dash, I don’t know how I would do my job every day without you. The way you hacked the electronic locks on the cells in the mountain hideaway was a feat most people like us couldn’t achieve. I’m astounded by your skills and in envy of...your prowess.”

Skylar giggled beside me, covering it up the moment I glared at her. “Sorry,” she whispered.

“Who’s in the SUV with you?” Dash asked.

“None of your business.”

“Hold on, I’m pulling up the video. Holy shit, who is she?”

“You’re just now pulling up the feed? What’s wrong with you? I would have done that the moment you called.”

“Yeah, well, I believe in not invading other people’s privacy.”

“No, you don’t. I’ve seen your blackmail drive.”

“Hey, that’s private!”

“Then you shouldn’t have kept it on the work server. And while you’re at it, you might want to do a better job encrypting that file labeled Dash’s Dance-off.”

“Alright, alright!” he shouted, clearly distressed by my find. “Fine, I’ll do whatever you want.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“You can never speak about what you saw on that video.”

“That depends,” I said a little too gleefully.

“On what?”

“On whether or not I need to use it again. It’s nice to have something like that in my pocket, just in case you decide to piss me off. Now, send me the address or I’ll upload that particular video for everyone at OPS to see. And then you’ll have Fox paying you a visit. I can only imagine how that’s going to go.”

“You know, I really fucking hate you.”

The line went dead and I grinned to myself. Yes, Dash was good, but I was better.

“What was that about?” Skylar asked.

“Just a little work rivalry gone—”

The blinding headlights smashed into my side, sending the SUV swerving out of control and flipping, rolling over twice before coming to a stop with me hanging upside down. My neck ached from being tossed around, but it was my left side I was the most concerned with. My arm was hanging loosely at my side and the gash in my leg with the piece of metal sticking out was a tad concerning.

“Skylar?” I asked, my voice weaker than I’d like.

“I’m good,” she mumbled. “I think.”

“We need to get out of here.”

I heard her release her belt and fall to the roof that was now where our feet should be.

“Don’t move,” she said, her voice shaking. “You have... multiple contusions and—” She sucked in a breath before reaching across me, pressing her fingers around the metal piece in my leg. “That’s really bad. We need an ambulance.”

“That’s not going to happen. Sky, listen to me. I need you to find out where the other vehicle is. Look out the window.”

She nodded and crawled into the back. I was kicking myself for getting injured when she needed me to protect her.

“Oh God. They’re behind us. They’re getting out.”

“How many are there?” I asked, feeling around for my gun. My holster was no longer on my pants. I felt around for it. I had to be on the roof of the car somewhere.

“Um...two.”

“Two vehicles or two men?”

“Two men. They have guns.”

“Skylar, you have to do what I say, okay? Sky!” My fingers brushed over the leather of my holster, but it was just out of reach.

“Yeah, I hear you.”

“Grab a gun out of the bag and hide it in the back of your jeans. They’re going to try and take you from the vehicle.

Once they have you outside, they'll force you into their vehicle. You can't let that happen. If you get in their vehicle, I'll never be able to find you."

"What do I do?" she asked, her voice on the verge of panic.

"Use the gun. You do whatever you have to do to get away from them. You run and hide. Do not come back for me." I stretched further, my entire left side pulling painfully as my fingers brushed the butt of the gun.

"But—"

"Do not argue with me," I snapped. "You do whatever you have to and you get away!"

The door on my side creaked, but wouldn't open as the man tugged. It was too banged up. "There she is!" the man shouted, moving to the back of the vehicle.

With a surge of adrenaline, I shoved my body as far forward as I could, finally grabbing the gun by the tips of my nails. With my arm laying limply at my side, I had to twirl it with my fingers on the roof of the vehicle until I could grip it.

I heard Sky scream as the glass broke out in the back, then heard her fire her gun. I twisted in my seat as best I could, but I didn't have a shot. The men were out of sight, but Sky's screams made it clear she wasn't going to make it out on her own. I only had one choice right now, and that was to unbuckle and risk shoving the metal further into my leg, possibly causing me to bleed out.

"This is gonna hurt," I muttered, depressing the buckle. I toppled out of the seat, falling on my shoulder as I tucked in my head. The metal in my leg twisted, grinding deeper into the wound. I clenched my jaw in pain, holding back the scream that threatened to break free. I crawled across the broken glass, shoving my way through the window. Shards cut into my skin, leaving pieces of flesh behind.

I collapsed on the ground, my head hitting the pavement with a thud. I watched from a sideways angle as the men dragged her toward the car kicking and screaming. I shifted

until my gun was in front of me, aimed at my target. I wasn't entirely sure I could make the shot without hitting her. My brain was a little scrambled from the accident.

I closed one eye, trying to focus better on the target. It wasn't the correct way to shoot, but desperate times called for desperate measures when you were seeing double. "Please don't shoot her," I whispered, pulling the trigger.

The man to her right fell, screaming out in pain. I fired again finishing him off. Skylar twisted in the other man's arms, slamming her foot into his leg, giving her just enough time to fight back. She punched the man's throat and when he doubled over, her elbow hit the back of his neck in a devastating blow. She bent over heaving as she waited to see what would happen. When he didn't get up, she turned and ran back to me, ignoring my orders.

"Are you okay?" she shouted, kneeling at my side.

"I told you to run."

"You can yell at me after I save your life," she said, rolling me to my back. "Holy shit, there's a lot of blood."

"Are you gonna puke?" I grinned.

"I'm a nurse and EMT. I think I can handle this." She tore a piece of her shirt, then used it as a tourniquet around my thigh. "I can't remove this now. I need to get you someplace safe first."

"That's my line," I grinned.

"Nice shooting, by the way. I appreciate you saving my life."

"Yeah, well, you should be grateful you're alive. I was aiming for the guy on your left."

She stopped moving and looked at me questioningly.

I shrugged. "It was a chance I had to take."

She pulled me upright and got to her feet, pulling me up by my armpits. "Can you walk?"

I huffed in irritation at the question. "Seriously? I got this."

“You look like you’re about to topple over.”

“Nah, my vision is a little wacky. If I just stay between the V of the two roads, I’ll be fine.”

“There’s only one road,” she pointed out.

“Don’t point out the obvious. Grab the bags out of the SUV. We might need them in case we run into anyone else.”

“If that happens, we’re screwed. I’m not sure my fancy moves will work a second time.”

She turned and crawled into the backseat, flinging out the two bags.

“Don’t worry, Fox will make sure you can defend yourself.”

She grabbed both bags and heaved them over her shoulder with more strength than I imagined she had. “I’m not sure I want to know Fox, or anyone else for that matter.”

“What’s wrong? You don’t like us?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I was looking for a little less excitement in my life.”

“Yeah, you might not have wanted to get involved with Jack then.”

She propped me up with her shoulder, then started to walk. “I had a feeling you were going to say that.”

Tires screeched as a car came squealing around the corner toward us.

“Sky, get the gun!”

She dropped the bag, unzipping it quickly and grabbing a gun. I aimed for the car as it pulled to a stop, but I knew I wasn’t going to be a good shot. The door opened and I groaned as Dash stepped out.

“Dash, what the fuck?”

“I saw you crashed. Thought I’d come to the rescue.”

“If you were here, why didn’t you just say so?”

“And what would be the fun in that? I brought someone I know you’ll be excited to see.”

He opened the back door and Fox stepped out, doing a little two-step as he grinned at me. “The cavalry has arrived!”

“Just shoot them,” I said to Sky.

“Isn’t he on our side?”

“Yeah, but I don’t like him very much right now.”

“That’s no reason to shoot him,” she hissed.

“Fine, I’ll give you a hundred bucks if you take him down the way you did with that other guy. Two hundred if you nail him in the balls.”

“I think that hit might have done some serious damage to your brain.”

“Nope,” I sighed, “this is the one thing I’m thinking clearly on.”

JACK

I STOOD IN THE KITCHEN, squeezing my hands to ward off the underlying itch. Johnny had been gone for an hour, and any longer, I was going to lose my fucking mind.

“What I want to know is why you were there with Baz, interrogating Jack,” Jason spat.

They’d been going at this for twenty minutes now. I wanted the same answers, but I was in no state to listen to any of it.

“I was trying to get inside with Baz,” Rafe snapped. “I was doing what Jack couldn’t accomplish.”

“Oh, so now you’re blaming him?” Jason shouted. “He did everything you asked of him.”

“And he failed!”

“Shut up!” I shouted, turning to all of them. “It doesn’t fucking matter why he was there. It’s done!”

“How can you say that?” Jason asked, getting off his stool and walking over to me. “Look at you. You’re a fucking mess, and he had a hand in that.”

“I kept Baz from beating the shit out of him,” Rafe said. “Think what you want of my methods. I knew he’d been on drugs already. I knew he could fight that off. But getting beaten to death and then shot when Baz lost his shit was not acceptable!”

I pressed my hands to the sides of my head, trying to stop the pounding. “This is not what we need to focus on right

now,” I said after taking a deep breath. “We need a plan to get Parker back.”

Jason tossed a glare at Rafe, then calmed his shit. “We have a plan. As soon as Johnny gets back, we’re moving out.”

“Where the fuck did he go?” Rafe asked. “Did he not understand that this is an urgent situation?”

With only a single look from Jason, it was clear he knew the situation.

“He knows how dire things are. He’ll be back soon.”

“What about Rae and Sky?” I asked, switching topics to take the heat off myself.

“Rae called while you were out. She got Skylar out. They’re safe.”

I didn’t want to know the details. I wasn’t sure I could handle it right now.

Pete walked into the room, just hanging up a call. “I just spoke with the gang unit. They’ve been keeping tabs on the place for the past two weeks. Our guy on the inside said that Rico hit these guys up for a deal on some kind of chemical—”

“Mustard gas,” I interrupted. “I was with him, but I didn’t know what it was until the deal was done. It was just a sample, but Rico was looking for a big score.”

“Well, he got it,” Pete announced. “Apparently, he sold them half a mil of mustard gas and already paid half up front. Rico was supposed to deliver the product and would be paid for the rest, but he never showed.”

“And that’s when they threatened Skylar,” I surmised.

“And she didn’t know who the message was for,” Pete continued. “Rico never made the drop and they took Parker for it. According to the inside man, he’s being held on the fourth floor, apartment 418. He doesn’t have eyes on the kid, but from what he knows, he’s still alive.”

“How many guys do they have inside the building?” Jason asked.

“Twenty spread throughout the building.”

The back door opened and Johnny walked in, shutting the door behind him. He gave me a pointed look, then headed to the room I had been staying in. “Be right back,” I said, shoving away from the counter.

I could feel Rafe’s eyes on me the whole way. No, this was not the ideal way to carry out an op, but if I didn’t take the edge off, I wasn’t going to be able to function. I shut the door behind me, licking my lips as if I could already feel the drugs hitting my bloodstream. I was fucking desperate for a hit.

“You got it?”

“Of course I did,” Johnny snapped. “Fuck, I never thought I’d see the day I’d be feeding you drugs.”

“Just give it to me,” I said, my patience wearing thin. I couldn’t stop wiping my hands on my jeans. With every second that passed, the shaking intensified to an unbearable level. I was going out of my mind.

Johnny grabbed the clear packet and tossed it my way. I nearly dropped it, my hands were shaking so bad. I walked over to the desk, swiping the crap off it in my haste to get the drugs into my system. I was like a wild animal attacking my prey, and it wasn’t until I was all set up that I remembered Johnny standing there. The anger on his face had me rethinking for all of two seconds, but the need was too great. I turned away from him as I snorted it, slightly ashamed that he was witnessing me at this low point.

I sat back and took a deep breath, feeling the rush of the drugs freeing me from the worst of the pain.

“Wipe your fucking nose,” Johnny spat. “We have to go.”

He stormed out of the room while I cleaned myself up. When I stepped into the kitchen, it was clear they all knew exactly what I’d been doing. Even Pete shook his head in disgust. Not that I expected anything different from him. None of them fucking understood. It was easy for them to judge me. They hadn’t just been fed an addictive drug in some twisted form of torture.

As I strode past Rafe, he grabbed my arm, shaking his head at me. “You shouldn’t be going in. Not when you’re fucked up.”

I jerked my arm out of his grasp. “I should put a fucking bullet in your head,” I hissed. “When this is done, you never contact me again. I don’t give a fuck if you’re dying. You’re already dead to me.”

“I saved your life,” he called out.

I spun, grabbing him by the collar and hauling him up, throwing him against the wall. “You fucking ruined my life, and I let you. That’s on me. But strapping me to a table and injecting that shit into my body?” I shook my head in disgust. “I would have rather been beaten to death.”

I turned and stormed out of the house, feeling a little less on edge than I was five minutes ago. I wasn’t fucked up enough not to think clearly, but this shit was definitely slowing my body down. It was a fucking terrible drug to have in my system when other people were relying on me. If my reactions were off even a fraction of a second, it could get my teammates killed.

Jason stopped me right as I was about to get in the vehicle. “Give me your gun.”

“What?”

“You can go, but there’s no fucking way you get a gun.”

I stared at him, not willing to give in. There was no way I was heading in without protection.

He lowered his voice, leaning in closer. “I get why you did it, but I don’t want a bullet in the back of the head because you’re too fucked up to shoot straight. You go in, you get the kid, but that’s it. Give me your gun, or I will lay you out right now and tie your ass to a chair in that fucking house.”

The threat in his voice was enough to make me concede. He was right, and as much as I didn’t want to go in unarmed, I had to think of what was best for my guys, even if my brain was fucking with me, telling me I had this. I slowly pulled out my weapon and handed it over.

He nodded, taking it from me. “We’ll get him back and then get you straight.”

“TWO TANGOS DOWN,” I WHISPERED, MY BREATHING RAGGED as the drugs started to wear off.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead, praying I could hang on just a little bit longer. The hit hadn’t been nearly enough to stave off my cravings, but I knew I could make it through this.

Johnny motioned for me to head down the hallway that led to room 418. I felt naked without my weapon, but trusted Johnny would take care of me. Pressing my body to the wall, I moved quickly down the hallway, keeping my steps light as I passed each of the doors. I stopped just shy of the door to the apartment, turning back to check in with Johnny. When he gave me the all clear, I checked in one last time.

“We’re...” I had to stop and take a deep breath. Spots danced in front of my eyes, clouding my vision as a wave of nausea washed over me. This wasn’t like before, not when I was coming down from the drugs. This was—

I crumpled over in agony as excruciating pain radiated through my head. I bit back a scream, digging my fingers into my scalp to alleviate the needle-like sensation piercing my scalp. My heart kicked into overdrive with every second that passed until I felt like it would burst from my chest.

I felt Johnny’s hands on me, trying to get me to calm down, but the pain was so intense that I couldn’t even hear him over the pounding of my head. I hit the ground, rolling to my side as vomit rose in my throat. Bile flooded my mouth as I gagged and spit, and then suddenly, the pain receded and I was left a shaking mess on the floor.

Taking deep breaths, I struggled to lay there without shaking. Every ounce of energy was used to keep from screaming in pain, leaving me feeling wrung out. When I finally opened my eyes, Johnny was kneeling beside me, along with Jason and Pete. The terror on their faces said it must have

been bad, but now wasn't the time to focus on what the fuck just happened.

Johnny held out his hand, grabbing mine and hauling me up. Dizziness spiked with the motion and I would have fallen over if it weren't for him grabbing me and pulling me against him. I sat there shaking for several minutes, just trying to get my body under control.

"You good?" Johnny asked, his hand tightening on my back.

I nodded, my breathing still shaking, but better than it had been. "Did I..." I shook off a tremor, trying to focus my thoughts. "Did I alert them?"

"They're not here," Peter answered. "We already checked the room. They're gone."

Gone. I failed again.

"Let's get you out of here," Johnny said, hauling me up.

He had to prop his shoulder under my arm as we walked down the hall. I was a sweaty mess, barely able to walk on my trembling legs. It took what felt like hours for us to get to the car, and once inside, I collapsed against the seat.

"You're done," Johnny ordered. "I know you want to be there, but that was fucked up."

"Johnny, I have to be there."

"You need some fucking rest. Your body has been through enough," he snapped. "I thought your heart was going to stop. I'm not even sure you were still breathing back there."

"Don't do this," I pleaded.

"He's right," Jason sighed. "I can't watch that again. You need to see a doctor."

"I need to get Parker back," I demanded. "Everything else can wait."

"You could fucking die!" Jason snapped. "Haven't you given enough?"

“Not when there’s a kid out there trapped in this mess,” I argued. “Not when I have to look Sky in the eyes and tell her that I let her down!”

“Look, we can keep tabs on—”

“Hey!” Pete interrupted, running over to the car. “Our inside guy checked in. The kid is being taken to the shipping yard. There’s cargo being loaded for transport!” he shouted, getting into the car.

Jason and Johnny scrambled to get inside and then we were off, flying down the road to reach the shipping yard. The streetlights passed in a whirl, trailing behind me like streaks of yellow that burst into little balls of fire. I closed my eyes, swallowing the nausea that wouldn’t settle. I pressed my head to the cool glass, fighting off the growing need under my skin. Everything burned, searing my skin as if I were on fire.

“Just breathe,” Jason said, his hand gripping my shoulder, but his voice was far away, barely discernible above the waves crashing in my head. I nearly hit the back of the seat when Johnny hit the brakes.

“Stay here!” I heard him shout.

Everyone scrambled out of the vehicle, racing off toward the shipping containers. I wanted to go after them, to chase them down and demand I go with them, but the tilt-a-whirl in my head kept me in place. I was no use to them now. I took in a deep breath and held it for three seconds, then blew it out, repeating the process until it felt like I was gently rocking on a boat instead of crashing into waves during a shipwreck.

My eyes started to play tricks on me, making me see things that weren’t there. Children came running out of the shipyard in every direction, screaming as monsters chased them. I tried to tell myself it wasn’t real. I closed my eyes and forced the images away, but when I opened them, they were all still there, running from the beast with yellow eyes.

And then I saw him. I didn’t know if he was real or a twisted version of a reality in my fucked up head. I fumbled for the door handle, pulling until it flung open and I tumbled

out onto the concrete. With my face laying against the ground, I saw his tiny legs and his scared face as he ran from the beast.

“Parker,” I tried to call out for him, but it was nothing more than a whisper. I pushed my arms under my body, forcing myself up. “Get up,” I muttered to myself. “Get over there!”

A scream tore from my throat as I summoned every ounce of energy to get my body moving again. With my feet under me, I finally started to feel my limbs again. I pushed my feet to move until I was running toward him, stumbling and tripping, but I was almost to him. The monster pulled a gun and I reached for my holster, only to remember that Jason took my weapon from me.

The monster aimed for Parker, threatening to end his life before he had a chance to live it. I dove, knowing I would only have this one chance to save him. His little body hit the pavement under my crushing weight, and he cried out, clinging to me as he screamed my name.

I wasn't even sure any of it was real. I rolled off him, protecting him from the monster behind me as I looked into his eyes. “Parker?”

“Jack!” he cried out, clinging to my body.

He was real. He had to be. I couldn't be imagining all this. Sharp pops filtered into my brain, but I didn't understand what any of it meant until I heard the footsteps running over to us.

“Jack!” Then Johnny was there, rolling me away from Parker. He screamed, trying to hold onto me as I was pulled away from him. Why were they taking him from me? Did I have it wrong? Was it not really him?

“Parker,” I whispered, trying to get back to him. He screamed as Pete picked him up and carried him away, pushing the kid's head into his shoulder.

“Stop fucking moving!” Johnny yelled at me.

“Parker,” I called again, reaching out for him.

“Hey!” Jason shouted, grabbing my face and holding it until I was staring at him. “Just hang on!”

“What?”

My head lolled to the side as soon as he released me, and that’s when I saw the monster’s lifeless eyes staring at me as blood seeped out from under his body.

He was dead.

PETE

“GRAB HIS ARMS!” Johnny shouted, taking his feet.

Sirens wailed as police swarmed the area. As soon as we found the container, I called it in to the chief, who was on standby, waiting for us to clear the area. As soon as the kids came running out, police intervened, gathering up all the kids. I should be helping them right now, but Jack was lying on the ground with a gunshot wound. He would die if I didn’t help.

I hurried to his head, lifting from his armpits. Jason kept pressure applied to his side as we hauled him up and moved as quickly as we could to the car. “We need to call an ambulance,” I said, trying to take control of the situation.

“If we call an ambulance, he’ll be dead within the hour,” Johnny spat. “These guys don’t fuck around, and Rico won’t leave anyone alive that can testify against him.”

I knew what he was saying was true, but he was going to die if we didn’t get him help soon. Rafe flung open the door to the backseat and I crawled inside, dragging Jack across the seat. Blood smeared over the fabric, leaving a stain that would be impossible to get out. They’d have to get rid of the car.

Jason crawled in, putting pressure on the wound again. He looked up at me, “Take Parker and go with Rafe. We’ll meet up with you at a safe house.”

“But—”

“Just fucking do it!” he snapped.

There was no time to argue. I shut the door and ran to Parker's side, hoping he wasn't too traumatized to remember me. Kneeling down, I waited for him to look at me.

"Hey, Parker. Remember me?"

He nodded. "I want my mama."

"I know, and I'm gonna take you to her."

I held out my hand, waiting for him to take it. I wanted to scoop him up in my arms and hold him tight to me, but he didn't know me well enough for that. I led him over to Rafe's vehicle, not quite sure that he was the right guy to go with, but he was my only ride and we had to get the hell out of here.

"Get in. The safe house isn't that far away."

As he turned, I grabbed his arm and forced him to look at me. "No funny shit. We have a kid with us, and he's our responsibility."

"Kid, you don't even know who I am."

"I don't give a fuck," I hissed. "From what I've seen, you're not anyone I'd want to be around. So, you get us to the safe house, and then we never have to cross paths again."

He didn't answer, but I didn't expect him to. I got in the back seat with Parker, pulling him against my body. The kid was shaking like crazy, barely holding it together.

"You okay, bud?"

"It was dark in there," he whispered.

I didn't have to ask where he was talking about. I saw it with my own eyes. The container was already in the air when we arrived, just a few feet off the ground. Rafe had been the one to get into the crane and lower it to the ground. The man operating it was now laying in bloody pieces on the pavement.

I would never forget the screams of the kids inside the container when the door opened. They ran at us, desperate to get out of the dark. It had to be terrifying. I pulled Parker closer, squeezing a little too tight as we headed out of town. I

didn't know where we were going, but it had to be better than where we just were.

“Are we going to find Mama?”

“Of course,” I tried to reassure him. “We'll see her soon.”

“You promise?”

I hated making promises to kids. I was always afraid I would fail them. “I promise.”

We were pulling down a long driveway before I knew it. There were a few men standing outside when we pulled in, and I could see Johnny unloading Jack from the back seat.

“Mama!” Parker screamed, pointing out the windshield.

Before I could even get the door open, Skylar was there, pulling Parker out of the backseat. The tears streaming down her face nearly broke me. What she'd been through tonight would break any woman, but she was strong. I got out and wrapped my arms around her and Parker, reassuring myself that they were okay.

“Skylar!” Johnny shouted. “We need you over here!”

She glanced behind her, then turned back to me, pressing her hand to my cheek. My heart soared from just a single touch. I knew from the moment I met Skylar that she was special, someone I could really fall for. But we hadn't really been able to spend time together, and now I doubted I would get the chance.

“Thank you for bringing him home.”

She was gone before I had the chance to tell her it wasn't me that saved her son. I was simply the man who sat in the car with him. Jack saved his life, jumping in front of a bullet that was meant for Parker. I ran my hand through my hair, sighing as I watched her run off with her son, back to the man who I had a feeling meant a hell of a lot more to her than she realized.

“You okay?” Libby asked, cocking her head as she studied me.

“I’m not the one who’s been shot.”

I shoved past her, heading inside to see if there was anything I could do to help. I wasn’t a doctor, but I was trained in basic triage. As soon as I stepped through the door, the gravity of the situation washed over me. Jack was spread out on the kitchen table, blood dripping from his body onto the floor as Sky hurried to stop the bleeding.

“Here!” Jason shoved a packet at her. “Dump this on the wound!”

She snatched it out of his hands, tearing the packet open with her teeth before she sprinkled it over the wound. Even from here, I could see the blood slow, giving her enough time to treat the gunshot wound. Rafe opened a kit of medical tools, spreading it on the table beside her.

“I need more light!”

Jack jerked in pain as she dug into his body with forceps. Johnny grabbed his bloody hand, squeezing tight as she twisted the tool inside his body.

“Hurry the fuck up!” Johnny shouted.

“It’s too deep! I can’t see it!”

Jason reached for the light, twisting it over Jack’s body, and in the process knocked the medical tools on the ground. They clattered at her feet, spreading across the dirty floor.

“I need another kit!”

“We don’t have one,” Rafe snapped.

“I’ve got some alcohol in the cabinet!” Libby said, rushing past me, nearly knocking me over.

“I can’t just clean it off with alcohol!” Sky shouted. “I need new tools!”

Libby grabbed them off the floor, holding them over the sink as she poured the eighty proof vodka over the tools. She spun and shoved them in Sky’s face. “This is all we have. Take it or leave it.”

Sky grabbed the forceps and got back to work, trying to retrieve the bullet. A low moan slipped from Jack's lips as she finally pulled it out. "Do you have morphine?"

"No!" Jack shouted.

"Get me whatever you can to knock him out," Sky said to Johnny.

But Jack snagged Johnny's shirt, his hand shaking as he stared at him. I watched the intensity in his eyes, the determination as he pleaded with his friend. "No...drugs."

His eyes slid over to Sky, and for just a second, I saw something, that same flash of want and need that I'd seen on Sky's face.

He was in love with her.

SKYLAR

I FINISHED the last stitch on Jack's wound, focusing only on making sure it was tied off, and trying desperately not to look at his face. He'd been in and out of consciousness since they brought him to the safe house, but this was the first time I'd had a moment alone with him. If I finally looked at him, I knew those emotions I kept buried under the surface would bubble to the top.

I snipped the dental floss and set down the scissors, crumpling my mess into a ball. Jack needed rest and antibiotics right now. There was nothing else I could do for him. I just had to hope that I didn't do more harm than good when I took out that bullet. I'd done plenty of time in the OR during my surgical unit, but I'd never actually done anything like that before. He needed to see a doctor, one that could ascertain if I'd done any damage.

My nerves were shot, fraying by the second since I laid eyes on my son. And just when I had him in my arms, I was called away to take a bullet out of Jack's side. I didn't even know how to deal with all that, or what I was feeling when I saw Jack laying on the table. I had to get out of here, take a breath and figure out my next step.

I grabbed the garbage, ready to leave when I felt Jack's hand on mine. My eyes flicked to his, and for a moment, we just stared at each other. He could have died. He probably should have. I wasn't trained for this kind of thing, and...and he never should have been in the position to begin with.

"Thank you," he croaked out.

I opened my mouth to thank him, but the words seemed inadequate considering what he'd done. "Johnny told me what you did for Parker. I—" The words caught in my throat and I had to duck my head when I realized I was about to start crying. And when he squeezed my hand tenderly, the waterworks couldn't be stopped. "You saved his life."

"Hannah," he whispered.

I stared at him in confusion before remembering Hannah was his sister. "She's not here."

He took a shallow breath as his eyes drifted shut. When they opened again, I realized he wasn't really here with me. "Tried everything," he mumbled. "Not good enough."

"What's not good enough?" I asked, taking a seat on the bed beside him.

His head rolled to the side and he sucked in a breath. He was a little more flushed than I'd like. I pressed my hand to his forehead, feeling the heat radiate off him. He needed to be in a hospital. This was too dangerous.

"I'm going to get help," I whispered.

But as I started to stand, he gripped my hand tighter. "Sky...you have to help her."

"I'm right here, Jack. I'm not going anywhere. I just need to—"

"Not safe," he muttered. "She's not safe."

"I'm safe now," I tried to reassure him. "I'm right here with you. You saved me and my son." Tears welled in my eyes as I watched him struggling to speak. Every minute he was here and not in a hospital increased the odds that he wouldn't make it through this.

His eyes kept fluttering shut as he fought the fever burning through his body. I gripped his hand, pressing my lips to them, praying that he would come through this in one piece. When his eyes fluttered shut and his breathing evened out, I pressed my fingers to his neck, feeling his steady pulse beating. I knew

he wasn't out of danger, and that scared me more than anything.

Wiping the tears from my eyes, I stood, needing to see my son. I gasped when I turned and found Pete leaning against the doorframe. "You scared me."

"Sorry, I just wanted to check on you. Parker's been asking for you."

"I was just coming to check on him."

He nodded to where Jack laid. "How is he?"

"I don't know," I confessed. "I'm not a doctor. I'm doing everything I can, but—"

"Hey," he said, pulling me into his arms. It felt nice to be comforted in this way. I was terrified that Jack wouldn't wake up, that I'd let him down after he saved my son. "You need some sleep. You've been up all night."

"Not yet. He's still not out of the woods, and I need to spend some time with Parker. I've hardly seen him since—"

"Rae's been keeping him company. She's been plying him with candy and fun movies, so he's not in too bad of shape."

That actually made me feel worse. Someone else was doing my job.

"I have to go to the station to check in, but I'll be back later today."

"Oh." I brushed the hair out of my face, unsure of how I felt about that. I wanted Pete to stay, but I also didn't want to lead him on. His life was here, and I was about to run.

"Don't look so distraught," he teased. "It'll only be for a little while."

"Pete, you know...I mean, I think you're so great—"

He held up his hand, stopping me from saying the one thing I really needed to say. "Skylar, it's okay. I know."

"You do?"

“I saw the way he looked at you. It’s the same way you looked at him.”

“I...don’t know what you’re talking about,” I mumbled, feeling my face flush with embarrassment.

“It’s the same way I imagine I would look at someone I was falling in love with.”

There was something about the way he was looking at me that made me feel like he was talking about me. But we barely knew each other. Much like I barely knew Jack.

“I don’t even know Jack.”

“I think you know him more than you want to admit. Something inside of you always knew he wasn’t the man he appeared to be. I think that’s why you trusted him. Probably the same reason I asked him to look after you.”

Pete smiled faintly, his hand coming up to cup my cheek. The trouble was, when Pete looked at me this way, I could almost imagine myself falling for him too.

“You’re one of a kind, Skylar. Any man would be foolish to walk away from you. But I can see that I’ve already lost this round. Just remember who you are. You’re not defined by who Parker’s father is. I’ve always seen that.”

His lips slid over mine in a warm caress, pulling me tight to his body. In a flash, it was over and he was stepping away from me, making me seriously question why I was allowing him to leave.

“I’ll see you later.”

I nodded, pressing my fingers to my lips.

“Wow.”

I spun, gasping as yet another person snuck up on me. I closed my eyes, telling myself I was fine as Rae walked into the kitchen. “You shouldn’t sneak up on people.”

“I was actually standing there the whole time. You need to be more aware of your surroundings.”

“Sorry, I’ve been a little preoccupied with death, running for my life, and...what was that other thing? Oh, yeah. My missing kid.”

Her lips twisted in a smile. “It’s okay. I get it. You’re conflicted.”

“I’m not conflicted,” I spluttered, not wanting another person to tell me how I feel.

“Yes, you are. It’s cool. I get it. You have this great guy, Pete, who absolutely adores you. It’s clear as mud. But he’s not really the one for you.”

“He’s not?”

“Nope. He’s devoted to his job. He’s got family here, and as much as he wants to believe he could drop it all to be with you, he’s just not that guy.”

“How do you know?”

She rolled her eyes, grabbing a mug from the cabinet. “Because I work with guys who drop everything for jobs, women, and...throwing knives. It’s a thing.”

“Throwing knives is a thing?”

“No, dropping everything,” she clarified, grabbing the coffee pot. “It’s not always easy to spot them. They’re sort of like chameleons, appearing to be average until one day you see them pull out a gun and chase down a baddie, grinning the whole time.”

My face twisted in confusion. I wasn’t sure what this had to do with anything, and my mind was so muddled from lack of sleep that I wasn’t sure I would understand her anyway. “Um...I’m gonna check on Parker.”

“Of course, it’s clear that Jack is *that* guy.”

I sighed, turning back to her. “What guy?”

“The guy who drops everything to be with you. Hello, he’s got a bullet wound and is fucked up out of his mind, all in an effort to get to your son after being tortured.”

“I didn’t ask him to do that,” I said defensively.

“Of course, you didn’t,” she laughed. “That wasn’t the point.”

“Then what was the point?” I asked, getting a little frustrated.

“The point is that you’re getting all twisted around in your head over two very amazing men. One appears to be everything you want. He’s got a good job, he’s normal, sane, doesn’t do drugs,” he said pointedly. “He’s even very clear on where he stands—or where he’d like to stand—which is beside you. But he’s too attached to his own life, and while he’d go the distance, you’d always wonder if he was happy with you.”

I already knew she was talking about Pete. The question was, why did she think she had to explain this to me? I already knew Pete couldn’t leave this all behind.

“Well, thanks for the advice,” I said, turning to leave once again. I just wanted to see my son.

“And then you have tortured soul number two,” she continued, taking a drink of her coffee with a grin on her face. “Devastatingly handsome—well, when he’s not strung out on drugs. Which he’s normally not. He’s dangerous, a protector at heart, and is already half in love with you, though he won’t admit it.”

“And why won’t he admit it?”

“Because of Hannah.”

That piqued my interest. “He told you about her?”

She snorted, shaking her head at me. “Nope. I did some digging. I’m not exactly known for letting people have their secrets.”

“Good to know.”

“Which is why I know that he blames himself for what happened to Hannah. If I had to guess, I’d say that he took all these jobs as some sort of punishment for what happened to her. Or retribution. Maybe he’s trying to do something good in her eyes, even though she’s dead and can’t judge him one way or another. But it’s part of his hero complex. Trust me, I’m

married to a man with a serious hero complex. It doesn't get easier as time goes on. Anyway, a guy like Jack, he's not going to easily give in to those feelings for you. He can't because that would somehow interfere with his mission to save the world and get rid of evil."

"So, he'll never commit. That's what you're trying to tell me."

"On the contrary. After being drugged out of his mind, tortured, and basically lost all reason to stay and finish the job, he still went back for your son, a kid he barely knows. There's no doubt in my mind that even if he chose to walk away from you, he would still find a way to check on you and make sure you were okay. Probably through tagging you and putting cameras in all your stuff. He'd want to be able to see you regularly, which he would because that's what these guys do."

"Great, so you're saying he'd become a stalker."

"No," she said thoughtfully. "Is that what you heard? Stalking is...dangerous. This would be a form of protection. I don't see how that can be stalking." She set her cup down on the counter and grinned at me. "Anyway, I'm gonna get some shuteye."

"Wait," I said, stopping her as she started to leave. "What was the point of all that?"

She cocked her head at me. "I thought that was obvious," she said, grabbing her mug and leaving.

"Sure, totally obvious," I muttered to myself. "Crap, I can't even remember what I was going to do now."

"SKYLAR."

"Hmm." I rolled into the comfort of the bed, snuggling closer to Parker.

"Skylar, you need to wake up."

My eyes popped open and I jerked upright in bed, forgetting where I was for a moment. It was still dark outside, making me even more confused than I was a minute ago. It

took a minute for my eyes to adjust to the dark light of the room. Johnny was moving around the room, putting stuff in a bag.

Getting up, I slid the covers back over Parker. “What are you doing?”

“We need to leave now.”

“Why? Jack’s not even—”

“Rico is looking for you. He knows Jack helped you escape, but he doesn’t know about the rest of us yet. He’s going to come after you, and the longer we stay here, the less likely it is we’ll get away.”

“But, that’s crazy,” I spluttered. “If we move Jack now—”

“He would want us to do this,” he said, stopping to look me in the eye. “Trust me on this.”

I couldn’t argue that. After everything Jack had done for us, I doubted he’d want us to stay here where we might end up dead. “What about Jack? How are we going to do this?”

“You’re going to ride with me in an SUV. We’ll get him as comfortable as possible. Jason and Rae will ride with Parker—”

“Absolutely not,” I said. “There’s no way I’m riding separately from my son.”

“This is for the best,” he said calmly. “If Rico catches up with us, it’s more likely that he’s coming after you and Jack. That’ll give Jason and Rae a chance to get Parker to safety. I need you to trust me on this.”

“Why can’t I ride with Parker?”

“Because Jack needs you.” He sighed, stepping closer to me. “Jack’s not in good shape, and you’re the only one with any medical knowledge. I need you to do this for me.”

I didn’t like it, but he was right. And if it meant keeping Parker safe, I had to do it. “Just promise me something, if anything happens to me—if you can’t keep us safe—I want my parents to have Parker. They’re in Florida and—”

“We know where they are. We’ll make sure everyone’s taken care of, but that won’t be necessary. This is all a precaution.”

I looked back at my son sleeping peacefully, wondering how he was going to handle this. He was just four years old. He shouldn’t have to wonder if he was ever going to see me again.

“I need to wake him up.”

“I could carry him out,” Johnny offered. “He might sleep for most of the ride.”

“No, if he wakes up and doesn’t know what’s going on, it’ll be harder on him. Just give me a few minutes.”

He nodded and headed for the door. “We leave in five.”

I sank down on the bed beside my son, hoping he wasn’t too scared to handle this. He was such a big boy in some ways, but in others, he was so small and innocent.

I brushed my knuckles over his cheek, trying to wake him. He stirred, his eyes blinking sleepily up at me. “Mama?”

“Hey, buddy. We’ve gotta go.”

“But I’m tired.”

“I know, but we need to leave now. Rae is going to take you with her, and I’m going to ride with Jack in another car.”

“But I want you,” he cried. Even in the darkness, I could see the tears filling his eyes.

“Hey, Parker, I need you to be a big boy about this. Jack is very sick and I need to look after him, just like I would with you if you were sick. And Rae will make sure that you have lots of fun on the ride.”

“Where are we going?”

“To a new home,” I smiled at him. “You’ll love it there.”

“Will Jack be there?”

I swallowed hard, thinking of Jack in the other room, how he could die at any moment. “Of course,” I said, lying to my

son for the first time. “But we need to get going now.”

“Can I stay in my jammies?”

“Like I would ask you to change,” I said in mock shock. “Those are so cozy. I think you should stay in them forever.”

He giggled, covering his mouth. “Mama, I can’t wear these to school.”

“You’re right. What was I thinking? Come on.”

He tossed off the covers and crashed into my arms, squeezing his tiny arms around my neck. I prayed this wouldn’t be the last time that I saw him, that Rae could keep him safe for me.

We hurried around the room, getting ready to go. Parker went to the bathroom while I checked on Jack. He was still running a fever, but I wasn’t sure the shaking had anything to do with his reaction to the surgery.

“Are we ready?”

I looked back at Johnny. “You said they gave him something. Do you know what it was?”

“No, but he had a hit of heroin before we went after Parker.”

“He what?” I asked in exasperation.

He didn’t even flinch at my tone. The look he shot me said to back off. “He was determined to get your kid back. I got him what he needed to get through it.”

That did shed a little more light on the situation. “I need something to keep him calm on the ride. If he’s in too much pain, the trip could kill him.”

“He was very adamant. No drugs.”

“But he’s your friend,” I argued. “Do you really want him in pain?”

“No,” he bit out. “But he didn’t want the drugs to begin with. He was clean until Rafe forced those drugs into his

system. He'd rather die than take anything else, and I'm going to respect his wishes."

"He could die without them," I pointed out.

His eyes flicked to his friend. "Then so be it."

It was insanity. I didn't understand how they could allow their friend to travel so far and be in so much pain. And the withdrawal from drugs would only make it worse. I could kill Rafe for doing this to him.

"Where is he?"

"Rafe? Long gone. Left the moment you finished up with Jack."

"He didn't even bother to stay and find out if he would live?"

"That's not the way Rafe operates. Besides, I have a feeling Rafe was trying to get out ahead of the fact that Baz was killed and find a way to give us an opportunity to get away."

"How nice of him," I said spitefully.

"He has his moments," Johnny muttered. "Get your son. Jason and I will load him in the SUV."

I nodded and headed back to my son, who was now playing with Rae. All it took was one look from Rae, and I knew she would protect my son, no matter the cost. That was all I needed to know.

"Hey, bud, should we get you in the car?"

"What about my bear, Mama?"

"Oh, baby, we don't have it. We'll get you a new one."

"But I need him," he pleaded.

"Baby, we can't go back for the bear. I know this is hard for you, but we'll find you something even better."

I knew it wouldn't help. In fact, if anything, it only made things worse. The fat tears rolling down his cheeks only made me feel like the worst mom ever. I scooped him up in my arms

and carried him out to the car, trying to keep him calm as I buckled him in. Someone had gotten a car seat for him, so at least I knew he was as safe as possible.

“I’ll sit in the back with him,” Rae promised.

I bent down and gave him a kiss, hating that I was leaving him again. “I’ll be in the other vehicle the whole time. If you need me, you just have Rae call. Okay?”

He nodded, sniffing as he buried his face in my neck. His tears dampened my shirt and his fists clung to me, refusing to let me go.

“Baby, we need to leave.”

I had to tear myself from his grasp. Tears streamed down his face as he called for me. I felt like a horrible mother. My heart ached at his cries, but I knew this was for the best. The danger was very real, and I had to believe that going in a separate vehicle would keep him safe.

Wiping the tears from my eyes, I got into the back with Jack. The seats were down and he was lying on the floor, shaking with fever. This was going to be the longest drive of my life.

JACK

“THE ANTIBIOTICS AREN’T WORKING! We need something stronger!”

Her voice rattled around in my brain, somewhere between the pain in my side and the pounding in my head. Every bump in the road intensified the agony rushing through my body. I just wanted to pass out and drift off into another world, one where the pain was over.

“Jack, you have to stay with me.”

I peeled my eyes open through the burning haze, seeing the worried face of an angel staring down at me. Those same eyes were with me in the ambulance, forcing me to keep going when it felt like the world was done with me.

“Stay with me, okay?”

For her, I would do anything, but I was so fucking tired. My body hurt unlike anything I’d felt before. I could still feel the electric current flowing under my skin, almost as if I was still strapped to that table.

“We need to get him to a hospital.”

“That’s not gonna happen.” I heard Johnny’s voice barking orders and tried to smile. He was always taking charge, whereas Jason was more passive, allowing others to run things. I was gonna miss them.

“Parker,” I mumbled, hoping she could hear me.

She grabbed my hand and bent lower, her ear just a breath from my lips. “What did you say?”

“Parker,” I mumbled again, using every ounce of strength to push the words past my lips. “He’s...okay.”

“He’s fine, Jack. Thanks to you.”

Something cool brushed across my forehead, momentarily easing the burn in my body. But it was never enough. The pain always returned. The heat pulsing through my body grew with every second that passed. I wasn’t going to make it. I just wished I could tell her and ease her mind.

I pushed through the drought in my mouth, hoping to make her feel just a little better. “You’re safe,” I whispered, feeling her fingers interlock with mine.

I was no good for her. My life, the uncertainty surrounding me would only ruin her chance to start over.

“Jack, you’re going to be okay. You just have to fight it.”

I huffed out a laugh, or at least, I thought I did. “Tired of fighting,” I whispered. “Tired...”

“I know, but I need you, Jack. Parker needs you.”

I stared into her eyes, those beautiful eyes that had seen me through so much, and I knew I couldn’t stay. I couldn’t be in her life and bring the destruction that was bound to ruin everything she fought so hard for. Rico trapped her the first time. I wouldn’t repeat what he did. Sky was so independent, so strong. She fought hard for what she wanted, never allowing anything to keep her down. Even in a tough spot, she found a way to get what she wanted.

If I stayed in her life, what could I offer her? She couldn’t rely on me. Not when I was addicted to drugs and couldn’t even function properly. I needed more help than she could give me, and it wasn’t her job to fix me. She had a son to consider, and he was more important than I would ever be.

“Promise me,” I said, forcing my eyes open. “Promise me...”

“Whatever you need,” she whispered. I could feel her hair tickling my cheek as she leaned in close.

“Promise me...stay away...”

“Stay away from what?”

“Run...”

“Jack, you’re not making any sense. What do you want me to run from?”

My eyes drifted closed as the heat intensified again. I needed to tell her, but my thoughts just wouldn’t come together.

“Jack, what is it? Tell me who I need to run from. Jack!”

My body shook as her hands landed on my shoulders, rocking me back and forth. I forced my eyes open again despite how tired I was.

“Jack, who should I run from?”

“Me,” I finally told her. “No good.”

“Jack, you saved me,” she cried. Fat tears slid down her cheeks as she stared at me. I’d like to think she was crying because she loved me, but it was most likely because I was dying. I could feel my soul being shredded in two, part of it fighting to stay here with her, and the other half trying to get to Hannah. I did what I was supposed to. I protected her and her son, but Johnny could take it from here. He would always have my back.

My breathing grew labored and a mask was shoved over my face. I wanted to tell her it was no use. It was over, and she had to accept that. It would be fine. I opened my eyes one last time to tell her that when the pain returned full force, eviscerating any thoughts jumbled up in my mind.

A tortured scream ripped from my throat as the stabbing sensation in my brain drowned out every other sound or thought. The faint light outside the window pierced my eyes, making the pain worse. As darkness swarmed in my mind, I readily accepted the escape, hoping I never woke up again.

THE FIRST THING I NOTICED WHEN I HEARD HER VOICE WAS that I no longer felt like my head was about to explode. The dull throbbing was still there, always threatening to get worse,

but it wasn't like before. I could actually think clearly. The second thing I noticed was the underlying itch that I hated so much. How much time had passed?

Opening my eyes was painful, but worse than that was the light that hit me, strengthening the headache. "Blinds," I muttered, hoping someone heard me.

In seconds, the room went dark as the blinds were pulled shut. "Hey, how are you?"

Sky. She was still here.

"Why are you here?"

"Wow, I saved your life and that's the thanks I get?" she teased.

"You should be—"

"We're safe," she said, grabbing a cup of water from the table. When she pressed it against my lips, I greedily opened, needing something to take away the sensation of sandpaper in my throat. "Parker is already at OPS with Rae and Jason."

"Where are we?" I asked. The room told me absolutely nothing about where we were.

"In Oklahoma. We stopped to get you help."

We weren't in a hospital. Fuck, this was all so confusing.

"You're lucky your boss has friends that were willing to drop everything to come out here and take care of you."

"Who?" I asked in confusion.

"Just wait here. I need to get the doctor."

Doctor? I couldn't think of a single fucking person that Cash knew that would come to my aid. But then Sky walked back into the room, followed by the one woman who should definitely not be out here. And based on the scowl on Knight's face, he felt the same fucking way.

"Let's check on the patient," Kate grinned, slipping on gloves.

Fuck, this was horrible. “I didn’t tell anyone to come,” I grumbled to Knight.

“Didn’t fucking matter. She heard you were about to die. You’re lucky we were in Colorado. Any further and I would have been able to talk her out of coming.”

“He’s lying,” Kate winked at me. “I would have come anyway.”

I didn’t know why. I didn’t know Kate any more than from her picture and a brief interaction. She didn’t owe me a fucking thing. She pulled back the sheet and slowly pulled the gauze from the wound at my side. I remembered my body hurting, but the events surrounding the injury were muddled with images of my nightmares.

“It’s looking a lot better.”

“Good, then we can go,” Knight grumbled.

“Not yet,” Kate grinned at him. “I still need to make sure that he can handle the rest.”

“The rest of what?” I asked, confused as hell.

“You’re going through withdrawals. You probably feel okay right now, but that’s only because I shot you up with morphine.”

My jaw immediately hardened in anger. “You did what?”

“You better back the fuck down,” Knight growled, stepping closer. “She saved your fucking life. Show a little gratitude.”

“Johnny made it very clear that you didn’t want drugs, but you were in a lot of pain. Speaking of, I found something that you need to see.” She turned and grabbed a small dish, holding it out for me. “I found these implanted under your hairline.”

“What are they?” I asked, my voice so gravelly, I wasn’t sure she could understand me.

“They’re electrodes,” Fox said from the doorway. “I bet you’re fucking ecstatic to see me,” he grinned, sauntering into the room. “I’ve been looking into them with Rae. It seems

someone put these in your head and set them to go off at regular intervals. That's why the headaches came out of nowhere. Scrambled your brain just a little," he chuckled.

"Is that all of them?" I asked.

Kate nodded. "I ran a scan, and those were the only two I picked up. Unfortunately, just because I removed them, it doesn't mean the headaches will stop. From what I've been told about what happened to you, the headaches are bound to reoccur, just not at the intensity you've been feeling. I would recommend wearing sunglasses everywhere you go until the headaches disappear."

"What about his incision?" Sky asked. "Is..."

"He's fine."

There was something I was missing, but no one was saying anything. "Doc, I need a minute."

She nodded and waited for everyone else to leave. Sky was hesitant, acting like if she left, she might never see me again. When the door snicked shut, I got right to the point. "What aren't you telling me?"

"You'll need to stay here for at least a week."

"Okay..." I said, still not understanding the problem.

"You're not feeling it right now because of the morphine, but I ran blood tests on you. The drugs in your system are... they're so much worse than just heroin. Whatever you were given, it's fueling the headaches. And with the pain you're already feeling because of the gunshot wound, it's not going to be easy to detox."

"How bad?" I asked.

"Honestly? I can't tell you. Heroin withdrawal isn't usually as dangerous as other drugs, but since you had multiple drugs in your system... There's the stress on your heart, dehydration, vomiting, and that doesn't even touch on the symptoms you're already experiencing because of how you were tortured and the wound to your abdomen. I would strongly recommend that you allow me to prescribe—"

“No,” I said immediately.

“Without it—”

“The answer is no.”

“No one would think less of you.”

“It’s not about them,” I admitted. “It’s about me. I need to know that I’m strong enough to fight this.”

“It could kill you.”

I didn’t want to tell her that if I couldn’t fight it off, then I didn’t deserve to live. She’d think I belonged in a straight jacket. For me, this was personal. “Kate, I’ve gone my whole life fighting demons from my past. And I never really win. I need this right now. I need to know that I can fight this and still come out stronger on the other side. Something has to—”

“You need a win,” she surmised.

It wasn’t as simple as that, but it summed it up better than I could explain it.

“It’s going to be very hard. You’re going to beg for drugs before it’s over, and you’ll probably have a few major headaches that may even make you pass out. There’s going to be a lot of vomiting and probably lots of shitting.”

“Sounds like a party.”

“It’s going to get very ugly. But if you survive all that, I think you’ll be just fine.”

“What about the neurological problems?”

“I would definitely see a neurologist when you get home. If you think you feel like shit now, just think about what you’re going to be feeling in a year. I’m guessing you’re still going to be fighting the headaches.”

“Not sure it’s worth it,” I mumbled to myself.

“It is if you have someone worth fighting for,” she said, clasping my hand. “And I think we both know that you do.”

“I can’t imagine anyone wanting me like this.”

“I’m sure she’s thought the same thing a time or two. And I speak from experience when I say it’s the challenges in life we face that show our true strength. No sane woman would ever walk away from a man who fought as much as you have. You just have to believe in yourself and what you have to offer.”

I wasn’t sure there was a damn thing I could offer Sky and Parker. I was a fucked up mess with so many problems, I’m not sure even a therapist could wade through my head and come out with an answer. But as Kate walked out and Sky slipped inside, looking at me with those big blue eyes that were so full of life and fire, I knew I could be as strong as her and fight for whatever the future might hold.

SKYLAR

“IF I HAD KNOWN you were coming, I would have worn the boots you gave me,” Fox said to Knight, grinning at him in some love-struck way that had me questioning everything about him.

“Again, I didn’t give them to you. You took them.”

“Because you gave them to me,” Fox nodded. “It was a special moment.”

“You were wearing my shoes while I was passed out,” Knight grumbled.

“Only to feel what it was like to walk in your shoes. And hey! Now, I don’t need to do that because I literally walk in your shoes almost every day. Well, aside from right now. See, I didn’t wear them because they’re my good boots. I wasn’t sure what we’d be getting into out here. I couldn’t risk someone stealing them off my feet if I somehow ended up dead.”

I busied myself making coffee as I waited for Kate to finish up with Jack. I wanted to be in there, but he wasn’t my husband or even my boyfriend. I had no right to push inside.

“Why would you end up dead? You’re a trained killer,” Knight snapped.

“Well, because I took a vow to stop killing.”

That got my attention, as well as Knight’s. “And how’s that working out for you?”

“Great!” Fox beamed. “Since I’ve made the decision to give it up, it’s like this whole other area of my brain has opened up, leaving me with all these...happy feelings. It’s quite intoxicating.”

“So, let me get this straight. You came on a job, but you aren’t carrying?”

“Nope,” he grinned. “Not even a knife.”

Knight stared at him, then turned to me. “And how does that make you feel?”

“Uh...I prefer to stay out of this.”

“She’s totally safe,” Fox chuckled. “See, I’ve been testing out this theory that I can basically turn any angry person into a happy person.”

“With your winning personality?” Knight said sarcastically.

“Well, I’ve developed a series of phrases used to calm the target. For instance, if someone is annoyed, I tell them to breathe.”

“I’m feeling annoyed,” Knight stated.

“Okay, good, so what you want to do is take a deep breath and hold it in.”

Knight just stared at him.

“Just...you gotta breathe,” he said, motioning toward his body as he sucked in a breath. “Like, suck in a breath and hold it. Are you doing it?”

“No,” Knight said.

“Well, it’s not gonna work if you don’t try it.”

“Are you suggesting that I can’t control myself?”

“What?” Fox’s face morphed into shock. “No. Never. The Kamau is always in charge of his emotions. If ever there was a man to be revered, it’s you.”

“Um...who is The Kamau?” I asked, holding up my hand.

“This man,” Fox said, jauntily sauntering forward and wrapping his arm around Knight as he patted his chest. “The Kamau is a great warrior, someone to be revered and feared.”

“But, you’re trying to calm him. Won’t that make him... less fearful?”

Fox laughed, slapping his knee. “Oh, Skylar, if only you knew who you were dealing with. The Kamau is fearful no matter who or what stands in his path. He could be as serene as a kitten and still strike fear into the hearts of everyone in his path. And for thousands of miles away, I might add.”

He turned back to Knight, grinning at him from ear to ear. “So, if breathing isn’t your thing, there are also some great juices I can make,” he said, rushing around the counter and digging through the cabinets. He pulled out a blender as he continued to talk. “Personally, I love using mango and pineapple. They have that cheery quality that makes you feel like you’re on an island somewhere, enjoying the sunshine without a care in the world. It really centers me.”

“I hate sunshine.”

“Okay, well, maybe that one’s not for you. What you really need is something to reduce stress and anxiety,” Fox continued, rushing around the kitchen and grabbing ingredients. “See, your cortisol levels rise when you’re stressed out, and that can leave you feeling anxious, irritable, and depressed. And a depressed Kamau is someone that goes out and kills people, am I right?”

He winked at the man, then continued with his work.

“What you need are fruits and vegetables high in vitamin C. So, berries, oranges, red and green peppers...Ooh, and kale. Now, I know what you’re going to say. That’s so disgusting, but trust me, my friend. It will change your life. And once you have it all macerated, you’ll have a delicious drink packed with all the vitamin C rich fruits and vegetables you need to live a healthy, stress-free life.”

“What about if someone shoots at me?” Knight asked. “Do you think a drink can change the way I feel?”

Fox chuckled. “We’ll have to see, but I’m afraid you’ll have to find someone else to do the shooting. I’ve put down my weapons.”

There was no way I was drinking his concoction. I grabbed my coffee and enjoyed every sip as he blended this concoction that looked more like shit than anything healthy. When he was done, he poured it in a glass and slid it across the counter to Knight, who didn’t bother to touch it.

Fox waited on pins and needles for him to pick it up and drink it, but as the minutes passed, it was clear, Knight wasn’t having it.

Enter Jason, stage left. “Fuck, I’m tired.”

“Here, have a juice,” Knight said, picking it up and handing it to Jason.

He grabbed it and chugged the drink, nearly choking as he rushed over to the sink and spewed it out. “Fuck, that’s nasty. Why would you give that to me?”

“Fox made it,” Knight answered with the barest hint of a smile on his face.

“Right, well, I’m still perfecting the recipe,” Fox frowned. “I thought I had it right that time.”

“I need a cup of coffee,” Jason muttered, walking over to the cabinet to get his own mug. “That shit should never be allowed in the house.”

“But it’s good for you.”

“That shit will kill you,” Jason pointed out. “Death by vomiting.” He poured a cup, then turned to me, his eyes assessing me. “How are you holding up?”

“Oh, you know about as good as any woman that’s been separated from her kid while on the run from her arms dealer ex.”

“Shouldn’t have gotten involved with him,” Knight muttered.

My eyes snapped to his in anger. “I didn’t get involved with him. It was a one-night stand that produced a child. I didn’t even know who he was, and by the time I did, it was too late.”

Fox rushed around the counter, holding his hands out as he grinned at me. “Whoa, just calm down. Have a smoothie,” he said, swiping the contents of the blender and pouring it into a cup. “I’m sure he didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Yes, he did,” I snapped. “You think I just wandered into an arms dealer’s den and thought, *hmm, what’s a great way to get some money?* Guess what? I want nothing to do with them. And despite the unfortunate connection, I’ve managed to build a life of my own until I somehow got dragged into this stupid mess!”

“He would never suggest that you—”

“Oh, shut up,” I snapped at Fox. “You’re so far up his ass, you can’t see the smoothie for what it is—a disgusting replacement for coffee.”

He looked hurt at first, then confused. “Um...what does being up his ass have to do with my smoothie? Are you suggesting it tastes like shit? Because that’s just mean.”

“I’m suggesting that you’re obsessed with this man and can’t see that he doesn’t even like you.”

Fox looked stricken, absolutely horrified by what I was saying. “Take it back.”

“Ask him yourself!” I snapped. “While you’re so busy trying to calm everyone else down, you can’t even read the signals in the room!”

Everything grew eerily silent around me. Jason was staring at the floor and Knight had some sort of evil look in his eyes, one that said he was going to bury my body outside—and I might still be alive when it happened. As for Fox, he cleared his throat and went to work cleaning up his mess. I had seriously overstepped on that one. I could only blame the fact that I was extremely stressed out, missing my son, and...oh

yeah, was responsible for making sure Jack didn't die. No pressure.

“Fox—”

“I think I saw some berries outside that would be perfect for a smoothie. And you know, weeds actually make a great addition to any drink,” he grinned. “Call me if you need me!”

His voice was way too cheery, which only made me feel worse. I made the mistake of assuming the man had no feelings. I needed to fix this somehow, but before I got the chance, the door opened and Kate walked out, sensing the tension in the room.

“Okay, who got murdered?”

“Let's go,” Knight said, shoving back from his chair. He shrugged out of his leather jacket and tossed it over the back, shooting a look at Jason with a nod.

“That's it?” I asked. “What about Jack?”

“Jack will be fine, but he wants to do this on his own. You know what to do.”

I nodded. It wouldn't be easy, but there was no other way around it if he refused to take the help.

“Just do the best you can. You have my number if you need me.”

Knight grabbed her hand and pulled her to the door. I felt absolutely shitty. This was not the way I wanted to start my day.

“I'm sorry,” I said to Jason, though he wasn't the one that deserved the apology.

“Fox is an unusual case. You just have to get used to him.”

“I really thought...” I chuckled to myself, feeling like such an idiot. “I just thought Knight hated him.”

“Well, it's a hate/less hate relationship. Let's say Knight tolerates him.”

I pointed to the jacket on the back of the chair. “What’s that about?”

“Just a way for Knight to let him know he’s still...friends with Fox. If you want to call it that.”

That made me smile just a little, even though I didn’t know the backstory. “Did Fox really take his shoes?”

“And so much more,” Jason sighed. “Relax, Fox will come around in no time. He doesn’t hold grudges very long. At least, not against regular people. Just...play him a show tune or something.”

“A showtune?”

“Yeah, it’s sort of his thing. But choose wisely. There’s a lot of meaning in them. Choose the wrong one and he might go all psycho on you.”

That had my heart kicking up. “Well, I don’t know what the wrong one is. What if I choose something he hates?”

He tossed his head back and laughed at that. “Fox hate a show tune? Highly unlikely. Just don’t go for anything from *West Side Story*. It puts him in a killing mood.”

He left before I could ask any more questions. I had to fix this, but I didn’t want to do it wrong. I knew nothing about show tunes. But I also couldn’t go around with Fox being depressed for the next week. I had to figure this out and find a way back on his good side. I hated being the reason other people were unhappy.

IT HAD BEEN THREE DAYS SINCE KATE LEFT ME HERE ALONE with Jack. The worst of the symptoms had started, leaving Jack even more irritable than anything I’d seen before. I was grateful now that Parker had gone to OPS with Rae. If he saw Jack like this, it would be something he’d never get out of his head.

“I need you to calm down,” I said, trying my best not to yell at Jack. He was pacing around the room, destroying anything in his path. Agitated didn’t even begin to describe

what he was going through. I was surprised he hadn't collapsed yet. "If you'd just let me—"

He spun on me, his eyes wild and feral as he stared me down like prey. Jack wasn't home anymore. This psychotic replacement was someone I didn't know how to deal with. Bloodshot eyes, his t-shirt soaked in sweat, and that didn't touch on the mental problems I could see as he muttered to himself with every step he took.

Whatever they had him on, it was severely fucking up his head.

"Jack, I think we should—"

In two strides, he was across the room, grabbing me by the neck as he shoved me against the wall. Terrified, I stood still, not wanting to move in case it set him off even more. I could see his pulse pounding rapidly in his neck. He was on the edge, ready to break at any minute. But what I was most scared of was that his heart was beating too fast and would eventually give out. It was known to happen in patients when they went through withdrawal, though it was usually due to dehydration.

But Jack was a different case. The drugs he'd been given were dangerous, and it was shocking that he was even still alive. This wasn't even the worst of it, though. I knew there was so much more to come, worse than what I was already seeing. I wanted to be here for him, but I wasn't sure I could handle it, especially with his hand wrapped around my throat.

"Jack," I whispered, hoping to break through whatever was clouding his mind. "It's Skylar."

For just a moment, I thought I saw a spark of recognition in his eyes. But that disappeared seconds later. The hand wrapped around my throat started squeezing harder. I could see the danger in his eyes, the lost look that only saw the threat in front of him. I was keeping him from his drugs, and therefore, I had to go.

I rammed my knee up, hitting him in the nuts. He gasped, bending over in pain as I ran from the room, slamming the

door behind me. Jason was there in an instant, catching me just as I was about to collapse.

“What happened?” he shouted, grasping my arms as he led me over to a stool. “Are you okay?”

Tears streamed down my face as I cried out, barely in control of my own emotions. I wasn't sad or hurt. I was angry, pissed that Jack had been through this—that someone would strap him to a table and torture him like that. The man I knew wasn't home. Even if he was faking it before, the protective side to him was long gone. I just hoped when the drugs left his system, he would return to the person I knew was buried underneath.

“Skylar, you have to tell me what happened!”

A loud crash came from Jack's room, making me jump. Jason's hands were on my neck, craning it to the side as he studied the red marks I knew were there.

“Jesus,” he muttered. “I'm gonna kill him.”

I grabbed him just as he was about to storm off. He spun, glaring at me, but he wasn't angry at me. “Don't.”

“Don't what? He put his hands on you!”

“He doesn't even know who he is!” I cried. “That's not Jack in there. You have to find another way to get through to him.”

“And how the fuck am I supposed to do that?” Jason spat.

I honestly didn't know. But anger wasn't the answer. He was damaged and it wasn't his fault. He didn't ask for any of this to happen. We needed another solution, a way to calm him down and—

“Fox,” I whispered. “You have to send in Fox.”

“Sorry, you want me to do what?”

“Just...give me a minute.”

I hopped off the stool, forgetting the anger and tears as I raced through the house looking for him. I finally found him

upstairs, sitting on the floor of the bedroom with his legs crossed in some weird meditation pose.

“Fox! I need your help!”

He ignored me, continuing to breathe in and out. I sat down beside him, hoping he wasn't too pissed at me to help.

“Fox, I...I know I have no right to ask for your help. The things I said...you should hate me right now. There's no excuse for the way I acted. But Jack needs you right now.”

He continued to breathe deep, humming to himself so softly that I almost didn't hear it.

“Fox, I'm begging you. There's a man downstairs that's hurting right now. He doesn't even know who he is. Nothing's working. But I think you can help. If you could just...you have to help him,” I said, finally breaking down in tears. “I can't do it. He doesn't even recognize me right now. And I know he would never hurt me, but that's not Jack. He's lost, and he needs someone who can think outside the box to reach him.”

Still, he didn't answer. Nothing I said was getting through to anyone. Maybe I wasn't good for Jack, or anyone else at OPS. All I was doing was causing more misery. Jack would come to resent me, and I'd already turned Knight and Fox against me. I knew Jason didn't have a very high opinion of me after my little outburst.

“Don't do it for me. He's your friend, and he needs your help.”

When he still didn't respond, I knew it was pointless to keep trying. I turned around and headed for the door, determined to find something that might help Jack through this.

“I'll need lots of lavender and maybe some bergamot orange. We'll also need to make some smoothies, the more nutritious, the better. I'll also require some triangles and two yoga mats.”

“Triangles?”

“The instruments,” he said, his eyes still closed. “Anything else would be too loud and worsen his headache.”

“I’ll get all of it.”

“And one more thing, a fountain that trickles softly as the water cascades over rocks.”

I had no idea where to get any of that, but I would do anything right now to help. I turned to leave, but an overwhelming rush of affection washed over me. I ran toward Fox, tossing myself into his arms as I wrapped my own around his neck. “Thank you,” I whispered. “And I’m so sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about. Stress makes people say things they don’t mean all the time.”

This time, he winked at me, letting me know everything was okay. With that taken care of, now I just had to gather all the things Fox asked for.

“Dash,” I grinned as he walked out of his room. “I need to go shopping.”

“Alright, make me a list.”

“It’s...stuff for Fox.”

He rolled his eyes. “I should have known. Grab your things. Looks like we’re going on a scavenger hunt.”

JACK

FOR THE FIRST time in a week, I woke up without feeling the pounding in my head or the need to kill someone. I wasn't exactly thriving, but I was in a better place than I was even two days ago. I vaguely remember Fox sitting beside me, chanting something, but I couldn't remember what.

I sniffed, wondering where the lavender was coming from. Skylar didn't wear anything that smelled like lavender, so it couldn't be her. I tossed off the sheet, immediately disgusted by how I smelled. When was the last time I showered? Pushing to my feet, dizziness washed over me. I grabbed the dresser, trying to stay upright until I got my bearings.

The door opened and Skylar peeked in, smiling at me. "You're awake."

"Yeah. What day is it?"

"Saturday. You've been out for a few days."

"Out like..."

"You passed out. I think Fox did some kind of voodoo on you."

"Oh." That was disappointing. When I woke up still in one piece, I thought I'd done it alone, beaten the addiction and somehow proven that...I was strong enough.

"It was really bad," she said, pressing her hand to her neck. My eyes were instantly drawn to her hand, and a flash of anger washed over me, but it wasn't at her. There was something

about the gesture that my memories were trying to decipher. It was just locked deep inside my head.

“I need to shower.”

“Yeah,” she smiled. “I’m sure that’ll make you feel better.”

I watched her for another minute, my eyes glued to her hand. What was it about the gesture that had me so freaked out? I felt like I wanted to punch myself, but I couldn’t remember why.

“Jack?”

“Huh?”

“Are you okay?”

“Uh...probably just hungry.”

“Well, I can take care of that. There are fresh clothes in the dresser.”

I nodded as she shut the door, wondering just how bad it was while I was out of it. Had she witnessed me at my lowest? I prayed Jason kept her from me, maybe closed her in another room while the drugs left my system. I headed for the bathroom, wincing when I stepped on something sharp. A shard of wood stuck out of the bottom of my foot, and when I pulled it out, I remembered the anger rushing through me as I threw a table across the room. I looked up and saw the hole in the wall.

I stripped out of the smelly clothes and turned on the water. A dull headache throbbed, but it was barely noticeable in comparison to what I normally felt. Warm water cascaded over my body, soothing my sore muscles. It felt like I’d run a marathon for the past four days. Basically, I was just fucking tired. Standing under the shower for even five minutes was enough to wear me out. I rested my palm on the tile wall and did my best not to fall over. Eventually, I had to start washing. I needed to get out before my legs collapsed under me.

It was when I was running the washcloth over my neck that the memory hit. Her terrified eyes stared at me as I crushed her throat under my hand. I dropped the washcloth,

shutting off the water as I tore the shower curtain open and snatched a towel to wrap around my waist. In seconds, I was ripping the door off the hinges to get to her. She spun, surprised when she saw me charging toward her.

She was scared of me, backing away as I walked up to her and grabbed her head, gently twisting it up so I could see the bruises on her neck. I was aware of the silence in the room, how everyone watched every move I made. But I couldn't move, couldn't release her as I stared at the damage I had done.

"I did that," I croaked out, more broken than I'd ever felt before. I'd never, not once in my life hurt a woman. I used to be able to say that. Now...

"Jack, you didn't know what you were doing. It was the drugs—"

"I put my hands on you," I growled. "I could have killed you."

"I got away," she insisted. "I kneed you in the crotch. Trust me, I know how to handle myself."

"I put my fucking hands on you!" I shouted, tears pricking my eyes unwillingly. I had done it, become the one person I swore I never would. I was my father.

My hands slid from her soft skin as I took a step back, devastated by the reality of what happened. It didn't matter that I was on drugs. It didn't matter that I was sick. I had become uncontrollable, and she paid the price for it.

"Jack—"

"I need to leave. Now."

"Jack," she pleaded, rushing forward.

I scrambled further away from her, unable to even look at her. The damage I'd done, it was unforgivable. "Don't," I warned. "Don't come near me. I'm no good for you."

"Is that really what you think? That you get to order me around?"

“Yes, because you have a kid to think about, and I shouldn’t be anywhere near him!”

“Jack, that wasn’t you. I know who you are!”

“Do you?” I shouted. “Is that what you want around your kid? A man that got fucked up and so lost in his head that he hurt you and didn’t even realize it? What if it’s him next time? What if—”

I cut myself off, unable to say the words. For everything I hoped for, this wasn’t part of it. I had become something I couldn’t recognize. I did this to myself with my choice to take a job that I never should have. This twisted version I became was no longer a man worthy of a woman like her. She deserved someone who could always put her first, who wouldn’t ruin something good for a fucking job.

“Johnny,” I croaked out. “I need you to get me out of here.”

“Yeah,” he answered quietly, not trying to change my mind.

“Jack.” I could hear the crack in her voice, the way she was trying to hide the tears from me. But it was too late. My chance with her was over before it ever started, and I only had myself to blame.

SKYLAR

“ARE WE THERE YET?”

I smiled in the rearview mirror at Parker. He'd been asking that for the past two days. He never was very patient when it came to road trips. I found that out on the way to my parents' house in Florida.

After we left the safe house in Oklahoma, we stopped briefly in Kansas. But after only a week, I was ready to leave. All it took were a few simple words for me to make up my mind that it was time to leave.

“They caught him.”

Rico was in prison. The inside man working to bring down Baz, the same one who gave us the information that saved Parker's life, testified at Rico's trial. He was in prison for life now, and since his father was dead, there was no one with enough influence to get him out.

That's when I decided to head to Florida. Parker and I needed the break, some time to be reminded of the people in our lives who loved us. It was just the thing we both needed to move past the trauma we'd suffered. And it worked, until it was time to get back to reality. There was one person I just couldn't move on from, and my life would never truly settle until I had the answers I needed.

“Almost, bud,” I grinned. “See that building?”

I pointed out the window, knowing he wouldn't actually see it. You could point to something right in front of a four-year-old's eyes, and he would still be blind to it.

“I don’t see it, Mama.”

I turned down the driveway, my anxiety spiking the closer we got. I hadn’t spoken to Jack since he walked out on me that morning at the safe house. The look on his face, the hatred he felt toward himself was something I would never get out of my head. I hated what it did to him, and I hated him a little for walking away without talking to me. I’d been through many ranges of emotions over the past two months, each of them worse than the last. It was my mother who finally shoved me out the door and told me if I wanted answers, I had to talk to Jack.

Now that I was here, I was second-guessing that decision.

I parked in front of the OPS building, doing my best not to chicken out and turn around. “Okay, we’re here!”

“Yes! Are we gonna see Rae? I want to tell her about the alligator and the lizards!”

“I’m sure she wants to hear all about them,” I laughed, thinking of poor Rae and all the details that would accompany those stories. I unbuckled and spent way longer than necessary getting him out of his car seat. He was perfectly capable of doing it on his own, but it was a habit, one that I couldn’t shake after he was taken from me.

“Rae!” he shouted, running from me the second he saw her exit the building. I turned, shielding the sun from my eyes as I faced whoever was standing with her. To my disappointment, she was the only one there.

I put a smile on my face and marched forward, determined not to show how desperately I missed Jack. I shouldn’t feel this way. I hadn’t known him long enough to truly develop a bond with him. That’s what I told myself when I was feeling overly attached.

“Hey!” she grinned at me. “I wasn’t sure you were really coming back!”

“Well, it seemed right.”

She nodded knowingly at me. “He’s not here.”

“Who?” I asked, feigning confusion.

“You know who.”

I was thankful she hadn't said his name. It wasn't just me that was missing Jack. Almost every night, Parker asked when we would see him again. Jack was his hero, the man who saved him from the bad men.

“You should have called and let us know you were coming. We would have found you someplace to stay.”

“I actually rented a house in town.”

“You did? Does that mean you're staying for good?” she asked, a twinkle sparkling in her eyes.

“It means I'm staying for now. We'll see how things go.”

“Well, I know someone who will be especially glad you're here.”

I prayed that was Jack, but like she said, he wasn't here. “Okay, I'll bite. Who's that?”

She opened her mouth to answer, but the door behind her flew open and Fox came running out, scooping me up into his arms and twirling me around. I screamed, not expecting the welcome from him.

“Fox! Put me down!”

He laughed, finally dropping me to my feet and stepping back. “See, everyone said you were staying in Florida, but I knew you'd be back. I told them you weren't through with a certain someone.”

“Actually—”

“I mean, after what happened between us in Oklahoma, I knew you wouldn't be able to resist my smoothies. I knew you'd come back for more.”

I flushed bright red, shoving my hair behind my ear. “You're right,” I smiled. “I...missed them a lot in Florida.”

It wasn't a lie. After eating at four every evening with my parents at the same buffet restaurant, even Fox's smoothies

sounded good right about now.

“Well, I’ll whip one up for you and—”

“Not today,” I interrupted. “We just stopped to say hi. We still have to unpack and get settled into our new house.”

“Do you need some help?” Rae asked.

“Actually, this is something I want to do on my own.”

After being moved around wherever Baz wanted me to live, I liked the idea of picking out my house and setting it up for myself. I didn’t have a lot of money, but I was able to get everything transferred from my accounts in Texas, and I was going by next week to set up a new account at the local bank. On top of that, my parents lent me some money to get back on my feet. I didn’t like it, but after Rico stole all that money from me, I couldn’t exactly say no.

“Well, when you’re ready, we’re having a drink, and I want to hear about everything since you’ve been gone.”

“Just one?”

“Like there’s such a thing?” she retorted.

Pulling out a piece of paper, I handed it over. “That’s my new address and my phone number, in case you need to reach me.”

“You got a new cell phone?”

“Landline,” I corrected. “I haven’t replaced my cellphone yet.”

She shot me a quizzical look. “A...landline.”

“That’s right. I’m going back to the simpler days of phones that you don’t carry around with you. It’s going to be great.”

“Sure, if you live in the Stone Age.”

“Well, since they didn’t have phones at all in the Stone Age—”

“Yeah, yeah. It was a joke.” She looked at the paper again, her eyebrows shooting up. “This is where you live?”

“Yeah, the realtor in town said it was the only vacancy. Why? Is it not a nice area?”

“Uh...no,” she grinned, shaking her head. “Not at all. It’s actually a great place.”

“Then why are you smiling?”

“Because I know the house. It’s actually not too far from mine and Duke’s house. I’m sure you’ll love it.”

“Ah, so we can get together for coffee.”

“Yeah, I don’t really do the whole getting together thing unless it’s to talk about guns. If you want to do that at six in the morning, I’m your girl.”

“I think I’ve had enough of guns for one lifetime. Anyway, we’d better get going.”

“Mama, but we just got here!” Parker whined. “And you’ve been talking the whole time! I didn’t even get to tell her about the lizards!”

“Next time, bud,” I chuckled. “Right now, we’re going to see our new house!”

That instantly brought a smile to his face. He waved to Rae as he ran away, which was actually waving in the other direction.

“Wait!” Fox said excitedly. “I have some food I just made. It’s perfect for dinner.”

“We’re good. I promise.”

“That’s what you say, but once you unpack and grocery shop, you’re not going to want to cook. I’ll bring it by and stock your fridge.”

“That’s really—”

“Trust me.”

There was no way to argue with him. And even though he’d forgiven me for my terrible comments at the safe house, I was still surprised with how nice he was being. It made it hard to say no.

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“Don’t thank me now. Wait until you try my delicious goodness!”

With a wink, he was off. I bit my lip, wondering if I just made a terrible mistake.

“He’s a good cook,” Rae reassured me.

“Should I be worried?”

“Only about the number of bags of Funyuns he’ll bring along.”

I COULDN’T TEAR PARKER AWAY FROM HIS ROOM IF I TRIED. He spent the whole day setting up the toys that my parents got him and then making his bed. The bottom sheet wasn’t on and the top sheet was pretty much in a ball under his comforter, but he was so proud of how it turned out. I didn’t have the heart to fix it. Even when he went to bed, he just passed out on top of the mess.

It was odd being in the two-story house. All the space was a new thing for me. In Texas, I couldn’t have rented something like this with what I was making. And when I started my new job here, it would still be tight, but I’d make it just fine. Parker and I didn’t need a lot, and I thought I deserved someplace nice after what we’d been through.

I walked through the first floor, running my fingers along the furniture that came with the house. It wasn’t exactly my taste, but since I didn’t have to buy it, I could learn to like it. There was a musty smell in the air that would go away with time, and if I opened the windows, it would help to air out the house. I just hadn’t gotten to it yet.

Truthfully, I wasn’t used to feeling safe enough to open a window. I just had to do it. This was Kansas, a safe area. It would be completely fine. I strode over to the living room window and unlocked it, determined not to hesitate. It was just a window. Flinging it open, the fall breeze floated in, rustling the curtains that hung the full length of the window.

It was a little cool this morning, but the longer I stood in front of the window, the more I wanted to have my first cup of coffee on the porch. Parker would be asleep for hours. Lately, he'd been sleeping in. His schedule was so much different from when we were in Texas. It was good for him, and made his days less stressful.

I grabbed my coffee and a blanket off the couch, then hurried outside. The swing that faced the street was the perfect place to observe the neighborhood. That first sip of coffee brought a smile to my face. It was ridiculous to be so happy about having coffee on my porch, but it felt so right.

I was so wrapped up enjoying my coffee that I didn't hear the door open one house over. But I saw him bend down in front of his motorcycle. I'd recognize that blonde hair anywhere, and the tattoos that ran up both arms. It didn't matter how much time passed, the same fluttering I felt in my stomach that one night on his couch—it felt like eons ago—but I still remembered the way his body felt against mine. The way his lips slid over mine as he touched me. It was only one night, and it never went any further than kissing, but I knew then the same thing I knew now.

Jack was someone I could seriously fall for, someone I would never be able to get out of my head. He lived in my brain—every word he spoke, the desperate look in his eyes to get away from me when he thought he hurt me—and most of all, the way he cared about me and my son when it was the last thing he needed in his life.

No, Jack hadn't meant to hurt me. It was the last thing he would ever do if he hadn't been so screwed up in the head. You could put any good man in the same position and risk the same reaction. I knew it that day, but Jack couldn't see past the bruises on my neck. And I had a feeling that even today, that's all he would see.

But that didn't stop me from shrugging off the blanket and walking down the steps to talk to him.

“Jack.”

He stilled at the sound of my voice. Slowly, he rose to his feet, his eyes immediately finding mine when he turned around. There wasn't a trace of the man I met in Texas. He was stronger, clearer than I'd ever seen him before. And he was looking at me like he'd seen a ghost.

JACK

MY EYES HAD to be deceiving me. There was no way she could be here.

Not only here, but at the house next to mine.

I couldn't speak. I just watched her, the way she stared at me nervously, wondering what I would do next. I'd dreamt about this woman for months, wishing I could turn back time and make things right with her. After all she did for me, I walked away without so much as a goodbye. I was too fucked up in the head to deal with anything else.

Yet, here she was, standing there looking at me with such warmth that I felt ashamed for being so harsh with her. It was what I needed at the time, but that didn't mean she would ever forgive me.

She walked down the last few steps and quickly ate up the space between us. I still hadn't opened my mouth when she flung her arms around my neck and squeezed me tight. I released a pained breath, slowly bringing my hands around her waist and pulling her closer to me. She was still here, still felt the same in my arms, though I didn't have many memories of that.

I'd spent the past two months working past my issues, going to meetings for drug addiction. But I knew I wouldn't get her back by just doing that. I needed to fix what was wrong in my head—the idea that I was responsible for so many things that happened with not only my sister, but with Sky. I had to accept that there were other factors that contributed to Parker

being taken, and by placing all the blame on my own shoulders, I was preventing myself from accepting my part in what happened.

I wasn't there yet, but I wanted to be so badly.

When she stepped back, I felt the loss deep inside me, like a hole opened up and let in all these emotions that I didn't know how to control. I wasn't used to feeling things like this. For so long, I had shoved all that shit down, focusing on redeeming myself in some way. Now, everything was bubbling to the surface, reminding me of what I felt when I was with Sky.

I cleared my throat, unsure of what to say. There was so much to apologize for, but where to begin?

She took the first step, making it so much easier on me. "You look really good, Jack."

"You do too," I finally said.

They were not the first words I thought I'd say to Sky if I ever saw her again. I ran my hand across the short beard that graced my jawline, hoping to come up with something brilliant to say. "I didn't know you were moving here."

"I just got in yesterday."

I nodded, unable to take my eyes off her. God, she was fucking beautiful. Those eyes...I dreamt about them at night. They pulled me back from the edge when I felt the cravings coming on. I fought for her, to make myself a better man to one day be worthy of her.

"You look great," I said for the second time. "Where's Parker?"

"Still sleeping. Since he doesn't have to wake up early anymore, he likes to sleep in."

"Lucky kid," I said, feeling the first hint of a smile touch my lips. "Is he..."

"He's fine. He had a few weeks of rough nights, but he's doing so much better."

“That’s good.” I hated the thought of what that kid went through.

“So...how are you?”

I huffed out a laugh, wishing I could sum it up easily. “You know...I have my good days.”

“And today?”

Today? Today was the best fucking day I’d had since I returned. Sky was here, standing next to me once again. It was the reminder I needed that life could be better.

“Today’s good,” I said, my voice cracking slightly. “Are you here to stay or...”

Please God, don’t tell me you’re leaving.

“I would like to stay. I can’t live in Florida with my parents,” she laughed. “They’re a little too...worried. That’s the best way to describe it. I’ve already talked to my mom twice this morning.”

“She worries about you.”

“But she doesn’t have to anymore. I’m safe. Thanks to you.”

There was nothing disingenuous about the way she said it. I just didn’t believe it yet. I wasn’t entirely convinced that I helped in any way. I was still working on that whole accepting that not everything was my fault.

Slowly, I held my hand out, hoping she would take mine in hers. It felt like hours passed when it was really just seconds, and then her fingers slid against mine. I swallowed hard, my chest tightening painfully at the sensation.

“It was you, Sky. You’re the hero in this story. You always will be.”

“You jumped in front of a bullet for my son.”

“And if I hadn’t been so fucked up, I could have been there to protect him and—”

“You mean if Baz hadn’t pumped you full of drugs. You’re taking the blame for something you couldn’t control. You did everything possible to get my son back. Do you know what that means to me? Every day, I wake up and I’m reminded of the sacrifices you made for me.”

I heard what she was saying. It was the same fucking thing my therapist said to me, but that didn’t make it easier to swallow.

“I hurt you,” I admitted, my voice low and shaky. “I fucking hate that I hurt you.”

She smiled at me then, her hand coming up to rest on my cheek. “Enough for today, hmm? You’re not ready to hear it, but one day you will be. We’ll talk about it then.”

After a moment, I couldn’t take the tension any longer. I stepped back, not knowing what else to do. “I uh…” That was it, all I could come up with as I stood in front of her.

“Do you want to come over for dinner tomorrow?”

That was a terrible idea.

“Parker hasn’t stopped asking about you since we left. He has so much to tell you about alligators and lizards.”

Dinner would mean being alone with her. With her and Parker. I wasn’t sure I was ready for that, but if we were going to be neighbors, I had to start somewhere. “Yeah, we can do dinner.”

“Great,” she smiled. “Five-thirty. We eat early around here.”

I nodded and watched as she retreated to her house. Nothing could make me move, not even when she went back inside. I stayed there for at least five minutes, wondering if I could fix this.

If I could ever come around to be the man she needed.

“JUST GO OVER THERE.”

“I’m working on it,” I grumbled into the phone. Johnny hadn’t stopped calling since yesterday when he heard Skylar was in town. You’d think he was my father, the way he was bugging me.

“Don’t work on it. Just walk over there and knock on the door.”

I sighed, rubbing my hand over my eyes. Today wasn’t a good day. I’d been fighting a headache since the morning, and nothing was helping. “Maybe I should just cancel.”

“Until when? You get headaches every other day. It could be months before they’re gone. Do you really think putting this off is going to make a difference?”

No, it wouldn’t. But I was afraid of how I would react.

“You’re not going to hurt her,” he said, as if reading my mind.

“You know how I get when the headaches get bad.”

“Yeah, you’ve got a fucking attitude. You’re not going to hurt her. You care about her too much.”

“I hurt her before,” I argued.

“And you didn’t even know who the fuck you were. Your therapist has gone over this with you a million times.”

That didn’t mean it was any easier to accept.

“I need you to really listen to me,” he said with an urgency I hadn’t heard in a long time. “You would never hurt her or her kid. And until you believe that, you’re not going to accept the things that happened and learn to move on. She trusts you. There’s no fucking way she would invite you over if she thought there was even a chance you could hurt her or Parker.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Do you hear me?”

“Yeah,” I answered, though I still didn’t believe it.

“Go spend some time with her and remind yourself what it’s like to have a good time.”

I hung up, hoping I could get through this without being a total dick. I grabbed the lavender oil from the counter and put a few dabs at my temples. It helped fight the headaches when they got bad. Maybe Fox was a little crazy, thinking he could interrogate people with herbs and shit. But he was dead on in helping me get through the week of hell.

With my oversized sunglasses in place, I headed out the door into the dimming light. People looked at me funny around town when I had to wear them, but nobody ever said a thing. I climbed the steps to her house, but didn't even get to the top when Parker ran out and flung himself into my arms. I thought for sure he would have forgotten about me by now.

"Jack!" he shouted, making me cringe at how loud he was. His voice echoed in my head, intensifying the headache and bringing on a bout of nausea. This was a mistake.

"Parker, come here," Sky said softly, taking his hand and pulling him back from me. "Jack's not feeling well, so we have to be quiet, okay?"

"Is he sick?"

"Yeah, baby. So we're going to speak really softly, okay?"

"Okay, Mama," he whispered. "I'm gonna get him an ice pack like I do for you when you have a headache."

"Thank you," she whispered. The nausea subsided enough for me to look at her. I felt fucking pathetic for everything, but the way she was looking at me was anything but pathetic.

"Come on," she held out her hand. "I have just the thing for you."

Reluctantly, I took her hand and walked the rest of the way to her front door. I didn't bother looking around. It was best if I kept my eyes closed. So, as soon as she led me to her couch, I sat down and blocked out the world. A cool pack smelling like lavender was placed on my forehead.

"Lay down," she ordered, tugging me to the side of the couch. I expected to land on a pillow, but instead, her legs acted as my cushion. She pulled the sunglasses off, replacing them with the cool pack. Gently, her fingers ran through my

hair, massaging my scalp rhythmically. I wanted to protest, but it felt so good, and actually seemed to be helping.

I heard her whisper something to Parker, but continued to block out all other sounds as I got lost in the way her fingers worked through my hair. My eyes grew heavy, something that hardly ever happened when I got a headache, and I found myself drifting off to sleep.

I ROLLED TO MY SIDE, NEARLY FALLING TO THE GROUND WHEN I hit the edge. My eyes sprung open and I stared at the carpet that didn't belong in my house.

“Good morning.”

I sat up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes as I saw the sun rising outside. “Did I sleep here?”

“Yeah, I didn't want to tell you to go home. I hope it was comfortable enough.”

“I slept like a rock,” I admitted.

“How's your headache?”

“Gone,” I said, a small smile forming on my lips. “You have some kind of magic touch.”

“Well, sometimes when you let other people help, they can surprise you.”

She handed me a cup of coffee, then sat down on the other end of the couch, pulling one leg underneath her. The first sip of coffee was like nirvana. I wasn't sure what she did to it, but it was freaking good.

“I'm sorry I passed out on you. Literally.”

“It's fine. I watched TV and Parker was just happy you were in the house.”

“Yeah, but he was so excited and—”

“Would you relax?” she laughed. “You know, your entire life is not about pleasing others. You're allowed to have bad

days, and considering what happened to you, a headache is more than a valid reason to pass out on the couch.”

I liked the way she didn't tiptoe around what happened. I didn't have to explain that my brain had been fried. She already knew that. It made things easier.

“Still, I wish I could have spent some time with him last night. He seemed pretty excited to see me.”

“He was,” she grinned. “And I'm glad you got some sleep. You really looked like you needed it. So,” she said, shifting on the couch. “How often do you get headaches?”

“Still most of the week. It depends on how bright it is outside. If I keep my sunglasses on, it usually helps.”

“And work? Have you gone back yet?”

I shook my head. I didn't want to talk about this. It was bad enough I went to a therapist and spilled my guts, but talking to her...letting her see how fucked up I was...I hated that. But if I couldn't be honest with her, how would I ever get her back?

“I don't know if I will.”

“Go back to OPS or go back to Rafe?”

“Definitely not to Rafe,” I grumbled. “It took a lot for me to see how fucked up that was.”

“Why not OPS?”

Again, this wasn't something I wanted to talk about. How did I admit to her that I wasn't sure I could do the job anymore?

“You know what? It's none of my business.” She stood, heading for the kitchen. “Do you want some breakfast?”

“Are you sure about that?”

“About eating? All the time.”

I pushed off the couch, grateful I didn't get dizzy when I stood. “I meant about being here when Parker wakes up.”

“Well, the great thing about little kids is that they don’t understand the meaning about another adult being in the room in the morning. So, there’s nothing to explain. Besides, you fell asleep on the couch and he saw that. It really is that simple.”

I walked over to her kitchen table and sat down, enjoying my cup of coffee as she grabbed whatever she was making. It didn’t escape my notice that her house was still just as clean as she kept her old house. But it was so lifeless around here. All the things she had at the old house that made it a home were absent. I doubted she’d had time to replace any of it when she came here.

“Have you found a job yet?”

“Yeah, actually, I’m going to be working as a nurse for the doctor in town. One of his nurses just retired, so it was perfect timing.”

“And that works with Parker’s schedule?”

“A lot better than before,” she admitted. “Plus, he’s going to start kindergarten this year, so I just have to find a sitter for him after school until I get off work.”

“And what about Rico? Have there been any problems there?”

I already knew that Rico was in prison, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t stirring up trouble.

“No, he’s been silent. His lawyer reached out. Can you believe he actually wanted me to bring Parker to his trial? I think it was some desperate plea for leniency.”

“I hope you said no.”

“I didn’t even answer,” she smiled. “His trial went pretty fast. Much faster than I expected. The prosecutor told me it could take up to six months, but given his crimes and the evidence they had, they pushed for an early trial. And from what I understand, he’s being transferred to a maximum security prison later this month.”

That was a relief, and something Johnny failed to mention. As she whipped breakfast together, I zoned out, thinking about what things might have been like if I had met her at a different time. I might not have even looked at her. I'd always been so focused on my job that women were replaceable. But how could I ever see this woman in that light?

"Jack!" Parker screamed from the top of the stairs. He rushed down the stairs and ran into my arms for the second time in two days. I didn't hesitate to pull him in for a hug. I missed the little guy, and being able to hold him reassured me that he was okay.

"I missed you," he whispered in my ear.

Something stuttered in my chest, almost like my heart skipped a beat. But the real shocker was when I felt moisture in my eyes, welling like a damn fountain. I was on the verge of crying, and why? Because this kid was hugging me, squeezing me like I meant the world to him. Me. A guy that by all means should be in prison right now. A man who didn't deserve the love of this little kid.

He pulled back and practically jumped out of my arms, running over to the fridge where a drawing hung. He came running back to me, shoving it in my face.

"See? This is you! I drew in last night for you. That's me. That's the mean man. And that's you!"

I was curled around his body, protecting him as the mean man stood over us. The images that still ran through this kid's head were horrific. And he saw me as his hero. He ran off again and I hung my head, unable to deal with the fact that this kid thought of me as one of the good guys. He saw only through the eyes of an innocent, not the destruction I caused to get to that point.

Somewhere out there, a cop's family had to go to his funeral, probably completely unaware of his bad behavior. They mourned him. He was someone's father and husband. And I took that away without a second thought because I thought it was for the greater good. I was no hero. I was a man who should be behind bars.

“I have to go,” I said, shoving to my feet without looking back at Skylar. The drawing slipped from my fingers, falling to the floor as I stormed out of the house. This was all wrong. I couldn’t let Skylar think this was anything more than us being neighbors. It didn’t matter what I wanted when she returned. All that mattered was the fact that I couldn’t change anything about my past.

It would never change the man deep inside me.

SKYLAR

THREE DAYS PASSED without a single sign of Jack. He refused to answer the door and I never saw him outside. I was beginning to worry about what he would do to himself. I wanted to believe that he was strong enough not to do something stupid, but he was so down on himself, so convinced that he wasn't good enough.

Sighing, I walked away from his door again and got in the car with Parker.

“Mama, is Jack coming over for dinner tonight?”

“I don't know, baby.”

“Does he not like me?”

I hated what Jack was going through, but I hated even more that my kid was hurting because he didn't understand. “Of course he likes you, sweetie. But adults have busy lives. I'm sure we'll see him again soon.”

“Maybe he's sad.”

“Why would you say that?” I asked, glancing at him in the rearview mirror.

“Because he was crying when I gave him the picture,” he said, as if that wasn't shocking news.

I knew something upset him and he ran out of the house, but I had no idea it affected him like that.

“Maybe he needs a hug,” Parker said matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, you might be right.”

I pulled up to the school moments later and parked to drop Parker off for his first day of school. I was a bundle of nerves, though it was more about what happened two months ago than anything else. Parker loved school, but he hadn't been back in a setting like this since he was taken. It was probably my own insecurities about leaving him with someone else that had me so rattled.

I opened the outer door and waited to be buzzed inside. I knew I was squeezing his hand too tight as I walked him to his classroom, but I was terrified.

"Mama, you're hurting me," Parker whispered.

"Sorry, baby." I sucked back the tears that were threatening to spill down my cheeks. If Parker saw how upset I was, it would only make things worse. I finally reached his room and bent down, smiling at him as I adjusted the straps on his backpack that made it too loose.

"Are you ready for your first day of school?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "Do you think I'll learn about the ocean?"

"Maybe."

"And the stars? What about Siberian Tigers?"

I chuckled at his enthusiasm. "I'm sure you will at some point, but probably not today."

His face fell in disappointment, but he quickly recovered. "Do you think I can check out a library book?"

"Your teacher will let you know when you can do that. Okay?"

He nodded, then hugged me tight. "Don't cry, Mama. You can take me to the park after school."

I huffed out a laugh, trying not to cry anymore. Standing, I held out my hand again. "We should get you inside."

His face lit up as we stepped through the door, but I instantly stopped in my tracks, unable to move an inch. Jack was talking with the teacher, but at Parker's squeal, turned and

knelt down as Parker rushed him. I covered my mouth with my hand, seriously trying not to sob like a baby. Parker had really wanted to tell Jack about his first day, and now he was here. I turned away from them, giving myself a moment to compose my emotions. When I faced them again, Jack was allowing Parker to lead him around the classroom, looking for the name tag on the desk he'd be using this year.

The teacher walked over to me, greeting me with a smile. "You must be Skylar. Jack was telling me all about you and Parker. He wanted me to know what happened a few months ago, in case Parker had any issues."

"He did?"

She nodded again. "I'll keep in touch with anything that might be concerning, and Jack has asked permission to install cameras throughout the school for extra monitoring. The school board approved it last night, given the circumstances of the situation, so long as the principal is also allowed to view the camera feeds. But that's all being worked out with the security company, so you have nothing to worry about. We routinely cover active shooter protocols, and each room will have a safe room installed."

"How is the district paying for this?" I asked, my mind whirling with questions.

"The district isn't. The security company is working with a local contractor to have everything taken care of. I can't tell you what a relief it is. This school has always been safe, but it doesn't seem to matter how safe a town is."

She kept talking, gushing about how excited she was for the upcoming improvements to the school, but my eyes were glued to Jack. I couldn't believe he came here all to look after Parker.

"Excuse me, I have more students coming. We'll talk later," the teacher smiled, walking off to greet the other students. Parker was already making new friends as Jack strode over to me. His eyes never once left mine, and when he took my hand and guided me out of the room, the warm tingles moving through my body couldn't be ignored.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“For what?”

“The teacher told me about the improvements to the school. I’m guessing that was because of you.”

“I just want him to be safe.” His voice was low, almost as if he couldn’t bear to admit that he was a good guy.

I didn’t want to discuss anything else in the school. It wasn’t the right place. So, we walked the halls in silence, Jack holding my hand the whole way. On the sidewalk outside, he stopped and turned to me.

“I’m sorry about the other day.”

“You don’t have to apologize. Just don’t drop off the face of the earth again. Parker was worried you didn’t like him anymore.”

“I just needed space to work shit out.”

“I know.”

Wincing, he slid his sunglasses in place. “I should get back.”

“Dab some lavender oil around your eyes.”

“Don’t have any. I used it all up.”

Shaking my head, I pulled out my key and handed it over. “Everything’s in my house.”

“I’m not taking your keys.”

“You will, and you’re going to use the oil and take a nap with an icepack on your eyes.”

I couldn’t see his eyes, but I imagined him rolling his eyes at me. “Thank you.”

“I have to get to work. Don’t be a stranger.”

A jerky nod was all I got in return. It wasn’t exactly the reaction I was hoping for, but it was certainly the one I was expecting.

“AND THEN MS. ANDREA SAID THAT I WAS RIGHT. WHICH means Carter was wrong.”

I kicked the car door shut, grabbing Parker’s backpack as it fell off his shoulders. “Just because you were right doesn’t mean you need to point it out. That makes other kids feel bad.”

“But Mama, I didn’t want him to feel bad. I just wanted him to know he was wrong.”

This was going to be a learning curve this year for Ms. Andrea. She thought she was getting a sweet kid, which he was. He was also a know-it-all, and that would drive her crazy.

“What do you want for dinner tonight?”

“Pizza!” he said, jumping up and down.

“Pizza is only for Friday nights.”

We were on an even tighter budget now and I wouldn’t waste money on pizza when I could easily make dinner, even if I was exhausted from my first day at work.

“But Mama—”

“Parker, when I say no, the answer is no. I don’t want to hear any whining.”

His face scrunched up, but he didn’t argue further. I was about to shove my key in the door when I remembered I gave it to Jack earlier today. Luckily, it was unlocked. I had a slight moment of terror as I stepped inside, worried that someone was in the house, but then I reminded myself that I wasn’t in Texas anymore and Rico was in prison.

But that didn’t mean someone wasn’t in my house.

Jack stood at the counter chopping something and glanced up when we entered. Parker was the first to react, running over to him and gushing about his first day of school. I, on the other hand, stood there in complete shock. The man was cooking something in my kitchen. After three days of him not speaking a word to me, he was here, acting all domestic. It threw me for a loop.

His eyes flashed to mine apologetically, and then he rounded the counter, heading right for me. He stopped just a few feet from me, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Sorry to scare you like that. I fell asleep here and...then I realized that you didn’t have a key and...Look, if this is a problem, I can leave. I just wanted to say thank you for today.”

“No,” I said after a minute. “No, it’s fine. It just...surprised me.” Pulling myself out of my shocked state, I dropped my bag on the ground. “What are you making?”

“Tacos.”

“Tacos?” Parker shouted. “I love tacos!”

“Parker,” I chastised. “Please don’t yell. It hurts Jack’s head.”

“Sorry,” he frowned, looking up at Jack guiltily.

“It’s okay, buddy. I know it’s hard to be quiet when you’re excited. You want to help me?”

“I get to cook?”

“I still have to make the beef and I’m sure your Mama needs a few minutes after her long day.”

I stood there stunned. Did that mean I was supposed to...go upstairs and...do something? I’d never been in this position before and I didn’t want to assume. “I’ll just change.”

“Take your time,” Jack said, helping Parker stand on a chair.

“Weird,” I whispered, watching as he took over.

I took the stairs two at a time, wondering what got into Jack. He was like a totally different guy. That gruff attitude was gone—at least for today. And he was acting like he was my boyfriend or something. I didn’t know what to make of it. I wanted to see where things could go with Jack, but we were going from zero to sixty without a single conversation. We’d made out a few months ago, but nothing since then!

I pulled on some sweats, deciding that until things were figured out between the two of us, I was going to be myself.

There would be no primping for him or anything that might fill my head with dreams of something that might never happen. It could be as simple as Jack wanted to do something nice for us after I helped him this morning.

By the time I got downstairs, the spicy scent of tacos filled the air, making my stomach rumble. I was going to make sandwiches and call it a night, so this was a pleasant surprise. As soon as my feet hit the bottom stair, Jack's eyes were on mine. His intense gaze had me squirming in place, desperate for something to do so all the attention wasn't on me.

"Mama! I made tacos!" Parker yelled, hopping down from his chair and rushing over to me.

"Really? That's pretty cool."

"You never let me cook," he pouted.

That was because I didn't have the tolerance that Jack apparently had. I liked to be able to make meals quickly and keep the cleanup to a minimum. Right now, the kitchen was a mess, one that I knew would be a hassle to clean. But I ignored that in favor of sitting down to the plate Jack shoved in front of my seat.

"This looks great."

Jack and I ate in silence as Parker regaled us with stories of his first day at school. At times, Jack was listening intently, eating up every word Parker said. But there were other times when I caught him lost in thought, pushing his tacos around his plate, but not eating a thing.

"Hey, buddy. You need a bath tonight."

"But—"

I gave him one stern look and he instantly shut his mouth, pouting as he hopped off his chair. "Fine."

"Thank you for cooking for us," I said, turning to Jack.

"Don't worry about it. I'll clean up the mess." I was about to argue when he cocked a smile at me. "I know this is going to bother you the whole time you're up there."

It surprised me that he realized that, so I took him up on his offer. “Thanks.”

While Parker took his bath, I pulled the laundry out of the dryer and folded it, checking in on him from time to time. He was busy playing and I had to remind him more than once to wash his hair. This was something he was just getting the hang of, and I usually had to go in and wash his hair again. But it gave me the chance to get other things done.

By the time everything was put away, I was ready to put up my feet and enjoy a glass of wine. I dried Parker off and sent him off to his room to get ready for bed. I still had an hour until he went to sleep since we didn’t get up as early in the morning. It was a new routine I was going to have to get used to. I hated to admit that I let him stay up a lot later while we spent the summer with my parents. The adjustment period was going to be hard.

I really expected Jack to be long gone by the time we got downstairs, and honestly, it probably would have been easier. I didn’t know what to make of this new version of Jack. He was wiping down the counters and all the dishes were washed and put away.

I took a moment to watch him lost in thought. Even though he didn’t look strung out like before, there was still a darkness lurking in his eyes, and I wasn’t sure he would ever really move past that.

“Hey,” I smiled, sitting awkwardly at my own counter. “You didn’t have to do all that.”

“Well, I made the mess.”

“Jack, will you read me a book?” Parker rushed over with one of his favorites. It was a National Geographic book about the solar system. He could read most of it on his own, but he was attached to Jack now, and that was something that made me nervous given his vanishing act a few days ago.

“Yeah, I can read to you.”

They sat down on the couch while I poured myself a glass of wine. I was stalling. Nerves had firmly settled in my

stomach, making it impossible to relax. I hated not knowing where I stood with him. But more than that, I hated not really knowing who he was. I didn't know how to talk to him about it. What was I supposed to say?

Hey, you're really good with my son. When did that happen?

I see you're not using drugs anymore. How's that going?

Or better yet...

So, now that you're not pretending to be a killer, what are your plans for the future?

And what was he doing here, hanging out with me? It wasn't that I didn't want him here, but...he was here. In my house, at the school, making me dinner...He was just here.

What about work? Was he planning on going back? And if he did, would he do undercover work like he had before? And how did Parker fit into this? He just spent the whole night with him, paying attention to him the way a father would. And as nice as it was for Parker to experience that, I didn't want it for him if Jack wasn't up to the task. He couldn't just appear and disappear from his life when things got hard.

I downed the last of my glass, surprised when I looked at the clock and saw that twenty minutes had passed where I drank wine and drove myself insane thinking about Jack and everything that worried me. That's when I realized it was silent in the living room.

Setting my glass down, I tiptoed over, watching as Jack gazed out the window, his finger rubbing over his top lip in thought. Parker was already asleep on his lap, curled up against him like he would with me. The sight nearly melted my heart.

"I can take him," I whispered, walking around the couch.

"Hmm?" Jack turned to me, his face pinched in confusion.

"He's asleep."

"Yeah," he nodded. "It was only about five minutes. He must have been worn out."

I nodded, sinking down on the couch beside my son, taking the book and placing it on the coffee table. “Well, thank you for tonight. I’m sure you didn’t intend to be over here for so long.”

“I liked it,” he answered, his voice gruff.

“You should probably get home. I have to get him to bed.”

“Right,” he answered as I picked up Parker, cradling him against my body. I started up the stairs, but Jack’s voice stopped me.

“Can we talk?”

“Tomorrow?”

He shook his head minutely. “Tonight, when you’re done.”

“Jack, it’s—”

The desperate look on his face stopped me from kicking him out. Whatever Jack was wrestling with, I couldn’t turn him away.

“Let me put him to bed.”

It didn’t take long to put Parker to bed, but I stalled anyway, not sure I was ready for this conversation, even though this was precisely the reason I came here—to find out where we stood.

Steeling my nerves, I headed downstairs and sat beside Jack on the couch, waiting for him to speak. I don’t think I’ve ever been so nervous in my life, so terrified of what he might say. But I had a feeling, whatever was said tonight would change my life forever.

JACK

I WAS AN ADDICT—A murderer by anyone’s standards. Good or bad kill, I took someone’s life without a second thought. The cop wasn’t the first time I’d done it either. I always thought I was doing the right thing, but as I sat on the couch with an innocent child sleeping on my lap, shame unlike anything I’d felt before washed over me.

I’d been working through my addiction, trying to come to terms with my actions over the past few years. My therapist said I was being too hard on myself, but the reality was, I made the decision to follow Rafe. Whatever his intentions, it had poisoned something inside me. It twisted me into doing things that I never thought myself capable of.

How was I ever supposed to be the man Sky needed?

“What do you want to talk about?”

My gaze jerked to Sky, who was just descending the stairs. I was caught again, so lost in thought that I wasn’t paying attention to my surroundings. I didn’t even know where to start.

She sat down beside me, waiting patiently for me to talk. I stared into her beautiful eyes, remembering the first time I saw them. Fuck, I wanted to be the man for her.

“Jack, it’s getting late. Maybe we should do this another time.”

“I—” Again, the words wouldn’t come. Telling her about the job with Rafe wouldn’t help her understand anything about me. I had to start at the beginning. “I was responsible for my

sister after my parents...They weren't good people. I wanted to give her a better life. And one day, I was supposed to pick her up from work, but ended up working longer than I should have. When I got home...I realized I forgot to pick her up. It wasn't until hours later that I found her."

I didn't have to say what happened to her. Sky was a nurse. I was pretty sure she'd seen it before.

"After I beat the shit out of the guy that attacked her, I was given the choice between jail and the military. I thought by joining the military, I would be giving her a family to watch over her. She took her own life," I said quietly. "I wasn't there, and I didn't realize how much she was hurting. I failed her the night she was attacked, and again when I didn't hear her cries for help. Taking out men like the guy who attacked her wasn't enough. That's when I met Rafe, and I thought he was really making a difference. Maybe he is," I said, shaking my head. "But..."

That was all I had. I didn't know how to tell her anything more than that. She scooted closer to me, taking my hand in hers. "You don't have to be perfect. I know you're working through a lot of stuff, and I'm patient. But you can't disappear on me and Parker. Either you're here as his friend or as his neighbor...whatever you can be. But if you disappear on him...he doesn't understand it."

"And you?" I asked, looking into her eyes. "What am I to you?"

"You pushed me away," she reminded me.

"Because I hurt you. Fuck, part of me worries that it'll happen again."

"Are you going to do drugs again?"

I swallowed hard, wishing I had a simple answer for her. "I want to say no. I want to tell you that I'll never do them again. But I'm an addict, and..."

"I know," she smiled at me. "Trust me, I know."

"I want to change. I want to...fuck, I don't want to be the guy that I was. When I see Parker and he looks at me like I'm

his best friend, I want to be the guy he needs. I want to be the guy you need.”

“Then be him,” she said simply. “All I need is a man who wants to be here with me, who will love my son and do whatever he can to protect us. And you’ve already done that. The rest is just follow through.”

I nodded, knowing she was right. “You once asked me why it felt like I wasn’t who I said I was. That guy—the one who was on drugs and hung around with Rico, the one who was angry all the time—that will never be me again. I promise you.”

“Then prove it,” she said, right as she leaned in and I crashed my lips against hers. It was like coming home, feeling her body against mine. The doubts and anger I held vanished with just one kiss. I knew they’d return eventually, but right now, she was my anchor, the person keeping me grounded.

Her hands slid through my hair, her nails scratching lightly against my scalp. There was nothing I wanted more than to take her upstairs and bury myself inside her, but it wouldn’t happen like this. Not when I was just coming to terms with who I was.

I broke the kiss, closing my eyes as I made my decision. “Not yet.”

“Jack—”

“No, when it happens, it’s going to be because I’m not fucked up anymore. I don’t want you to ever worry that I’m just using you.”

“Why would I think that?” she laughed.

But she stopped laughing when I looked her in the eyes. “I disappeared on you just a few days ago. You need to be sure that’s not going to happen again. Only then will I really have your trust, and the ability to earn your heart.”

I kissed her one last time and stood, walking to the door. “Lock this behind me.”

“You know I will,” she said, her eyes laughing at me.

I stepped outside and didn't leave the porch until I heard the lock snick. But even on the short walk home, I was watching the shadows, waiting for something to come and blow my world up once again.

“JACK!” CASH GRINNED AS I WALKED THROUGH THE FRONT doors at seven in the morning. “Are you back?”

“Not yet,” I answered, feeling a little itchy just being here.

“How's the head?”

I still had sunglasses on my face, even though I was indoors. “Good days and bad.”

“I take it today isn't the best day. Do you want to talk about it?”

I did enough of that with my therapist. Fuck, I hated even admitting that I was seeing someone. It made me feel weak, like I was broken.

“I actually stopped by to...to find out...”

“Where you go from here?” he finished for me.

I gave a tight nod. “Something like that.”

“Come with me.”

He turned and headed for the elevator, not waiting to see if I would follow. Of course I did. The whole reason I came here was to figure out what I was going to do now. But it felt strange to sit down and talk with Cash in this way. He had the same face as his brother, but he was nothing like him.

We descended to the third floor, heading to his office that was now next to the conference room. I guessed he didn't like being above ground when everyone else was below. Shutting the door behind me, I took a seat across from him.

“I don't know if you're aware of this, but I was in Afghanistan,” Cash said, leaning back in his seat.

“Yeah, I heard that.”

He smirked. “It wasn’t exactly my favorite place to serve. The sand—fuck, sometimes I think I can still feel it biting at my skin, you know?”

“Cash, I didn’t come here to trade war stories.”

“And the people over there, it was so fucking sad to see the way they lived—how they were ruled by fear. It makes you glad to be back here, fighting for something you can put your hands on. Something that you can see made a difference.”

I shifted uncomfortably, wondering why he was telling me about his glory days in the military. Did he think I didn’t trust him as a leader? Because I’d spent a lot of time around Rafe. I knew both men were ruthless, but Cash had a decency to him that Rafe could never touch.

“There was only one time Sally failed me. Sally’s my rifle—”

“I know who Sally is,” I interrupted.

“A lady like that knows how to rule you,” he grinned. “But there are times when even a lady can let you down. I was in this village, keeping an eye over the men in my unit from my nest. Some were playing soccer with some local kids, trying to get the people to trust us. And this one kid, scrawny as hell and scared as shit, walks over to one of my guys and starts talking to him. Pretty soon, my guy is leading this kid over to our unit where there are fifteen guys hanging out, having lunch. And that’s when I saw it, the wire sticking out from under his shirt. I thought for sure I was seeing things, so I hesitated, waiting for a better view. The moment his fingers wrapped around the device, I knew what I had to do.” He huffed out a laugh as he stared at his desk. “They gave me the fucking medal of honor for killing a kid. I saved the lives of my men that day, and another unit. And we caught a man that was spying on us, feeding intel to the enemy. There was a ceremony and everything. My parents were so fucking proud.” He shook his head and finally made eye contact again. “There was nothing heroic about me pulling the trigger on a kid. Sometimes, we do things because it’s what has to be done, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t eat at our souls. That’s the cost of

war, the part no one tells you about when you enlist—or when you take a job, thinking you’re doing the right thing for the greater good. And those things can drown you until the only way out you can find is at the end of a barrel.”

“You’ve been down that road?”

“Once. The day they gave me that medal. I gave it to my dad and walked away. I never wanted to see it again. I knew I had to make peace with what I had done, and move forward with the intention to never do something that would eat at my soul like that ever again.”

I’d never thought of looking down the end of a barrel, but the drugs were just another form of escape. I was beginning to see that, and learn how to deal with those decisions. I just wasn’t sure I was ready to come back to this life.

“Whatever you decide,” he said, pushing out of his chair. “Your team is waiting for you.”

“Thank you.”

I was just about to leave when an alarm went off. I turned to see what it was, but Cash was reading something on his phone. He immediately picked up the landline and dialed a number.

“This is Cash Owens. I just received an alert about a prisoner.”

My body tensed at his words.

“Why the fuck didn’t you notify us sooner?”

He slammed the phone down, his face serious as he looked at me. “Rico escaped a prisoner transport. He’s been on the run for two days.”

I snatched the phone out of his hands and dialed Sky’s landline. “Hello?”

“Sky, it’s Jack. Rico escaped. I’m coming to get you. Only grab what you need and be ready when I get there.”

“What?” she asked, her voice shaking.

“I’m coming to get you. Hurry!”

I slammed the phone down haphazardly, not even getting the phone in the cradle as I raced for the door. The scanners and codes slowed me down as I tried to get out of the building. As the elevator finally started moving, all I could think about was Sky, and how I couldn't be late yet again.

SKYLAR

I HUNG up and raced over to Parker, who was sitting in the kitchen eating breakfast. “Hey, Jack’s on his way over. I need you to go pack a bag.”

“Mama, what are we doing?”

I knelt down so I was eye level with him, doing my best not to freak him out. “We’re going on a trip. I need you to pack all the stuff you want to bring with you.”

“Like my big Flamingo?”

“Baby, I don’t think we can bring that with us.”

“But, Mama!”

“We’ll see if it fits, okay? Just hurry.”

He rushed upstairs to his room, giving me a moment to get my shit together. I just needed the essentials. Everything else could be replaced. I hurried upstairs, grabbing a duffle out of my closet.

“Clothes,” I said to myself. “Essentials.”

The door creaked open and a shadow emerged. I thought it was Jack and started toward him when I realized Jack was bigger than whoever this was. I stopped in my tracks, debating if I should scream for Jack or tell Parker to run. I never got the chance to do either.

The first shot was muffled, like a silencer was used. I felt the pinch of pain, but didn’t really understand what was happening. I looked at my shoulder, confused when I saw the

growing patch of red seeping through my shirt. I slowly looked back at the man in my house.

“You shot me.”

He finally stepped into the light, his features bathed in moonlight, reminding me of the night I first saw him in the club. Only he was smoother, less frightening back then. I stumbled back a step, nearly tripping over my own feet.

“What do you want?”

“I want you dead. You ruined my life.”

I shook my head in confusion. “I ruined—” A bubble of laughter burst from my lips. I should be panicking. I should be doing something other than standing here with this man.

“You sided with that traitor. You stole my son from me” he said, taking another step toward me. His gun was still pointed at me, but I was pretty sure he wouldn’t put a bullet in my shoulder the next time.

“Rico, he was never your son.”

“Don’t play innocent with me. I never fell for your act. That whole innocent look on your face, like you didn’t know who I was at the club. It was all a lie!”

He was insane, which I always knew, but now had proof, and I found that very disturbing.

“Rico, I didn’t know who you were then, and if I wanted you, don’t you think I would have tried to get you at some point over the last five years?”

He fired the gun again, making me jump as it missed my head by less than an inch. I felt the air shift as it passed my cheek, lodging in the wall behind me. The confusion faded to absolute fear. He was unhinged, and if I didn’t get him under control, he might really kill me, or worse, get to Parker.

“Look,” I said, my voice coming out shaking and scared. “You can run. I won’t say a thing. I just want to live my life—”

He charged me, grabbing me by the throat as he slammed me up against the wall. I tried to scream, but no sound came out. For just a moment, all I could think about was the lack of oxygen and how terrified I was that I would never see my son again. His face flashed in my mind, but then I saw Jack's face and something changed in me. My heart calmed and peace settled over me. I wasn't a scared woman who didn't stand up for herself. That had never been who I was.

I stopped struggling and sucked in what little air I could. Then I went on the attack. I slammed my knee up into his balls. He gasped, bending over and wheezing, but it didn't stop him. He wrapped his arms around my body, slamming back against the wall again. The wind was knocked out of me, leaving me dizzy and reeling. The first hit to the stomach was the most indescribable pain I'd ever felt, but the second had me crumpling to the ground.

“Mama?”

I looked into the hall, seeing my son stand with his bear and tears running down his face. I would not allow him to see me go down. I had to survive for him, no matter the consequences.

“Run!” I shouted, taking Rico's attention off me just long enough to attack.

I jumped to my feet just as Rico turned his back on me. I leapt on his back, screaming as I slammed my fist into the side of his head. He spun me around several times, then rammed me into the wall again, but I held on.

I could hear Parker screaming in the hall, but couldn't stop now. If I did, we were both dead. Rico stepped forward, then slammed me into the wall again. If he kept this up, I would be done in no time. I slid my hand over his forehead, then shoved my fingers into his eyeballs. Something disgusting seeped under my nails, making me want to puke. But I kept my fingers lodged in his sockets, digging in as he spun me around, then stumbled into the hallway.

We teetered near the stairs and I knew we were going down. His foot slipped and that was it. We both went tumbling

down the stairs, my body hitting each ledge painfully until we hit the wall at the bottom of the stairs.

I shoved to my feet, gasping at the pain in my ribs. I had to draw him away from Parker, and the only way to do that was to move further away from the stairs. I stumbled into the kitchen and grabbed a knife, but just as I turned, Rico crashed into me, slamming my back into the ledge of the counter. I cried out in pain, feeling like I was paralyzed as my back went numb.

He picked me up, hauling me over his shoulder as he spun me around again. With one last ounce of strength, I slammed the knife into his back. He spasmed, tripping and collapsing onto the coffee table, breaking the glass as we crashed through.

My back landed hard on a sharp piece of glass, slicing deep into my back. I could feel my body going into shock, but I had a little bit of fight left in me. I scrambled for a piece of glass, reaching for anything I could use to stop him. He rolled off me, glaring down at me as he raised his fist and hit me square in the jaw. My head snapped to the side with the first hit, but I didn't have time to move before his second hit. Blood oozed from my mouth and I felt a tooth knock loose.

I stared up at him, gathering all the strength I had in me, spitting my blood all over his face. His eyes turned darker than I'd ever seen before. I knew the end was coming. I scrambled on the ground for a shard of glass, anything I could use to protect myself.

Rico's hands wrapped around my neck, squeezing the life out of me. I could feel his rage as he stared into my eyes, watching my life slip away. I heard the faint sound of the door breaking open just as my eyes started to drift shut. Gunshots rang out and the hands around my throat disappeared as Rico fell over, slumping to the ground beside me.

In seconds, Jack was beside me, his eyes filled with tears as he stared down at me.

I opened my mouth to talk, but found the words wouldn't come. The adrenaline of the last few minutes overwhelmed

me, making my heart race out of control.

“Breathe, baby. Just breathe.”

I tried desperately to get myself under control, but it was impossible. Jack’s hands roamed over my body, shoving my shirt aside when he saw the bullet wound. He pressed down on it, but I cried out, feeling the shard of glass dig deeper into my back.

“I have to, Sky. I have to—“

“My...back,” I hissed.

As gently as possible, he rolled me to my side. I knew what he would find, but I didn’t know how bad it was. I felt him shift and then a pillow was shoved under my back, holding me up from where the glass was protruding.

More boots stomped into the house and Jack called out over his shoulder. “Johnny, I need an ambulance!”

“Is she—”

“No,” he answered, his eyes focused on mine. “You’re not going anywhere. Do you hear me?”

I wanted to say yes, but there was so much pain, so much anger that Rico was destroying my life just as I got away from him.

Jack grabbed my face, forcing me to look at him. “Sky, where’s Parker?”

I opened my mouth, but again, nothing came out.

“Sky, I need to know, where’s Parker?”

“Up...stairs.”

“Hang on, baby,” he whispered, bending over to press his lips to mine. The taste of salt pressed into my lips and when I looked into his eyes this time, I knew those were tears. Shit, this had to be bad. He looked up, speaking to someone else. “Get Parker and get him out of here. I don’t want him to see her like this.”

It was strange, for all the men I imagined walking through the door, I never thought someone in a cowboy hat would be here. Which was silly because we were in farm country. The thought made me laugh, but only a small squeak left my lips.

“Hey, you’re going to be okay. Just hang in there. The ambulance is on the way.”

His blue eyes watched over me, pleading with me to stay with him. Those blue eyes that I got lost in, that made me feel like I was at home with just one look. I swore I could see Jack walking through the door with Parker, laughing as he tickled my son. He smiled at me, a sight I rarely saw, and then he started to fade into the wall. “Jack,” I whispered.

“No, Sky, stay with me!”

My body shook under his hands, but I felt no pain. Everything was peaceful, like being in a dream, walking through the zoo with Jack and Parker. I could see their smiles and hear my son’s laughter, and I knew he would be fine.

JACK

“ARE YOU READY FOR SCHOOL, BUDDY?”

“Yep!” he grinned, but then his face turned down in a frown. “The teacher says I have to let other kids answer.”

I chuckled at how annoyed he was by that. When I was a kid, I would have given anything for another kid to get called on by the teacher. “Yeah, I know it sucks, but sometimes you have to give other kids the chance to get the answer right.”

He sighed dramatically, hoisting his backpack onto his shoulders. “They never know the answers, and I always do.”

I ruffled his hair as I walked past him. There wasn't a day that went by when I didn't fall deeper in love with this kid. I never thought I would want kids of my own, that someone like Parker would make me glad to wake up every morning. Being a dad wasn't the thrilling adventure that I was used to. There were no more bad guys chasing us. The only pretending was when we played cowboys and robbers. And when he wrapped those cuffs around my wrists, it didn't bring back horrible memories that I would sooner forget.

All I saw was the smile on his face and that was enough to know that I'd chosen the right path. It may have taken me a while, but I was finally here.

“Jack?”

“Yeah, bud?”

“Do you think...Mama misses me?”

I bent down, looking him right in the eyes. It killed me when he asked questions like this. “Yeah, bud. I know she misses you.”

His lips pursed to the side as he stared at the floor. “She hasn’t called.”

I burst out laughing at the sad expression on his face. “Bud, she had to work early this morning. That’s all. But she’s going to pick you up from school today.”

“She is?” He perked up right away at hearing that.

“Yeah. And she also said she was taking you for ice cream, but don’t tell her I told you.”

“I won’t,” he said, shaking his head wildly.

My phone rang right on cue and Sky’s name came up on my caller ID. “Baby, your son misses you.”

“Put him on speakerphone,” she laughed.

I did as she asked and held the phone out for him. “Mama?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“I miss you.”

“I miss you too. I’m sorry I had to leave early this morning.”

“That’s okay. Jack said you’re taking me for ice cream after school!”

“What?” I laughed, shaking my head at the little rascal. “That was supposed to be our secret!”

“Yeah, but I never keep secrets from Mama,” he grinned, then shot out the door.

“Nice, Jack. Way to ruin the surprise.”

“I was trying to make him feel better,” I said, walking out the door and closing it behind me.

“Kids can’t keep secrets. You need to learn that.”

“Alright, lesson learned. Did you need anything?”

“Just to hear your voice.”

I grinned as I headed to the car. I would never get tired of hearing her voice or feeling her beside me at night. “Call me anytime.”

“You know I will. I have to go,” she chuckled. “See you tonight.”

“Love you.”

“Back at ya.”

I hung up, shaking my head at her phrase. She had yet to actually tell me she loved me, but I knew she did. I could feel it in her kisses and the way she held me at night. It shone bright in her eyes every time she looked at me.

I dropped Parker off at school, but couldn't bring myself to go home yet. I stopped by the florist and bought a bouquet of flowers for Sky. I could just bring them home, but I wanted to surprise her. She'd gone in early today for inventory, so she wasn't working with patients.

I pulled the door open to the office and strode inside, immediately getting a sappy look from Amelia, the receptionist when she saw me holding flowers. “I'll get her for you.”

“Thanks.”

I leaned against the counter and waited for her, knowing it would take her at least a few minutes to climb out of the back room. When she walked out, her eyes landed on me and a grin filled her face.

“What are you doing here?”

I slid my arm around her waist, pulling her closer to me. “I couldn't wait another seven hours to see you.”

My lips crashed with hers and the waiting room erupted in hoots and hollers. There was a time I would have hated to kiss a woman in front of anyone else. But not just any woman saved my life. Sky brought me back from the brink of death and made me want to live again.

She gave me hope.

She gave me love.

She gave me my freedom.

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