



Delanceys
BODYGUARD
TRIDENT SECURITY BOOK 1
C.K. O'CONNOR

DELANEY'S BODYGUARD (SPECIAL
FORCES: OPERATION ALPHA)

TRIDENT SECURITY

BOOK ONE

CASSIDY K. O'CONNOR



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Dear Readers,

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

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

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

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

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

Dominick thought he left danger behind when he retired from the Navy SEALs. Little did he know, his new journey was about to lead him straight into the heart of an unexpected love.

Six months into his fresh start as the owner of a private security firm, Dominick's life takes an unexpected turn. An old friend needs help to rescue an informant that's gone silent. Confident in his team's skills, he readily agrees. His training never prepared him for the whirlwind that is Delaney Rossi—a woman as headstrong as she is captivating. Dominick finds himself not only protecting her but also her spirited mother, her endearing son, and even an unlikely member of the team: a charming turtle.

With danger lurking at every corner, this unconventional group must stay one step ahead of the informant's menacing brother, who is determined to reclaim what he believes is rightfully his. Amid high-stakes rescue missions and heart-pounding confrontations, Dominick and his team learn that love and courage can blossom even in the most perilous of circumstances.

CHAPTER ONE



Dominick wiped the sweat from his forehead. The whisper of the enemy's boots against the ground as they went from room to room searching for him sent goosebumps across his skin. If he hadn't gone back to save the last girl, he would have been long gone. He pinned her between his body and the wall and faced the door, ready to take out as many of the enemy as he could.

The door handle slowly turned. He steadied his breath and felt his heartbeat slow down.

The door to his office banged against the wall, jerking him from his dream. It took him a few seconds to remember he wasn't overseas, and he wasn't in the military any longer.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and sat forward. "Seeds? Why are you still here?"

"If you're here, so am I. And let me tell you, I'm getting tired of these late nights." Seeds, or Eli to his family, plopped onto the loveseat against the wall of Dominick's office. "The business has only been open two weeks. You have to stop stressing so much. Things are going to take off soon."

Dominick stared at the logo that was the background on his computer. He hoped his friend was right. He'd been retired for six months and going insane. Trident Private Security was born out of desperation to feel needed and helpful again.

"You got balls, I'll give you that. Signing on four more bodyguards before we even have clients for them."

Dominick sighed. "I know it was stupid. But they are vets like us. They're as lost as we were before we started this. Things are going to get better. They have to..." he trailed off. There was no reason to finish that

sentence. He'd never actually take his own life, but he couldn't say he hadn't considered it once or twice. "Don't you need to get all packed for your next job?"

Seeds smiled. "I'm always packed."

Dominick shook his head at his friend and former teammate. "At some point, you'll have to learn how to settle down. Do you have one personal item anywhere in your apartment yet?"

"Seriously? I've been to your house. Besides the crappy pictures that were already there, you don't have anything either."

"Well, I don't have a go bag packed at all times." That wasn't technically true. He had a bag with money, his passport, and some other important papers, always ready to go. No clothes were pre-packed though, so it didn't count.

Seeds sighed. "We make a sorry pair, don't we?"

"At least Gabby seems to have her shit together. I saw her place. It's the girliest, softest thing I've ever seen. I swear she's making up for all the years she had to be hard in the service."

"I love her place. I try to nap on her couch whenever I can, but she always boots me out before I can fall asleep. She keeps saying she's going to buy me the pillows she has, but nothing has shown up yet. And it always smells so good in there."

Dominick nodded. "Women are so superior. They really should be running the world."

"Ha! While I do agree with you, let's not let Gabby hear that. Otherwise, we'll never hear the end of it."

Dominick leaned back in his chair as the silence settled around them. "Be careful on this job. This CEO guy seems like a real prick. He seemed pretty slimy to me, but money is money and if we do a good job, he'll tell his friends about us."

"Don't worry about me, boss. I got this. I'll make Trident Private Security proud." Seeds hopped up from the couch. "Now, will you please log off and go home for a few hours?"

Dominick waved him off. "Yeah, yeah. You can tell Gabby you did your job babysitting me. I'm just going to answer a couple of more emails, then I'll head out."

Ten minutes later, as he was about to log off and leave, his cell phone rang. "Tex, haven't talked to you in a while."

“Hey, Crash. How’s it going? I heard you started a new bodyguard business.”

Dominick snorted. Tex knows everything. “Sure did. Trident Private Security opened two weeks ago.” He felt such pride just thinking about it.

“Well, I might have a job for you and it would be a personal favor to me as well. Can we meet and talk in person? I’m only a couple of hours from you.”

Dominick was speechless. Tex never asked for help, and when he did, it was usually from one of the active SEAL teams. “I’m honored you’d think of me.”

Tex snorted. “I’ll text an address. Is ten a.m. tomorrow okay?”

The man always was business first. “Absolutely. See you then.”

Dominick hit the end button on the call and slid his cell into his back pocket. It was going to drive him crazy all night, wondering what his old friend wanted. He knew Tex was known for doing what was right, even if that meant doing things in the shadows. Dominick had never been involved in any of that while he was active, but now that he was retired... it could be fun.

CHAPTER TWO



Delaney tried to hide her fear as her brother Mason yanked her cell phone out of her hand. One of his guards came in with her laptop. “Mason, what the hell?”

“We have a mole. I don’t know who it is yet, but until I do, I need to lock everyone down. I can’t take a chance the mole will come after you if they see you still have a way to communicate with the outside world.”

A shiver ran down Delaney’s spine. “You can’t seriously lock us in here with no way to talk to anyone? What if Caleb needs a doctor?”

“Your son is healthier than anyone here. And if you need to talk to someone on the outside, you can always come to me or Peter,” He nodded to the goon holding her laptop.

“How do you know he’s not the mole?” She glared at the behemoth. She saw the hatred in his eyes, but he knew not to step out of line in front of her brother. “Mason, please. This is crazy. You’re being crazy. You can’t keep us prisoner.”

Mason jumped up and stomped toward her, then leaned over her until his face was inches from hers. “Everything I do is for this family. I protect you. I provide for you. I’ll be a father to your son. We’re building an empire here. You can get on board or you can get out.” He straightened up but still glared down at her. “But Caleb won’t be going with you.”

Delaney gasped. “You’d take my son from me?”

He shrugged as he walked back around his desk. “I love you, sis, but Caleb is the next generation. I need to raise him in my shadow so he can take over all of this one day. You and that husband of yours made him weak. You should have never left the family. We would have raised him right.”

A cold sweat broke out across Delaney's skin. Peter was staring at her from the corner with a stupid grin on his face. "Mason, please, don't do this."

Mason shook his head as he picked up his cell phone. "Sorry sis. Until I find the mole, you're not going anywhere or talking to anyone. I know you're friends with half the staff. There are plenty of ways for you to entertain yourself. Plus, I'm not taking away your streaming services. You can still watch all your stupid romance shows."

Her shows weren't stupid, but that was beside the point.

He glanced up at her. "You can go."

Her mouth snapped shut. There was no point in arguing with him. His paranoia wasn't a big deal a few months ago, but it's steadily gotten worse. She'd put up with a lot from him, but being a prisoner in her home was taking it too far.

Delaney shoved herself up from the chair and made a show of stomping out of the room and slamming the door behind her. It wouldn't do any good, but it helped relieve a little of her anger.

No one bothered her as she made her way to the section of the house her brother had shoved her, Caleb, and their mother Rosa into. Honestly, it didn't bother them. He left them alone for the most part. She might have been fine continuing like that for longer if she hadn't been contacted by a childhood friend and shown what her brother was really doing.

Rosa got up from the couch. Her eyebrows were drawn together. "What did he want? Why was Peter in your room?"

Delaney paced as she chewed her nail. "He's truly lost it now. He took my phone and my computer."

Rosa shook her head. "Peter took my e-reader too. Why? All I do is read books on there."

Delaney cursed. "Damn. They are thorough. He threatened to kick me out and keep Caleb. I knew he always wanted to take over for Dad, but this is crazy. He's crazy."

Rosa sighed. "I'm so sorry. I should have seen this coming. I looked the other way when your dad was running the business. Everything seemed harmless, and I was able to give you kids such a good life. He wasn't like this until his trip to Italy. Something changed over there and that's when we lost him."

She gave her mom a sardonic look. "No crime is harmless. Everything has consequences, but now that I know what Mason's been doing, I agree

Pop was barely toeing the edge of illegal.”

Caleb ran into the room and dove into Delaney’s legs. “Can we go swimming now?”

Tears stung her eyes. Her son had no idea what was happening around him. One thing was for sure. She wasn’t going to let her brother near him. “Absolutely. Go get your suit on and grandma will take you out. I’ll be along in a minute.”

She waited until he was out of the room before turning back to Rosa. “If I don’t check in with Tex, he’s going to know something’s wrong and I don’t want him risking anything by checking on me.”

Rosa rubbed Delaney’s arm. “John Keegan is a good man. He was a good boy when you were kids, always looking out for the smaller kids. I don’t want anything to happen to him either, but your brother is out of control and we need help.” Her voice hitched.

Delaney pulled her into a hug. “I know everything has been so hard for you since Pop died, and then everything with Mason. You don’t deserve this.”

Rosa shook her head as she pulled back and cupped Delaney’s face in her hands. “And what about you? You lost your father, then your husband and your brother locked you in here with me. I’m old. If I don’t get out, it’s not a big deal, but you and Caleb need to get away from all this and start over.”

“Sixty-two is hardly old. We’re getting out of here and you’re coming with us. I won’t leave you.” She wiped the tears from her face. “Mason is leaving soon for Italy. I’m going to get into his office and see if I can contact Tex somehow. We should try to get out while Mason is gone.”

She sounded way more confident than she felt. No matter the consequences, she had to take the risk and get them out. What other choice did she have?

CHAPTER THREE



Dominick scanned the bar and finally found Tex in a back corner with his back to the wall. “Hey. Long time no see.”

Tex held out his hand. “You’re looking good. I guess retirement is going well?”

Dominick grimaced as he sat down. “It’s been miserably boring. I still get up and train every morning at five a.m. It feels weird to take a day off.”

“Being a bodyguard isn’t exactly lazy work. It’s probably a good idea for you to stay in shape.”

Dominick asked for a coffee and water from a passing waitress.

Tex scrolled through his phone and tossed it on the table with a growl of frustration.

“You ready to tell me what the big mystery is yet?”

He sat back and crossed his arms. “After you get your drinks. I don’t want any interruptions.”

Dominick nodded and glanced around the bar. “This place seems cool. I haven’t been here before.”

“The owner is an ex-marine. Most everyone in here is a vet. Even when you’re out, you still feel more comfortable around your brothers and sisters, right?”

He couldn’t argue with that.

After his order came, Tex gave him a minute to fix his coffee. “Okay, I’m ready.”

“A shipment of military weapons went missing. I was tracking it and found the seller in Chicago. I was able to connect with someone on the inside and they passed me the info to find the buyers in Italy. I have a team going

after them soon.”

Dominick listened quietly. It was always easier to get more information by listening than by asking a million questions.

“My informant has gone silent. I think they were found out, and I had promised them when it was all over I’d get them out. I’m worried it’s too late.”

The lines around Tex’s eyes deepened.

“So why not send in a team?”

Tex glared at the cup in his hands. “The intel is the seller is going over to Italy to handle the sale himself, so my informant is a low priority.” He slid his phone over with a file on it. Dominick flipped through the pictures of the woman and the compound she was staying in.

“This isn’t really what my private security business does. We’re more about following behind celebrities and business people and keeping them safe. This is a full-on mission... stateside.”

Tex nodded. “I know what I’m asking, but this is personal. The seller and my informant are brother and sister and I grew up with them. I leaned on our history to get her to spy on her brother. This is my fault. I don’t think her brother would hurt her, but he’s also become unhinged since his father’s death.”

Dominick stared at the photo of the brunette talking to a man. Even before he knew it was a female, he knew he would agree to the job. She’d risked herself to help her country. The least he could do was get her out safely.

It wasn’t going to be an easy extraction, but it wasn’t anything his team couldn’t handle. “I’ll take Seeds and Gabby with me. Use non-lethal ammo and should have her free in no time. Where do I take her from there?”

Tex looked uneasy for the first time. “I was hoping you could hide her until we’re sure we have her brother and all of his lieutenants rounded up. And I know that’s asking a lot with you getting your business off the ground, but I have money. I’ll fund the whole thing and get you whatever you need.”

Dominick had to admit he was excited. It felt good to be needed again and to know he was saving someone who deserved it. “Send over everything you have. We’ll fly out tonight and wait for your signal.”

The two men shook hands. “Thanks for this. I’ll get your drinks. By the time you get back to your office, you’ll have everything in your inbox.”

Dominick nodded and grabbed his cell phone as he walked out of the bar.

“Change of plans. Get Gabby and meet me at the office. I’m sending one of the new guys on your job.”

He resisted the urge to speed as he drove. His adrenalin was already pumping.

Seeds and Gabby were already sitting in his office when he walked in. He rolled his eyes at the tiny pile of sunflower seed shells on Seed's knee. He handed him the small trash can. “That’s disgusting. Use this.”

Seeds spit a shell into the can as he took it.

“You’re glowing. What’s going on?” Gabby asked from the chair by his desk.

“You guys remember Tex?” He waited for them both to nod. “He asked for a personal favor. It’s an extraction in Chicago and he’s funding the whole thing. I’m going to book flights for us while you start going over the files he’s sending over. I want to be wheels up in three hours.”

Seeds spit into the trash can again. “You remember you fly coach now, right? We’ll be wheels up when there’s a flight available.”

He had a point. “Just start looking over the file.”

While he used his laptop to book a flight and hotel rooms, they projected the mansion specs on the wall along with the intel that Tex had received. Once everything was set, he rolled his chair around to stare at the screen. “The informant-”

“Delaney, her name is Delaney,” Gabby interjected.

Dominick nodded. “Delaney told Tex her brother and a lot of his men were going to be leaving for Italy soon. Gabby will disable the alarm on the house and take out the security cameras. Seeds and I will enter through the back garden, past the pool house, and knock out the guards that will be patrolling the area. We’ll be using non-lethal ammo. We want to be in and out quickly and quietly so that when her brother lands in Italy, he’ll be none the wiser. Once we’re clear, I’m going to take her to the mountain safe house. Tex will give me the all-clear when it’s safe to let her go.”

Gabby stared at the details of the alarm system. “And she doesn’t know we’re coming for her? It would be nice to have an inside person helping with this.”

“You got this. I haven’t seen a system yet that you can’t beat.”

“I didn’t say I couldn’t beat it... it would just be easier to have someone on the other side.”

The room went silent as they memorized every detail of the blueprints.

Dominick glanced at his watch. “We need to be at the airport in an hour. I need to run home, get my bag, and I’ll meet you back here.”

“So you do have a bag,” Seeds accused.

“I have a lot of bags. That doesn’t mean there’s anything inside them.”

Why was it so hard to admit to one of his best friends that he hadn’t completely relaxed into civilian life yet, either? There was no reason to be ashamed of it.

He shook off the melancholy thoughts. A woman’s life may be in danger. He had to stay focused for Delaney.

CHAPTER FOUR



Delaney paused the show she was watching as her brother breezed into the room. He rarely came to their side of the house. Rosa immediately hopped up and kissed him on the cheek. The sad part was he couldn't even see his mother was scared of him.

He kissed her cheek before pulling away and walking around to inspect everything as he talked. "I'll be out of town for a few days. I'm leaving Peter here to manage things, so if you need to go out or make any phone calls, check in with him." He held up a notepad and thumbed through it.

"I don't think you'll find the mole in there." Delaney snarled. She didn't mean to poke at him, but leaving Peter to babysit was just insulting.

He glared at her and moved on. "In another week, we're going to be on top of the world. We'll be untouchable and I'll buy you all anything you want. We can fly to 5th Avenue and go on a shopping spree." He turned and smiled at them. "I am building something amazing here. Pop could only take the business so far. You guys just wait and see. Good things are coming our way."

He was so proud of himself that it was almost sad. Rosa, ever the nurturer, clapped her hands. "That's wonderful. You've been working so hard. Hopefully soon you'll be able to take a break for a bit and relax."

He nodded absently. "So where's my nephew so I can say goodbye before I go?"

"He's asleep. It's after nine and he's only seven." Delaney replied dryly.

Mason snorted. "You are so strict with him. We never had such crazy bedtimes, and we turned out fine."

That was debatable.

“Oh well, you can tell him I’ll be back with a special gift for him.” He kissed Rosa on the cheek and left.

Rosa blew out a breath and collapsed onto the couch next to Delaney. “I know you won’t tell me everything you’ve found, but I hate knowing he’s doing terrible things with our family name attached.”

“I’m sorry Mama. I wish there was another way, but what he’s done is really, really bad. He needs to be held accountable. And after Tex has him arrested, you and I are free. You can take over the business like you should have when Pop died, and I’ll even beg you to let Caleb learn from you. We can go completely legit.”

She walked over to the door of their wing and listened intently. When she was sure no one was nearby, she went back and unpaused the TV and turned it up a bit before leaning closer to Rosa. “I’m going to go to his office and see if I can send a message. I don’t want to wait any longer for Tex though. This is our best chance to get a head start while Mason is gone. Can you pack our stuff while I’m gone?”

Panic twisted Rosa’s usually beautiful face. “What about Peter? He is a nasty one. I don’t trust him.”

“As soon as Mason leaves, Peter is going to do a full sweep of the house. He always checks every door and window personally. The last place he’ll go is Mason’s office. That will give me plenty of time to get there and back.”

“What about when he comes here and you’re gone?”

Shit. She hadn’t thought of that. “When you hear him come in, turn on my shower. If he gives you a hard time about needing to see me and the bathroom, accuse him of being a pervert and that you were reporting it to Mason. That should make him go away.”

Rosa blew out a breath. “This is crazy. Sneaking out of our own home while avoiding armed guards. Your father would be so angry at Mason right now.”

Delaney loved her father, but he had been an authoritarian, too. He wasn’t as controlling as Mason but enough that Delaney had escaped to college and only moved back because she thought Caleb needed to be around family after his father passed away. Her mother had always had too soft of a backbone, but Delaney wasn’t going to be like that. She wasn’t going to let anyone else control her, ever.

She got up and walked over to the windows overlooking the parking area. “They’re loading the car now. He should be leaving any minute.”

They didn't move for several minutes. When the car finally pulled away, Delaney felt a sense of relief. This was it. Their chance to be free.

"Okay. They're gone. You have about fifteen minutes before Peter gets to this side of the house. I'll get back as fast as I can, and then we'll get out of here."

Rosa pulled her into a hug. "Be careful. Even if you don't get the message out, we can still leave, so don't take any extra risks."

Delaney nodded and slipped out the door. She clung to the walls and made sure to twist and turn the halls the opposite way Peter would be going. The only good thing about Peter was that he was predictable. Whenever her brother left him home, he had the same routine. She had learned them so she could avoid him as much as possible. This time it just happened to also help her to escape unnoticed.

After several tense minutes of silence and a few times ducking into a room to avoid people, she made it to Mason's office. She sat behind his desk and moved the mouse, squinting when the screen lit glaringly bright in the darkness. She switched the username to her father's and typed in the password he'd written in the little black book he had carried everywhere with him.

She logged into her email account and sent a message to Tex saying she was leaving and would buy a burner phone and contact him as soon as she could. As she was about to log off, she took a chance and double clicked on the icon for their company's accounting software.

Her father was still logged in. She printed out several pages of activity and took anything that looked important from his desk. She'd let Tex dig through and see if there was anything useful.

She logged out of her email and her father's account, making sure to put her brother's username back before putting the computer to sleep and sneaking out the door.

It took a lot longer to get back to her room, as she had to go the long way around to avoid Peter. Every window she passed, she glanced out to watch the progress of lights going on and off as he went from room to room. Living in a large compound had its perks.

She slipped through the door and was immediately grabbed by Rosa. "You were gone so long. I was just about to go looking for you."

It took a minute for Delaney's heart rate to slow down. "Did you have any trouble with Peter?"

Her mother gave her a sly smile. “As you predicted, as soon as I mentioned him being perverted for wanting to see you in the shower, he tucked tail and left.”

“Good. Let’s finish packing and when the last light goes out on the third floor, we’ll leave.”

They moved quickly, grabbing only the most personal items and a few sets of clothes. A lot of stuff could be replaced but not her photo albums. Those memories were priceless.

She looped the duffle bag across her back and picked up Caleb. He moaned as he curled into her neck and stayed asleep. The innocence of children.

Rosa had a duffle each for herself and Caleb. As they were about to leave, the house alarm blared into the night.

“What the hell? We didn’t even do anything yet.” She rushed over to the window and saw guards running in every direction.

“Delaney,” Rosa whispered as she pointed at the door. The handle was just starting to turn.

She laid Caleb on the couch and grabbed a vase off a shelf. She lifted it high over her head, ready to smash it on the intruder’s head, but stopped short when the person called her name.

“Who are you?”

The man was in all black with night vision goggles on. He lifted them, piercing blue eyes stared back at her. “Tex sent me to rescue you.”

“Pfft. Does it look like I need rescuing?” She pointed at the bags Rosa was still holding. “We were just leaving until you blew our chance.”

His jaw dropped. “Seriously? Can we just go? Your maid can stay. We’ll grab your things.” Another man stepped in and tried to grab the bags from Rosa.

“Excuse me. She is my mother and she most definitely will be going with me. If you have a problem with that, you can see your way out and we’ll find our own way.”

The nerve of the man to just assume she was a damsel in distress.

CHAPTER FIVE



Dominick couldn't believe this woman. He was there to help her, and she was being openly hostile. She was the most ungrateful captive he'd ever rescued.

Seeds spun around and fired muffled shots down the hall.

Delaney gasped at the sound of bodies hitting the floor. "Oh my god. Not all of these guards are bad people. You can't just kill them."

Dominick couldn't help it. He actually rolled his eyes. "We're not killing anyone. Those are rubber bullets that are being expertly shot at the right spots to render them unconscious long enough for us to leave. Now that I've explained all of that, can we go?"

"Mommy? What's wrong?" Caleb sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Oh, for fuck's sake. How many of you are there?" Tex's intel had not told him about a mother or a son.

Delaney lifted one eyebrow at him. "Again, you are free to go. We'll save ourselves."

"Seeds. Grab the boy." Seeds rushed in and grabbed Caleb.

"Hey, buddy. We're going to have some fun. Can you be super quiet?"

He glanced at Delaney, who gave him a smile and nod.

He stared wide-eyed at the man holding him. "Okay, but we can't leave yet. I need Harry."

"There's more of you?" Dominick mumbled.

Seeds smiled at Caleb. "Is that a stuffed animal you need from your room?"

Caleb shook his head. "No. He's my turtle." He pointed at a tank across the living room.

It was Delaney's turn to swear. "I forgot about him. Caleb having him

would help keep him calm, though.”

Seeds looked to Dominick and waited for his nod of approval.

Delaney jumped as he spun around and shot down the hall, dropping another guard. “Let’s go. Gabby isn’t going to be able to keep them busy forever.”

It was like the start of a bad joke. What do you get when you have two ex-soldiers, a mother, an informant, her son, and his turtle trying to escape into the night?

Delaney pointed to a door to the right. “That leads to a stairwell that goes out the back.”

“Yep, that’s the way we came up.” He started the group down the steps. Halfway down, the door above them and below them opened. Flashlights were pointing from both directions.

“Seeds you good?” He knew the other man was capable, but it wasn’t common to fight while holding a kid and a turtle.

“We’re having a blast back here. Right, Caleb?”

Dominick tuned them out and tried to ignore the feeling of Delaney’s body pressed against his back as he focused on the man in front of him.

Not having a better plan with the confined space he had, he jumped the rest of the steps down and landed a blow to the guard’s head.

He helped Delaney and Rosa out the door and turned back to help Seeds, but the other man was already through the door. Caleb and Harry were smiling in his arms. Did turtles smile because it sure looked like that one was?

“I told Mason you were the mole, but he insisted you would never betray him after all he did to help you after your husband died so tragically.”

The group spun around to see a behemoth walking toward them with his gun raised.

Delaney tried to step forward, but Dominick held his arm out to keep her from getting in front of him.

She glanced at him and back to the guard. “Peter, please. Let my mom and Caleb go. I’ll stay here.”

Peter laughed maniacally. “You think he’ll want you after this? All he cares about is the boy, anyway. Leave him and I’ll be nice and let the rest of you go. Besides, Mason will want to hunt you down himself.”

Before anyone could say another word, there was a whizzing sound as a bullet flew from somewhere and hit Peter in the back of the neck. He

stumbled to his knees.

Dominick turned and yelled. "Run. I'll catch up."

Seeds took off. Rosa was a step behind him.

He sized up the other man. He was bigger, but also slower. "You can end the night with a mild headache from that hit you took or you can finish it unconscious because I knocked you out."

Peter snorted as he put his gun away. "Oh, this is going to be fun."

Fists flew. He was faster than he first appeared. Dominick took a shot to the ribs but went back with a jab to Peter's throat. Both men grunted as they repeatedly hit each other.

Peter must have had enough, because he reached back and pulled out his gun.

His eyes went wide as he was hit again in the back of the head.

Delaney stood over Peter's unconscious body, taking heaving breaths after swinging her duffel bag to knock him out.

She looked up at Dominick and shrugged. "I told you we'd save ourselves."

He shook his head and took off in the direction Seeds had gone. She followed him past the pool house to the perimeter fence. Gabby was straddling the top of the fence.

He reached out, grabbed her bag, and grunted. "Shit. Did you pack bricks?" He handed the bag up to Gabby, who dropped it on the other side of the fence.

Without warning, he bent down, cupped her under her ass, and shoved her into the air. Gabby reached for her and helped her over the fence. Seeds rushed out from the bushes and helped lower her down. Before her feet had even touched the ground, Dominick was over the fence and had landed next to her. Gabby jumped down and took off running.

Delaney bent to grab her duffel, but Dominick already had it looped over his shoulder. "Come on. We have a long drive."

She looked like she was going to argue.

"Do you mean to tell me you have a car out here ready to go? You have a place set up for you to hide out in."

She looked unsure for the first time. "Well, no."

"You don't have to trust me, but trust Tex. We have a plan and I promised him I would protect you for as long as that took."

Shouts rang out as bullets whizzed past them.

He couldn't give her any more time to decide. He threw her over his shoulder and took off. This was definitely going down in the record books for the most unwilling rescue ever.

CHAPTER SIX



Delaney jerked awake as the car rolled to a stop. They'd driven through the night, only stopping once for gas and a bathroom break. "Where are we?"

Gabby opened the door for her to get out. "We're in the Smoky Mountains. It's one of our safe houses."

Caleb jumped from the car and hopped up and down excitedly. "We're in a forest mommy."

Ugh, he'd been in the city for too long. "Yeah, isn't this cool?"

"Crash. Put that down."

Delaney turned and saw Gabby scold her rescuer. First Seeds, now Crash. What was with the names?

"I can carry some bags." He glared back at the other woman.

"Not until we take care of things." She crossed her arms and waited.

Seeds grinned as he took Delaney's bag from Crash.

"You know I'm the boss, right?"

Seeds and Gabby smiled and nodded gleefully.

He scoffed and stomped past them to open the cabin door. The door opened directly into a living room, dining room, and kitchen combo. He pointed across the kitchen. "There are two bedrooms over there. Your group can take them."

Delaney glanced around, but didn't see any other rooms. "Where will the three of you sleep?"

"Don't worry about us."

She shrugged and led Caleb to the back room. Seeds put her duffel on the bed and walked out.

Worried she'd damaged the albums when she hit Peter, she checked the

bag. “What the heck?” There were two holes in it. Thankfully, nothing inside looked damaged. She emptied the bag and carried it to the kitchen. “Do you guys know what these holes-”

The first thing she saw was Crash without a shirt on and then she noticed the blood. “Holy shit. You’ve been hurt this whole time?”

She tossed the bag on the counter and went over to stand next to Gabby, who was threading a needle.

“Wait, is that... were you shot?”

He snorted. “No. I was grazed by a bullet.”

“And you drove like that all night?”

Gabby glanced up at her and nodded as she rolled her eyes.

“No. When we stopped at that rest stop, I taped it up.”

Oh, he taped it. That’s cool. Who were these people?

She stayed silent while Gabby worked. It gave Delaney time to study the people who rescued them. Gabby was open and friendly, but looked like she could kick anyone’s ass if she needed to. Seeds was a loveable goofball, who also seemed to know how to easily incapacitate people.

Then there was Crash. His muscles had muscles, and the scars scattered around his body gave him an edge she’d never been attracted to in the past.

Her first husband was a suit and polo guy who loved hanging by the pool.

The object of her fascination glanced up and caught her staring. It was enough to snap her out of her musings. Why was she comparing him to her husband? No man had interested her in the two years since he had died. What was it about Crash that suddenly awakened something inside her?

“Mommy,” Caleb shouted from the bedroom.

“Excuse me.” Thank god for her son. She needed to escape the tension and heat building around them.

Caleb was on the floor, following Harry around as he explored. Rosa was sitting in a chair watching them.

“What’s up, baby?”

“We have beds, but where’s Harry gonna sleep?”

She looked around the room. “I’m sure we can find something.” She sat down and held her arms out for him to crawl into her lap. “Hey, you good. I know last night was scary.”

“It was awesome. Seeds is funny and his name is silly.”

Kids were little miracles. Everything he’d been through in his short life and he was still so sweet and happy.

He yawned wide and laid against her chest.

“We had a long night, didn’t we? Why don’t you take a nap and when you get up, we’ll go exploring after.”

He hopped up and grabbed Harry. “Nana, will you watch Harry until Mama finds him something to sleep in?”

Rosa took the turtle. “Of course, love. Get some sleep and we’ll get it taken care of.”

Delaney helped tuck him into bed. He didn’t take naps anymore, but after the night they had, he was going to need it.

Rosa waited outside the door for her. “I’m going to lie down too. I didn’t sleep much on the car ride. I think I was still trying to process everything that happened. I can’t believe Mason’s men shot at us. This has gotten out of control.” She blinked away tears.

“I know. I’m sorry it got all screwed up. It’s going to be better soon. Tex sent those people to look after us. We’re going to be fine.”

Delaney didn’t want to hide in her room, so she went back out to the kitchen. The table was empty. It was like they hadn’t just been doing surgery ten minutes earlier.

She rounded the corner and found Crash sitting in a chair he’d pulled up to the window. “You’ve got some interesting names. I feel weird calling you Crash.”

For the first time since they met, he actually smiled. “It’s a habit for vets to still use the names they got while serving. I’m not even sure if I remember all of my friend’s real names.” He shrugged as he thought about it. “I’m Dominick, if that’s any better. It’s up to Seeds and Gabby if they want you to use their real names.”

“Where are they anyway?”

He stayed staring out the window. “I sent them on a supply run. We didn’t have time to stock this place before we extracted you.”

“Are you guys leaving after that?” She wasn’t sure what she wanted his answer to be. On the one hand, they were strangers with guns. But on the other hand, they’d come in handy if Mason and Peter found them.

Until she could talk to Tex, she hoped he’d stay around.

She stepped toward the other window to look out at the trees.

“I’d prefer you not do that. Let’s not make it too easy for people to see you.”

She instantly bristled. “I just left one prison. You’re going to do the same

to me?”

He finally turned and stared at her. “It’s not like that and you know it. This is temporary and for your safety.” He studied her silently for a minute. “From what I saw last night, you seem more than capable of taking care of yourself. I’m surprised you let yourself get caught under his thumb.”

She bristled at his accusation. “It’s easy to let it happen when you’re stuck wallowing in the grief of your dead husband.”

A flash of surprise crossed his face. “I’m sorry. That was rude. I have no right to make assumptions about someone I don’t know.”

His sincere apology threw her off. She wanted to stay angry, but he truly looked remorseful. “It’s fine. Can I call Tex? I need to catch up with him.”

Dominick shook his head. She opened her mouth to argue, but he held his hand up. “I’m not keeping you from contacting people. Tex is in the middle of a raid on the place where your brother was flying to. He’ll make contact when he can.”

Remembering the papers she’d collected from Mason’s office, she went back to her room to grab them. Caleb was already passed out.

She took the papers and handed them to Dominick. “Can you send all this to Tex? It was everything I could grab before we took off. It’s not much, but maybe something in there can help. I also wrote down my father’s login info to our accounting software. It looks like my brother hasn’t deactivated his account.”

He thumbed through the pages. “You really can take care of yourself, can’t you? It was stupid to risk it, but I get why you did.”

“Stupid?” Anger bubbled inside her again. Why did he irk her so easily?

“Not that you’re stupid.” He sighed. “After the raid in Italy, they are going to raid your house here. Tex wanted you guys extracted first. You didn’t know that, so you took a risk. I’m sure Tex will appreciate it.”

She nodded and plopped down on the loveseat across the room. “Did you and Tex serve together?”

“We were on different teams, but indirectly we did. After his injury, he took the desk job and has been indispensable to all our teams.”

Delaney gasped. “Injury? What happened?”

Dominick realized he’d said too much. “Sorry. I assumed you knew, since Tex said you guys were childhood friends.”

“We were neighbors through middle school. My family moved away, and I hadn’t seen or heard from him until two months ago. It was like real spy

stuff. He sent me an email asking me to click on a link and it opened up some kind of secure link and he told me he needed my help. I knew my brother was doing some shady stuff since taking over the business, but I had no idea the depth until Tex showed me the proof. What he had wasn't enough though, and he asked me to see if I could gather any intel for him." She went silent for a minute. It felt like years ago when that started, not months. How had her life gone downhill so fast? "At first it was kind of easy, but I must have messed something up because he started getting suspicious of a mole. The whole lockdown, with no outside contact, happened gradually. I was so busy trying to get info on him, I didn't realize how much he'd isolated us until it was too late."

They lapsed into silence as he continued watching out the window and she thought about everything that had led her to this point.

Maybe she had let herself become a prisoner, but it wasn't on purpose and she would be damned if it would ever happen again.

CHAPTER SEVEN



The moon was high in the sky when Dominick finally got a message from Tex saying to call him.

He glanced over at Seeds. "I'm going to make a call. I'll be back."

He slipped out the door quietly so he didn't wake up Gabby, who was curled up on the couch, catching a few hours until it was her turn again to be on watch.

When he was a good distance from the cabin, he dialed his old friend.

Tex picked up on the first ring. "Is she good?"

"She is. So is her mother, her son, and his pet turtle."

There was silence on the other end for a few seconds. "My intel isn't usually that bad. I guess I was so focused on Mason that I didn't check if she had anyone she would need to take with her. I'll send more money."

"It's not a big deal. We got them out and we're holed up at one of my safe houses."

Tex chuckled. "You really kicked the hornet's nest with that extraction. Unfortunately, Mason got word about what happened before landing in Italy, so he turned around. That means we didn't pick him up in the raid."

"Shit. There goes any kind of lead we were hoping to have on them."

"On the bright side, we got part of the weapons shipment, the buyers, and a few of Mason's men that live over there and were already at the buy when they got word Mason was turning around and the buy was canceled."

"Rocco and the guys good?" Like Dominick needed to ask. He was always impressed with that team and their records. If that weren't enough, they'd all found love and got married in the last couple of years. Dominick had a lot to be jealous of.

“Yeah, you know them. In and out and no casualties. I got those papers you sent over. With this, I might have enough to take Mason down. I just have to hope he doesn’t go underground before I get the green light.”

“Even if he does go into hiding, I don’t think he’ll stay there long. From the way it sounds, he’s pretty adamant to keep her son and raise him in his shadow.”

“Over my dead body,” Tex growled.

Dominick chuckled. Tex hadn’t even known there was a son thirty minutes ago, and he was ready to go to the ends of the Earth to protect him. “Delaney feels the same way, and as long as we’re watching over them, we won’t let it come to that.”

“Appreciate that. I’ll let you go. Stay put and I’ll contact you when we’ve got him.”

Dominick hung up and blew out a deep breath. The extraction had been a nice dip back into the past and now that he’d met Delaney, he wanted nothing more than to join the teams that were hunting Mason.

That wasn’t his job though, anymore. He had a responsibility to Delaney, Caleb, Rosa, and even Harry. And he never walked away from a responsibility.

He slipped back inside as his phone pinged. He chuckled at the message.

Seeds gave him a questioning look.

“Your replacement is having a heck of a time with his charge. The guy has a bottle of blue pills and a revolving door of prostitutes. He wants to know what our responsibilities are when it comes to the prostitutes stealing from our employer. Two have tried to take the guy’s watch and one was going through his wallet.”

“Geez. This gig is so much better. Thank you for bringing me. I know a lot of people wouldn’t take a risk on me, but I appreciate you seeing past my disability.”

Dominick scowled at him. “You lost part of your leg. Big whoop. Every morning at training, you prove you are just as good, if not better, than the day we became Seals. I would always pick you to be by my side in any situation. You’re my brother for life.”

Seeds gave him a shy smile and went back to watching out the window.

Dominick walked over and nudged Gabby. “Your turn.”

He didn’t know if he was going to be able to fall asleep, but he’d do his best. It was usually easy to focus on a mission, but something about Delaney

got under his skin. He had to do his best to keep his distance. It wouldn't be fair to her or Caleb for him to get involved with them. He was still a hot mess from retirement and just starting a business that required a lot of travel. Plus, he saw the mansion he rescued them from. They were in a whole different tax bracket from him. He had nothing of value to offer them. With those depressing thoughts, he closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Delaney stretched awake. Maybe it was having three soldiers in the house, but she had slept like a baby.

The smile fell from her face when she glanced over and saw Caleb's bed empty. She screamed his name and ran out of the room. She ran past Gabby and Rosa and slid to a stop when she found him sitting on the couch playing a video game with Seeds.

She clutched her chest and bent over to catch her breath.

"Mommy, what's wrong?"

She sucked in a big gulp of air. "Nothing. I didn't hear you leave. I got scared. That's all."

He went back to staring at the t.v. So much for worrying about her.

After a second, she realized who was missing. "Did Dominick leave?"

"No. It was his turn to sleep. I'm actually switching with him as soon as I eat breakfast." Seeds said without looking at her. For playing a children's game, he was concentrating pretty intensely.

"I didn't see any more rooms. Where is he sleeping?" Was he in the tub?

Seeds nodded his head toward the door. "He's on the porch."

"What!" She pulled the curtain back and saw him in a rocking chair with his feet up on the rail. He had a hat pulled low over his face.

She spun around. "Wait, are you all taking turns sleeping out there?"

Gabby popped her head out of the kitchen. "I curled up on the couch."

"I cracked the windows and slept in the car."

Her jaw dropped. "Seriously?" She moved closer to the kitchen. "Mom, will you move in with us? You can take Caleb's bed and he'll share with me."

Rosa nodded. "I'll move my stuff as soon as I finish cooking."

Seeds and Gabby shook their heads.

“Crash wouldn’t want us doing that. You guys are fine the way you are,” Seeds clarified.

Delaney crossed her arms. “I don’t care what he wants. You guys will share that room, and I’ll deal with him when he gets up.”

Gabby and Seeds glanced at each other and then burst into laughter.

Gabby threw her arm around Delaney’s shoulders. “I like you. This is going to be so much fun to watch.” She walked to a cabinet and grabbed a stack of plates. “I’m Ava, by the way. It always sounds weird to me when civilians use our other names, but you are welcome to use whichever.”

“And I’m Eli.” Seeds, no, Eli called from the living room.

Delaney nodded and held out her hands to take the plates. “It’s nice to meet both of you. Can I ask a question?” she waited for the other woman to nod. “How long do you think we’ll be here? I feel like I’ve already traumatized Caleb and now I’m hiding him here. I just want him to have a normal life.”

Ava grabbed Delaney and had her glance back into the living room. Eli was tickling Caleb, who was giggling harder than she’d heard in a very long time. “Kids are resilient and trust me, we’ve rescued a lot of kids from bad situations. I think Caleb’s going to be just fine.”

They went back to the kitchen to finish breakfast. “Did you all serve together or meet after retirement?”

Ava smiled broadly. “Crash and Seeds have been together for fifteen years. I’ve known them for ten. Thanks to his private security business, we get to stay together.”

Delaney’s stomach twisted. “Are you and he...”

Ava gave her a horrified look. “Good lord no. I love him like a brother, and that’s the extent of it.” She made a shivering gesture as she grabbed the plate of pancakes off the counter. “Trust me, you are in excellent hands with us. We’ll keep you guys safe.”

Delaney nodded and went to sit at the table. It was all so overwhelming. Her chest felt tight. Panic set in as she realized she’d destroyed their lives. They had been shot at. What if a bullet had hit Caleb? Was it so bad living with Mason?

Ava sat down and grabbed her hands. “I can see you’re spiraling. Copy me, let’s take a deep breath.” For a minute, they breathed in sync.

Ava smiled at her. “You’re okay. I’ve been in your place before.”

Delaney lifted an eyebrow.

Ava chuckled. “Seriously. I was taken prisoner once. Crash, Seeds, and the rest of their team saved me.” The haunted look in Ava’s eyes hinted the story was so much worse than that, but it wasn’t Delaney’s place to ask. “And now look at me. Thriving, loving my job, and getting to see my best friends every day. You’ll carve out your version of normal, eventually. Have faith that Tex is doing everything he can to get your brother, so you don’t have to be here for long.”

“Thank you. I appreciate the risk you all took for us.” Delaney reached forward and hugged the other woman. When she pulled back, she saw complete shock on Ava’s face. “I’m sorry. I should have asked first if it was okay.”

Ava waved her off. “No, it’s okay. It just surprised me.” She glanced out the window for a second. “Damn. I just realized that was probably the first hug from someone that wasn’t my parents in more years than I can remember. And the team doesn’t count. They do that stupid male, one-armed hug.”

Delaney squeezed her hand. “I’m glad I can be your first hug in a while. My family are huggers, so if you need another, I’m here.”

Rosa walked out with a large bowl of scrambled eggs. “My hugs are even better, and I think we owe you a thousand for what you’ve done for us.” She held her hands out and waited for Ava to get up and hug her back.

Poor Ava probably regretted admitting anything now.

When she pulled back from Rosa, it looked suspiciously like she had to wipe her eyes. How sad that she had to be so tough and control her emotions around the guys. If Ava would allow it, Delaney would be thrilled to have her as her first friend in her new life.

Ava sat back down and let out one low whistle.

A second later, the front door opened, and Dominick walked in, looking wide awake. How long did that trick take them to learn?

Eli went to the dining room table with Caleb slung over his shoulder.

Dominick disappeared to the restroom, then came back and sat in the only open seat which was across from her.

He nodded at her and then glanced at Seeds. “So?”

“All’s quiet. No alarms tripped. The hourly perimeter checks have been fine.”

They had alarms? She’d seen them go out occasionally since they’d

gotten here, but hadn't realized they were walking around the area. Why did she think she could do this on her own? She didn't know the first thing about hiding.

As everyone filled their plates and talked animatedly, she sat back and took it all in. This is what her life had been missing since her husband's passing. Connection.

CHAPTER NINE



Dominick scrolled through another page of numbers. He had used the log-in Delaney gave him and thought he'd see if he could help Tex out. He'd gotten word a couple of hours earlier that Mason had gone off their radar, so Tex had his hands full already.

It didn't take long to see the patterns of deposits and money being shuffled around to various accounts. On top of trafficking the illegal weapons, he was most definitely laundering money. There were also veiled emails she had printed out that sounded like he'd ordered some assassinations of rivals. Mason had become a real mob boss without his family even realizing it.

Seeds walked in the front door. "Perimeter's clear. If it's okay with you, Caleb is driving Delaney and Rosa crazy to go outside. I can take them down to the stream."

Dominick sat back in his chair and weighed the risks. Mason was an unknown factor, since no one knew where he was. They had alarms set up to go off if anyone got within five miles of the cabin. "Sure, but only thirty minutes and stay on comms the whole time."

Seeds smiled like he was the seven-year-old and took off toward Delaney's bedroom. Dominick heard the soft knock and whispered words before Caleb whooped and came running out into the living room. He plopped onto the floor and pulled on his shoes.

Rosa was chasing behind him. "Slow down. He's not going to leave you."

Seeds came back in with extra weapons strapped to him. He waited by the door. Before Rosa stepped out, she paused and looked back at Dominick. "Delaney is out cold. If she wakes before we get back, can you let her know

where we are?”

He nodded and went back to study the papers in front of him.

Twenty minutes later, Delaney came out, rubbing her eyes. “It’s so quiet. Where is everyone?”

He’d heard about her panic earlier when she couldn’t find Caleb. This calmer question showed they were making progress, and she was learning to trust them. “Seeds and your mom took Caleb to the stream that’s fifty yards behind the house. We’re on comms and Seeds took extra weapons with him.”

She smiled and sat on the couch, pulling her legs up underneath her. “Sounds good. I’m sure Caleb’s loving that. What are you working on?”

“Going through all the stuff you gave me. I figured we have time, so why not see if I can find anything?”

“And?”

“I’m no expert, but it looks like money laundering, extortion, assassinations, and the illegal weapons sales you already knew about.”

Her jaw dropped open. “He had people killed? Tex didn’t tell me that.”

“Maybe he didn’t know until you gave him these papers?” He was tempted to tell her they lost track of Mason, but would it be beneficial to give her that stress?

“If you can get me a phone, I can start reaching out to people and see if I can get details. Now that I know what’s going on, I can ask the right questions.”

His head snapped up. “Absolutely not. You’ve risked enough. Let Tex handle the rest.”

She glared back at him. “I don’t think you realize this is the world I grew up in. My father was no murderer, but he wasn’t exactly Mr. Rogers, either. I have contacts in the other families. A lot of them didn’t like Mason taking over, so they might be willing to help if it means taking him out of play.”

Dominick turned his chair to face her. “Can we please just hold off a little longer? There are a lot of plays in motion right now. Good people risking their lives to get those weapons back and stop your brother. Can we please just let the dust settle a bit?”

She ran her hands through her hair and held her head. “Yeah. You’re right. I’m just so scared of Mason finding us. I’m not even worried about him hurting me. I can’t let him take Caleb.”

The thought of someone hurting her sent a rush of anger through him.

“I don’t think we should stay here long. I’m sure you’re good at your job,

but Mason will be relentless and he's wealthy enough to hire a bunch more thugs to find us."

That wasn't the most pleasant idea, but it didn't scare him. He had faith in his team.

She sniffled as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Without thinking, he got up and kneeled in front of her. "Hey. It's going to be okay. I promise you, I will not leave your side until I know you're safe. That goes for your mother, your son, and his turtle." She gave him a watery laugh. "Not to brag, but we're freaking good at what we do. I won't let Mason get near any of you."

Something in his stomach twisted when she looked at him. He wanted to wrap his hand behind her neck and pull her to him. She'd slowly been getting under his skin and he wasn't sure how they were going to avoid acting on it. The mission and her safety came first, but damn if it wasn't going to be torturous for him.

"Dominick-"

The door burst open. Caleb ran in and dove for the couch. Dominick jumped up and backed away. Seeds lifted an eyebrow at him, but kept his mouth shut. Smart kid.

Rosa smiled and winked at him on her way to the kitchen.

Great. Gabby was the only one who wasn't witness to him making a fool of himself.

He stomped out the door. He had to clear his head and get Delaney out of his thoughts. He had a job to do, and fantasizing about her was unprofessional and downright unsafe. He owed it to Tex to not screw this up.

CHAPTER TEN



Delaney's skin was crawling from anxiety. They'd been in the cabin for six days. It wasn't that she wasn't enjoying herself. How could she not when Ava was a blast to be around. Eli was amazing with Caleb and Dominick... was Dominick. She loved the way he smelled. The way he looked at her. Even the way he brooded when he realized he was caught looking at her.

She glanced into the living room and smiled. Caleb and Dominick were sitting on the floor playing a board game Eli had bought in town. It was so nice to see Caleb comfortable. After losing his father, he was closed away and surrounded by armed guards. But her sweet boy was happy, and that's all she ever wanted for him.

"Amore mio," Rosa tapped her knuckles on the kitchen table.

Delaney glanced back at the cards in her hand. "Sorry."

"You like him, don't you?" Rosa asked.

Delaney was mortified. This was not a conversation she wanted to have with her mother. "Mama, how do you know he doesn't speak Italian?"

"I asked Eli. He said none of them did. So?"

At least she thought to check before going into an embarrassing topic. "He's good looking. A nun would notice that."

Rosa chuckled. "The priests too," she fanned herself.

"Mama!"

"Oh please. He looks at you the same way. He's very different from your Joseph. That's not a bad thing, though. I hate that you came back and got wrapped up in all this. He could get you out and give you a good life."

Delaney shook her head. "That's a bit premature, isn't it? Just because he looks at me doesn't mean he wants to date me or take on a child that isn't

his.”

“Uh oh,” Caleb called out. “When they talk Italian, that means they want to keep stuff from me.”

Rosa and Delaney turned surprised faces at him.

Dominick chuckled. “Well, then it’s a good thing we don’t understand Italian, right? We don’t want to overhear their secrets.”

Delaney had a sinking feeling Dominick did know the language and had understood every word they had said. If so, she was going to kill Eli for telling her mom otherwise.

Caleb moved his piece across the board and jumped in the air. “I won. I won.” He danced around, flailing his arms in the air.

Dominick held his hand out. “That was a good game. You are a worthy opponent.”

Caleb smiled big and shook hands with him.

Rosa got up with a groan. “Okay. Time for a bath and bed.”

Caleb shocked everyone when he hugged Dominick and said good night then ran over to Delaney and repeated the action.

The silence was deafening now that Delaney and Dominick were alone. They quietly cleaned up the games they were playing. She just knew he had to have understood their conversation.

She turned to ask him when the front door opened. Ava glanced between them, turned around, and walked right back outside.

Great.

Dominick sat in the chair facing the window. “You have a great son.”

She curled up on the couch. “I’m pretty partial to him. You’re good with him. Do you have kids?”

Ava had already told her they were all single, but she hadn’t said if they had kids.

“Definitely not. I don’t think I’d be a very good dad, anyway.”

That shocked her. “Why do you say that?”

He shrugged. “All I know is the military and protecting people. I’ve never been very good at actually connecting with people. I enlisted when I was eighteen. With all the moving around, everything just seemed so impermanent it didn’t make sense to get close to anyone.”

“Besides your team?”

He smiled as he stared out the window. “Well, yeah. That’s a given. We couldn’t hate each other if we wanted to. We sleep, eat, and fight together.

It's different with them."

"I don't know if it helps at all, but I've watched you with Caleb, and I think you'll make a great father one day."

He turned and stared into her eyes.

A shiver ran down her spine. God, he was hot.

They had to keep talking or she might end up in his lap and that would be very bad. "Are you glad you retired or wish you were still in?"

He blew out a breath. "That is a loaded question. I miss it every single day. I think if I didn't have Seeds and Gabby, I'd be going crazy. They are my connection from feeling like everything is gone." He trailed off for a few seconds. "But I'll be forty in a couple of years and I don't want to die alone. If I didn't get out now and try to make a life for myself, I might never. And that scares me more than anything."

Men admitting their fears was so sexy.

She rolled her eyes. It was obvious it had been a long time since she'd gotten any. The poor guy was having a heartfelt moment and all she could think about was the tingle between her legs.

And they say men were hornballs.

He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. That got really deep, didn't it? You have a way of making people feel comfortable. That could be really useful in interrogations. Get the bad guys to just spill their guts."

She chuckled at the image. "I don't think I'm ready to interrogate anyone, but I'll keep it in mind if I start looking for a job."

"I don't know where you're going to end up, but I'll eventually need an office manager to help me run things." She must have looked surprised. "Sorry. That was stupid."

"Not at all. I appreciate the offer. I'm struggling to see past tomorrow as long as Mason is out there, so I'll get back to you on that."

"Deal." He winked at her and went back to watching out the window.

Man, she had it bad.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Dominick answered the phone on the first ring. “Tex. It’s been a few days. Give me some good news?”

Delaney popped her head out of her bedroom and walked over to listen.

“I remember Mason being a bit of a spoiled prick when we were kids, and it seems he’s grown to be so much worse. He’s definitely gone underground. We’re looking for him, but so far, nothing.”

“Okay. We’ll stay put. If you need anyone from my team, just let me know.”

“Will do. And thanks for your notes from your research. It’s always nice to have a second set of eyes. This should be enough to put him away for a long time. I gotta go. Stay safe.”

Dominick hung up the phone and blew out a breath. He knew Delaney was going crazy cramped in the tiny cabin, but they had no choice.

“Dom, this isn’t good.” He loved when she called him that. “Mason is a snake. I don’t think he just gave up on us and disappeared. His pride won’t allow for that.”

Seeds, Gabby, and Rosa circled around them. Apparently, this was going to be a group discussion.

“We’re not letting our guard down. My security team is bringing another car by later today. We have several exit routes mapped out and the next safe house if we have to leave here.”

“And I’m glad you have plans, but let me reach out to my contacts. I won’t give away where we are. It won’t hurt to find out if we have any allies.”

Dominick looked at each person. Seeds and Gabby shrugged. Rosa was

nodding her agreement with Delaney. “Fine. I’ll go into town and get you a burner phone. But we make every phone call together. We decide together what’s legitimate intel and what’s not.”

“Can I go with you? I’ve been stuck in here for days. I’ll stay in the car. I just really want to get out.”

She looked so hopeful he couldn’t deny her. “Okay, but we wait until the other cars get here.”

An hour later, two matching black SUVs pulled down the driveway. Dominick went out and greeted two of his newest hires. Both men were recent retirees that had been referred to him through the grapevine. His business was quickly getting around. Now if he could get enough clients to keep them all busy.

When they were gone, Dominick waved toward the house. He knew Delaney was watching. She’d been pacing since he said she could go into town.

Her smile as she rushed across the grass was breathtaking. “I don’t even care if I leave the car. I just want to see people again.”

“Well, then I’ll make sure to take the long way through town.”

They drove in companionable silence as Delaney stared out the window. Normally he would take the back roads to the store and avoid the tourist area, but he wanted to keep that smile on her face.

It took an extra twenty minutes before they pulled into the store.

“Stay put.”

She gave him a mock salute.

He rushed around the store getting the basic supplies and the burner phone. He slowed down as he approached the register. He realized he wasn’t rushing because of the job. He was rushing to get back to her.

He got back to the car and used his pocketknife to open the phone case. “Here you go.”

“So um... I don’t actually know anyone’s phone number from memory. Is it okay if I log in to my messenger app?”

“I assumed as much. You’re lucky they are starting to sell ones that allow apps. Burners aren’t traceable, so it should be fine. Get their numbers and log out as quickly as possible.”

He pulled back out onto the road while she typed away on the phone.

“Nicky wants to video chat? Is that okay?”

“Just keep me out of the video and try not to show the background at all.”

A minute later, an overly tanned man popped up on the screen. When she had said Nicky, he had assumed a female.

“Laney, thank god you’re okay. You’re looking as gorgeous as ever.”

Laney? The douche had a nickname for her.

“Hey, Nicky. I’m good. How’s the family?”

“Everyone’s good, but what is happening at your place? We’ve seen some police activity there and your brother hasn’t been around. Are you guys okay?”

“That’s actually why I’m calling. Mason’s been doing some illegal stuff. My mom, Caleb, and I took off. I was actually wondering if any of your network has heard from him?”

Nicky blew out a breath. “I’m sorry, Laney. I knew he’d taken things too far after your father passed, but I can’t believe he’s endangering you like that. I’ve heard he’s been asking around about you guys. I can send my jet to pick you up. We can go to France or Fiji and hide out as long as you want. I remember how much you love the beach.”

Dominick’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. He’d think about Delaney in a bikini later. For now, he wanted to imagine knocking pretty boy out.

Delaney smiled. “That was a great vacation. I appreciate the offer. We’re good where we are, though. We have people helping us.”

Nicky nodded. “I’m glad you’re safe. I’ll check around and see if I can find anything out. Stay safe.”

She hung up the phone and powered it down. “I knew he’d be looking for us.”

Dominick’s phone rang before he could respond. It couldn’t be good that Seeds was calling him. “Yeah?”

“We got a problem.”

Dominick tried to mask his face. Delaney couldn’t hear the conversation, and there was no reason to panic her. “Tell me.”

“Rosa let Caleb log in to some game he plays.” Fuck. Dominick knew where this was headed. “He’s been chatting with his uncle. It looks like they started talking yesterday. The kid didn’t give much away, just that we were in the woods and there was a creek, but I don’t know if his location is shared.”

A chirp on Dominick’s phone showed the perimeter alarm's trigger. “I think we have our answer. Get out of there. We’ll meet you at the next house.”

Delaney's eyes were wide. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"They found us. I'll explain later."

She cursed. "We need to get back."

"No. We'll meet up with them." He knew she wasn't going to be happy with that answer.

"I want to be with my son. Take me to him now." Her voice rose as the panic set in.

He reached over and squeezed her hand. "Seeds and Gabby will give their lives to protect him. I promise you they'll be safe. Those alarms are five miles from the cabin. They'll have plenty of time to get out."

She turned to the window and cried silently. He couldn't blame her. Even though he believed every word he said, it didn't mean he wasn't a little scared for them too.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Delaney was so stupid. She'd gotten comfortable. She should never have left Caleb's side and now they were on the run and she wasn't with him. She did trust Eli and Ava but they weren't invincible.

Dominick pressed the phone icon on the car screen and dialed a number. "Tex. He found us. They are converging on the safe house. We're all out. I'll send you the coordinates. If you hurry you might be able to round up a few of them."

"I can have a team in the air in twenty minutes. With any luck, they'll still be there going through the place. Let me know when you're at your next location."

"Hey, Tex." Delaney called out.

There was a pause. "Delaney. Hey. I'm so sorry about all of this. I should never have brought you into this."

She appreciated the apology even though it wasn't necessary. "I'm glad you told me who my brother really was. It gave me the clarity to realize I needed to get out of there." It also brought Dominick, Ava, and Eli into her life but she wasn't going to admit that out loud.

"Are you guys okay? If you need anything just ask Crash, he'll get it for you."

"Thanks. He's taking good care of us."

"Glad to hear that." He cleared his throat. "Crash I'll be in touch with an update."

Dominick ended the call and typed an address into the car's GPS.

"We're going to Louisiana?"

"Yep. Lots of woods to hide in. Settle in, we've got a long drive."

Two hours later Delaney was pulled from a very sexy dream starring Dominick when his phone rang. “Tex, what’s the update?”

“Mason wasn’t there. We picked up a few of his guys. They gave us a location where Mason is working out of. We’re sending a team in after dark.”

“Good job. Keep us posted. We have another nine hours to the next house.”

“Stay sharp. Talk to you soon.”

Dominick ended the call and looked over at her. “Sorry that woke you up. I’m getting updates from Seeds. They’re all good. They thought they had a tail so they’re changing their route for a bit so we’ll beat them there.”

She rubbed her eyes. “This is all so insane. I can’t believe this is my life.”

“You said yourself you’re a crime family. You really never thought you’d be here?”

She gasped. “Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry, I’m not trying to be rude but come on. If you break the law it will eventually catch up with you. Why are you getting upset though? It’s not like you were doing anything illegal right?”

What an asshole. “I spent the money my family made. I hung out with the other families. Doesn’t that make me guilty by association? Aren’t I an accomplice for not turning them in?”

He blew out a breath. “I’m sorry. You said you went off to college to get away from them. I assumed you were against all of it too.”

He had a point but that didn’t make it any easier to hear. “I did leave because I wanted a normal life. I knew I was going to have kids one day and I didn’t want them going into the family business.”

“Why’d you go back?”

“My dad died and my husband, Caleb, and I went to stay with my mom for a couple of weeks. My parents had been together for thirty years. She was devastated and Mason had no clue how to handle her. My brother had seamlessly taken control of the business while Mom and I mourned. When it was time for us to go home Mason was pissed. He tried every level of guilt that he wanted my husband to work for him and my son to take over one day. I was adamant though and went home.” Pain constricted her heart. She stared out the window so he wouldn’t see the tears rolling down her face. “When Joseph... my husband died I was a mess. Mom came and got Caleb and me and brought us home. She took care of him while I grieved. Before I realized it we were there for two years. Mason had sold our house and moved all of

our stuff. I just accepted it. I was so numb and I think he liked it that way. I couldn't push back if I was catatonic."

Dominick reached over and grabbed her hand. "I'm sorry. First I insult you then I make you cry. You don't have to tell me anything. It wasn't my place to ask to begin with."

She brushed the tears from her face. "You didn't say anything that wasn't true. Some part of me had figured that out too though. I had finally started rejoining life. My mom was dragging me to events with her and I started hearing whispers about what Mason was up to. I had already been thinking about leaving when Tex got a hold of me. He was the final domino that needed to fall to get me to leave."

"With Mason out of the way, what will happen with the business? Will you take over?"

She blew out a breath. "I don't want to. I don't even think there will be a business left. Mom is more than capable of taking over and she'll restore it to its former glory and maybe even go completely straight with it." She gave him a pointed look. "But I don't really have any desire to take it over. I wasn't kidding when I said I didn't want Caleb near that lifestyle. Sure, the lavish parties and extravagant vacations are great but there's always someone trying to take the upper hand with the families and you're always looking over your shoulder."

"Man did we come from vastly different backgrounds." He gave her a cheeky smile.

She turned to face him better. "Do tell. What was little Dominick's life like?"

"I was an Army brat, moving from base to base as my father was promoted. He was deployed a lot of my younger years and I preferred it that way. He was a hard ass who expected perfection. When he wasn't around Mom was carefree and I felt like I could breathe."

She reached out and touched his thigh. "I'm sorry. That sounds really stressful."

"It had its moments. Like I said when he was gone we had a great time. Don't get me wrong, he loved us in his own way. He just didn't have a lot of love to give. And man if I stepped out of line even the slightest he'd set me straight real fast. I remember one time in middle school I saw some kids picking on another boy. They were older and bigger and the boy was crying which made it more fun for them. I threw my backpack down and walked

over putting myself between them and the boy. They were shocked for a minute which gave me enough time to land one good punch on the biggest kid and that gave the boy enough time to run away.”

He trailed off.

“That can’t be the end of the story?”

He chuckled. “Sorry got lost in the memory. The boys recovered quickly and beat the shit out of me. My dad was overseas at the time so he sent one of his buddies that was on base to come scare me straight. He lit into me for ten minutes. Then he sat down and told me he was proud of me for standing up for the other boy and let me know that the bullies were in serious trouble. Their parents found out who my dad was and they were so scared of him they grounded the kids and made them all write apology letters. My dad wouldn’t let them send them to me though because he didn’t want me thinking what I did was okay. In his book, fighting was never okay.”

“I don’t think either of my parents ever raised their voices at us or even grounded us. Maybe that explains why Mason is the way he is.”

He looked surprised for a second before they burst into laughter. His laugh sounded nice. He was always so serious. As long as she was around, she wanted to make him smile and laugh more. It seemed like he didn’t get enough of that in his life and everyone deserved to feel joy and love.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Dominick pulled into the driveway of the safe house and gently touched Delaney's shoulder. "We're here."

She shot forward and glanced around. "What about Caleb and my mom?"

"I talked to them an hour ago. They are still a few hours out. They are being extra cautious of that possible tail."

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes. "Yeah sorry. That was instinct. Caleb didn't look scared at all when we talked a couple of hours ago. He thinks this is one big adventure."

"Well it is, isn't it?" He smiled and got out of the car. He'd say anything to help her relax. Their situation was seriously dangerous, but she had enough on her plate to worry about.

She hopped out and looked around. "How is it possible this looks even more remote than the last one?"

He closed the back gate of the SUV and walked up with the groceries from their last stop. "Because it is. This is mostly swampland, so I got it really cheap. There's no one around for miles and miles."

She glanced through the front window. "Is there at least electricity and running water?"

"Ha ha. I'm not a caveman. We even have satellite TV." He opened the door and waved for her to go in. "After you."

He put the groceries away while she walked around.

"Two bedrooms again. You guys are taking one of them." She poked her head into the kitchen. "No arguing this time."

He rolled his eyes at her. He'd tried like hell to make her keep the second room at the last cabin, but turned out she was even more stubborn than he

was. When she jutted her chin out and scowled at him, he knew he'd never win an argument against her.

His phone rang, causing her to run back into the room.

"Tex. What's the news?"

"The team is going in. Do you want to listen in?"

Dominick looked at Delaney, who nodded.

"Sure. Delaney's here with me."

"Hey Delaney. This is your brother. Are you sure you want to be a part of this?"

She chewed her nail for a second. After a few seconds, she cleared her throat and straightened her shoulders. "I'm sure."

Dominick sat at the kitchen table and laid his phone down. Delaney paced back and forth as they listened to the team report on their progress. When they breached the doors of the building, Delaney gasped as tears filled her eyes. Maybe he shouldn't have let her listen.

There were random gunshots and people yelling.

"Combatants contained. Confirming if the target is here."

Delaney looked ready to snap. He got up and grabbed her shoulders. "I can take it off speaker and let you know."

She shook her head. "No. I need to know. I really do want him caught, but I don't want him dead. He's my brother. Shouldn't I want them to fail?"

"Target not located."

"Fuck." Tex cursed into the phone. "I'll get back to you guys."

The phone call disconnected. Dominick was frustrated for Tex and sad for Delaney.

She fell against him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He froze at first. This was definitely not protocol, and he'd berate any of his employees for doing this, but he couldn't push her away. He held on and rubbed her back as she sobbed. She had a lot of conflicting emotions about her brother. It was better to stay silent than to say the wrong thing.

After a while, she sniffled against his chest. He had to listen carefully to understand her muffled words. "I'm probably making you really uncomfortable, but I need this. Can I hold on just a little longer?"

He chuckled. "I'm not moving. You take as long as you need."

He had to focus on anything but her if he wanted to keep his attraction to her from poking her in the stomach. Since when did he have so little control?

Since Delaney, that's when.

When he was on the third rendition of *Bohemian Rhapsody* in his head, she finally lifted her head.

Her gorgeous green eyes still twinkled from unshed tears. “I’m so sorry. I needed a few minutes to just wallow.”

“You have nothing to apologize for.” He couldn’t look away if he tried.

She reached up on the balls of her feet and kissed him softly. “Is this okay?”

“No.” As he shook his head yes.

She laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck to pull him closer. She kissed him again, then turned her head and deepened the kiss. He was vibrating from the strain of holding back and letting her control what happened next.

She broke the kiss long enough to pull off her shirt. Her tongue thrust inside his mouth, begging him for more. She growled and pulled away. “Touch me, damn it.”

He couldn’t resist her grumpy pout. “Are you sure?”

“Is there like a consent form I need to sign? The blinking neon light above my head saying fuck me should be enough.”

God, he loved her sass. “Tell me if you want to stop.”

She opened her mouth, probably to say something snarky again, but he kissed her deeply as he picked her up and carried her to the bedroom he’d be sharing with Seeds and Gabby.

He set her gently on the side of the bed and stepped back. He never stopped looking at her as her eyes roamed up and down his body as he removed every piece of clothing.

He’d never been shy of his body, but standing naked in front of her with his erection throbbing had his mind full of doubts.

His breath caught as she reached up.

Her fingers gently rubbed just below the stitches on his side. “You took a bullet for me.”

“And I’d do it again.” Ugh, why did he say that? He sucked at being sexy.

She smiled as she slid down onto her knees and took him in her mouth. The heat as she took him deep had him on edge. He gently ran his fingers through her hair, careful not to put any pressure. He wanted her in complete control. With each deep thrust, she moaned, sending vibrations down his shaft. It wasn’t until her nails dug into his ass cheeks did he feel like he was going to lose it.

He reached down and pulled her up. “It feels too good. The first time you make me come, I want to be inside you.”

She unsnapped her bra and tossed it to the side. She pulled off her jeans and underwear and scooted back on the bed. The invitation was clear.

He dug around his clothes for his wallet, pulled out a condom, and put it on. It had been in there a while. It almost felt weird to finally be using it.

He kneeled on the bed and leaned over her. “Are you sure?”

Her answer was to grab his shoulders and pull him down.

He settled on top of her and kissed her neck. Goosebumps broke out across her skin everywhere his mouth touched. She giggled as he neared her sides. He’d have to remember she was ticklish.

By the time he made it between her legs, she was panting. He inhaled deeply and let her scent brand his soul. With the first long lick between her lips, she arched off the bed. She hooked her legs over his shoulders and buried her fingers in his hair. There was no sexier position to him. He made love to her pussy with his mouth until she was begging for more. He reached down and thrust his fingers inside her. She ground against him as he latched on until she dug her heels in and pushed away from him.

He jerked up. “I’m sorry. We can stop.”

Her breasts bounced as she caught her breath. “I’ll kill you myself if we stop. Turnaround is fair play, though. I want you deep inside me the first time you make me come.”

He smiled. That was exactly what he wanted to hear. “I was told to give you whatever you need.”

“Careful. A girl could get used to that.”

If she let him, he’d spend the rest of his days giving her everything she could want. He’d protect her, love her, make her scream with passion, and cherish her as long as she’d let him.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Delaney felt like mush. She'd never been so thoroughly pleased before. Dominick was even better in bed than she'd been imagining. It took her a second to figure out what woke her up.

Dominick's phone had rung.

"Tex? What's wrong?"

"You need to get out of there." Dominick jumped out of bed and waved at her to hurry. "We finished going through the warehouse. They hired someone good. Your car had been tracked from their house and they got your picture. It looks like they ran facial recognition and once they had your info, they pulled everything about you, including all the properties you own. He's sent teams to infiltrate all of them."

Dominick cursed.

Delaney grabbed everything she could and ran to the car, never being more than a foot away from him.

He sped out of the drive.

"I don't know how long you have."

"Got it. I'll call you back." He hung up the phone and called Ava. When she didn't answer, he called Eli. "Fuck."

"Dominick, why aren't they answering?"

She grabbed the handle above the door when he took a hard turn. A car came speeding at them and slammed up against them.

He sped up and took another hard turn. The car stayed on them as they twisted through the woods. Each time they bumped them, Dominick would curse.

Nausea rolled through her. Where were her son and mother? Would

Dominick be able to get them out of this car chase?

“Hang on.” He pulled the wheel hard and drove off the road. They jerked and rocked as he drove over bushes.

She looked over and saw what he was going to do. “Oh, that’s not a good idea.”

“Trust me.”

She shut her mouth. The truth was, she did trust him.

There was a break in the trees with several large boulders just past it. He’d have a millisecond to make the turn. It was very likely the car behind them couldn’t see the rocks.

He made the turn to head for the gap and she closed her eyes.

Her body was thrown to the side as he made the sharp turn. Their back tire hit one of the rocks but they managed to keep going.

A second later, the crash of the second car was a deafening boom behind them. She turned back to see smoke rising from the crushed car.

They drove for a few more miles until he finally pulled over. “I have to change the tire.” He handed her his sat phone and a gun. “Stay in the car.”

Her hands shook as she scanned the woods around them. It wasn’t possible that car was still functional, but that didn’t mean another car wasn’t far behind.

Dominick managed to change the tire in less than five minutes. It was the longest five minutes of her life.

He pulled back out onto the road and dialed a number.

“Yeah boss?”

“I’m sending you coordinates. I need a car not connected to me. This one’s been made.”

“You got it.”

The tension in the car was thick, but she couldn’t stay quiet. “Please call Ava again. I need to talk to Caleb.”

He dialed Ava and then Eli with the same response. He opened an app and saw the car wasn’t moving about a mile from them.

She knew something was wrong, but panic wasn’t going to help anyone.

It only took a few minutes to get to the car. It was abandoned on the side of the road. It had been in an accident. The doors were open.

Delaney jumped out of the car before Dominick had fully stopped. She ignored him yelling her name. She got to the car and fell to her knees.

It was empty, but there was blood on the passenger seat.

Dominick caught up and searched the car. He lifted her off the ground. “If it were Rosa or Caleb, the blood would be in the backseat. They’re okay.”

She shoved him away. “You don’t know that. And is that supposed to make me feel better that it’s Ava or Eli bleeding?”

“Uh, I guess not.”

He looked thoroughly confused.

“Look, I don’t know what kind of assholes you’ve guarded before, but I care about all of you, so if any of you are hurt, I’m going to worry and you should, too.”

He pulled her against him. “I am worried, but that isn’t going to help them. Right now, I need to focus and come up with a plan.”

She nodded. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

He went back to the car and grabbed his phone. “Tex. We’ve got a problem. I found my team’s car abandoned. They had Caleb and Rosa. I’m going to keep moving. Can you get someone here to handle this?”

He listened for a minute, then hung up and typed on his phone for another minute. “Okay. We need to go.”

She was amazed at his control. Their situation just kept getting worse, and his friends were missing, yet he was keeping calm. She needed to find her own control. Her baby was out there somewhere and she had to believe Eli and Ava would keep him safe.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Dominick was an idiot. He let his feelings for Delaney make him soft. He was better than this.

They drove in silence for an hour before pulling into a rest stop. They parked next to a BMW with heavily tinted windows.

“Come on. We’re switching cars.”

Bard, his first non-team hire, got out of the car. “I got your message about Seeds and Gabby. What can I do?”

“I’ve got people on it. Keep an eye on the work comms in case something comes through. I don’t want anyone going back to the office until this is over and don’t use any of the safe houses. I fucked all this up.”

Bard shook his head at him. “We’re supposed to be guarding celebrities and business people. There was no reason for you to think you needed to jump through hoops to hide your locations. The average stalker and business rival wouldn’t have been able to figure all this out.”

“I know. We should never have done this.”

The car door slammed as Delaney got into the passenger seat.

“Shit.”

“I don’t think she liked hearing that.” Bard gave him a sympathetic look.

This day couldn’t get worse. “Yeah. Drive this East for a while then hide it somewhere. We’ll get it later.”

“You got it. Let me know if you need anything.”

Dominick tossed his stuff in the backseat and then blew out a breath before getting into the driver’s seat.

Delaney sat with her arms crossed as she stared out the window, ignoring him.

“Delaney.”

She spun on him. “I’m sorry you got mixed up with us. I did try to make you go away when you came for us. I was prepared to go on my own.”

He grabbed her hand, which was flailing in the air as she yelled. “I didn’t mean it the way it sounded.”

She pursed her lips and scowled at him.

“I meant I knew this was a dangerous extraction. I shouldn’t have used my business setup for this. I should have treated it like a real mission. Nothing would have kept me from taking this job. I’m saying I made a mistake when I didn’t properly prepare. It’s my fault you’re separated from your mother and son. It’s my fault one of my team members might be hurt. It’s all my fault and I’m sorry. I will do everything I can to fix this.”

Her hand came up and cupped his cheek. He didn’t realize he’d shed a tear until her thumb wiped it away. He couldn’t remember the last time he cried.

“All of this is Mason’s fault. You are a good man, risking everything for us. I’m sorry I yelled at you. I’m scared and I took it out on you.”

She leaned toward him and waited for him to kiss her. He was never going to be the same after this job. He needed her and the sad truth was she didn’t need him.

He poured every emotion he had into the kiss, then pulled away and onto the road.

“So, where are we going?”

“They know we’ve been using safe houses, so we’re going to mix things up. How about a seedy motel?”

He laughed at the look of disgust on her face. “Does it have to be seedy? There have to be nice ones out there.”

His phone rang with an unknown number. “Hello.”

“Dominick?”

Delaney gasped. “Mom? Are you guys okay?”

The older woman cried into the phone. “Caleb and I are, but Ava is hurt and we don’t know what happened to Eli.”

Rage filled Dominick. He was going to kill Mason. “Where are you?”

“I’ve got Ava and Caleb locked in a bathroom of the Gas and Go on Highway 58. The clerk is letting me use her phone. The numbers on the building are 4596.”

Dominick typed the info into his GPS and scrolled to find the one with

that address. “Great job Rosa. We’re only fifteen minutes away.”

He heard her muffled cry. “Pull around back. The bathrooms are behind the building. Hurry.”

Dominick didn’t have to be told twice. He hit end on the call and hooked a hard right. With any luck, they wouldn’t pass any cops because he was about to break a few laws.

Delaney was quiet in the seat next to him. Her hands fisted in her lap told him everything he needed to know about how she was feeling.

They skidded to a stop behind the gas station and ran for the women’s bathroom. Dominick pounded on the door. “Rosa, open up!”

The older woman opened the door and sobbed when she saw Delaney. Caleb had been sitting next to Ava. He jumped up and tackled Delaney’s legs. “Mommy, I don’t want to do this anymore. I want to go home. Ava’s hurt and we don’t know where Seeds is.”

It melted her heart that he still called Eli Seeds. She picked him up and held him tight. “I know this is scary, but I need you to stay strong a little bit longer.”

Dominick kneeled next to Gabby. She was unconscious, with her shirt covered in blood.

Rosa was standing over them. “She rattled off your number before passing out. I did my best to stop the bleeding, but she has a bullet hole in her shoulder.”

He ran back out to the car and dug the medical kit all of his cars were supposed to have. Bard was well trained. He’d put a kit in the car.

On his way back inside, he paused when he saw Caleb hugging Harry. That was the luckiest turtle alive.

He pulled back the paper towels covering Gabby’s shoulder and scowled at the jagged hole just below her collarbone. He rolled her gently and saw there was an exit wound. That was going to make everything much easier.

Rosa helped him clean and dress it.

He scooped her up in his arms. “Let’s get to a motel and we’ll do a better cleaning and I can see if I need to stitch it.”

Delaney ran ahead to the car and leaned the passenger seat back while Rosa stayed behind and cleaned up their mess.

Caleb was attached to Delaney’s side, and Dominick didn’t blame him in the least. The kid was going to need some serious counseling after this.

He searched the GPS for a motel a good distance away and pulled back

on the road. Every time he looked up in the rearview mirror, Delaney was staring back at him.

Two hours later, with everyone in the car asleep but him, he finally pulled into the motel. He nudged Delaney. She jerked awake. "I'm going inside to get rooms. I wanted someone awake in here just in case."

She nodded and sat up. "Go ahead. I'm good."

The check-in clerk didn't look twice at him and, for a little extra cash, skipped the I.D. check. Seedy motels were the best.

He pulled the car to the end of the building and handed Delaney the keys. "We've got these last two rooms here. They're adjoining, so we'll all be together. Can you open one of the rooms so I can carry Gabby in?"

He was so proud of her for jumping out and helping. A lot of people would be shut down by this point. Delaney was too strong for that.

He ran around the car and gently lifted Gabby up. She moaned when her shoulder rested against his chest.

He got her settled on one of the full size beds. Rosa was right beside him with the medical kit. He used the scissors to cut Ava's shirt off. The bullet hole was ragged, but he'd be able to stitch it. "Gabby. You're gonna feel this. I'm sorry."

He tried to be gentle as he cleaned the area. When the needle first pierced her skin, she finally opened her eyes.

"Crash. We fucked up. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. We got you."

"Where's Seeds? Did he catch up to us?" Understanding dawned on her as she studied his face. "Oh, tell me they didn't kill him?"

Dominick shook his head. "Not that we know of. The only blood in the car was on the passenger seat."

Her eyes widened. "I was driving."

His jaw tensed. That was exactly what he didn't want to hear.

"I was shot as we were running through the woods."

He'd focus on that problem next. First things first, close the holes and stop the blood.

Delaney and Rosa helped turn Ava over and keep her busy while he sewed the entry wound.

He nodded at Delaney when he was done and got up to stretch his back.

"Good as new." Delaney said, as she helped Ava sit up.

Dominick cleaned up quickly and grabbed his phone.

“Tex. Gabby was shot and Seeds is missing. I’m putting my entire team on alert to be ready. When you figure out where Mason is, give me the address. We’re going after him ourselves.”

Delaney shook her head when he ended the call. “Please don’t. Let Tex’s guys handle this. Stay with us.”

He didn’t care they weren’t alone. He pulled her against him and hugged her. “I’m not leaving you yet, but I have to go after him. He’s my brother.”

Even being away from them for an hour was going to be torture, but he wasn’t going to leave until they had confirmation Seeds and Mason were in the same location. They could hide long enough for them to storm the place and rescue Seeds.

Everything was going to be fine. It had to be.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Delaney wasn't going to sit around and wait for Tex to find Mason. She snuck off to the bathroom and turned on her burner phone. She sent a text to Nicky to see if he was available for a call.

Her phone rang immediately. "Hello?"

"It's about time you answered. I've been calling for hours."

Delaney's stomach dropped. "Mason. How did you—"

"I'll give you credit. I don't know how you hooked up with the people you did, but I'll admit they're good. I'm better, but they're good." She stayed silent. "Did you know one of them only has one leg? It seems almost cruel to kill him after what he's been through."

Eli. "Mason, don't do this."

He chuckled. "You always were too kindhearted. How about this? You, Caleb, and Mom meet me alone and I'll let peg leg here go."

If she was in front of him, she probably would have swung on him. "Why can't you just let us go? We're not trying to take the business from you. We just want to live our lives."

"You're my family. You belong with me. I don't want to do this without you."

For the first time, he sounded unsure of himself. He snapped out of it quickly. "But if you don't care about this guy, I'll have Peter take care of him."

"Stop. Just stop. Text me the address."

She could picture the slimy smile on his face. "I knew you'd do the right thing. Remember, come alone or stumpy here won't live to see another day."

She slammed the phone on the counter and sobbed into a towel. Her

brother was gone. She didn't even recognize this monster anymore.

She washed her face and straightened her shoulders. When she opened the door, Rosa was on the other side and she looked pissed.

"Don't do anything stupid."

Delaney dropped her shoulders. "He's going to kill Eli. He won't hurt us. I have to try."

Rosa turned and stomped through the room to the adjoining room. "Delaney just got a call from Mason and she's planning to go meet him."

Dominick swung around from his place at the window. The anger radiating off of him was palpable. Ava was pushing off the bed. He pointed down at her. "Stay put." He looked up at Delaney.

She was never good with men controlling her. She couldn't help crossing her arms and daring him to boss her around.

"You talked to your brother? Without me?" He sounded more hurt than angry.

It completely crumbled her defenses. "I didn't intend to. I turned on my burner and it rang. I thought it was Nicky."

"I'm guessing Nicky sold you out to your brother."

Rosa and Delaney argued at the same time. Rosa was louder. "He wouldn't do that. He's always been in love with Delaney."

Dominick gave Delaney a look. Was she supposed to mention that to him before? It didn't matter. What mattered now was they knew where Eli was and he was alive. "Mason said he'd trade Eli for us if we came alone."

Dominick snorted. "Please. He'll kill him the second his guys have you."

"No. I'll go out first and talk to him. He'll see Mom and Caleb in the car, but not you hiding in the back. I'll tell him they'll come out when Eli gets in the car. When Eli gets to the car, I want you to take all of them and leave the country. Whatever you do, don't let them out of the car."

Everyone shouted at once until Dominick roared over them. "Enough. That is not happening. I'm not leaving you with him. Tex will send teams in and I have my guys. There is no way any of you will be staying there. Do you trust me?"

She didn't even hesitate. "You know I do."

He nodded and pushed a button on his phone. "Tex. We have an address. He wants to trade Seeds for Delaney, Caleb, and Rosa. I need help."

She could imagine it wasn't easy for him to admit that.

She sat quietly on the edge of the bed while Dominick and Tex made

plans.

When everything was arranged, she went and got Caleb from the other room. “We’re going for a ride. You are going to wait in the car with Grandma and Dominick while I talk to your uncle Mason. It is very important that you not leave the car and you do everything Dominick tells you to, okay?”

He nodded and went back to watching the cartoon on the TV.

They packed up and drove a few miles toward the meet spot. They pulled up next to a heavily tinted SUV. Bard got out and shook hands with Dominick. They talked for a couple of minutes before Dominick came back to the car.

“Okay. Bard is going to drive this car with Ava, and he found a spot he can set up with his sniper rifle.” Delaney’s jaw dropped open. “Delaney, you’ll drive the SUV with Rosa in the passenger seat. Caleb and I will be in the backseat and I’ll crouch down when we get there.”

Everyone nodded and went to their assigned spots. Dominick grabbed Delaney’s elbow as she passed by. “Have you ever shot a gun before?”

She hated guns. The basic function of them made sense, but too many bad people had access to really bad guns and it was making the world worse. “I shot once or twice at a target, but I wouldn’t say I’m proficient.”

He held out a small handgun. “I’d like you to take this because he won’t be expecting it and you might need it.”

She hesitated before nodding and grabbing the gun. He pointed out the safety switch and then pulled her against him. “Don’t do anything heroic. You won’t see them, but you have a lot of backup. He’s not going to get away again, and he definitely won’t be taking any of you.”

She leaned up to look into his eyes. “I trust you. I trust you to keep my son and my mother safe. This will all be over soon-” She stopped. What was going to happen after this was over? Would the job be done, and he’d just go on to the next one?

He cupped her face with his hands. “When this is all over, I hope we can have a conversation about us. I like you, Delaney Rossi. I adore your mother and think your son is amazing. Heck, I even like the turtle. If you want to go your own way when this is over-”

She leaned up on the balls of her feet and kissed him.

“Amore mio,” Rosa called from the SUV.

Delaney pulled away. “I guess we better go deal with my brother so we can get to that conversation.”

She settled into the driver's seat and adjusted the mirror. He was sitting behind her, staring into the mirror. How was she supposed to concentrate with those gorgeous eyes looking back at her?

Her hands were soaked in sweat as she gripped the steering wheel. The GPS led her to a warehouse in a part of town that had seen better days.

"Tex, we're pulling in. You guys ready?" Dominick was wearing a headset, so she couldn't hear the reply. "Okay. Delaney. Everyone is set. Don't get too close to the door."

She stopped thirty feet from the entrance and got out. No way was she going inside. She stood in front of the SUV and yelled. "Mason. Get out here."

A few seconds later, her brother walked out with Peter and several new guards she didn't recognize. He was replacing them as fast as Tex's teams were rounding them up.

"Delaney, why are you screeching? Where's mom and Caleb?"

She glanced over her shoulder and nodded. Rosa leaned toward the windshield and nodded. Caleb leaned between the seats and did the same. She relaxed a little when she realized she couldn't see Dominick at all.

"Where's Eli?"

"Is that his name? I give him credit, he's a tight-lipped mother fucker."

Peter went back to the door and dragged Eli out. He was bloody, bruised, and looked seriously pissed off.

Delaney reached back and rested her hand on the gun tucked in her pants. "Here's what's going to happen. Eli and I are going to walk toward each other. When he is safe in the car, Mom and Caleb will get out." Mason started to shake his head. "This isn't negotiable. You know I won't leave my son, but I want a guarantee Eli gets out."

After a few seconds, he nodded. "You know, this would have all been a lot easier if you had just stayed in the house and enjoyed the lavish lifestyle I was providing for you. Why did you have to make everything so difficult?"

She snorted. "You kill people. You sell weapons to bad people. Why would you ever think I would be okay with that? You knew Joseph and I were against the family business and didn't want Caleb getting involved."

"Joseph," Mason sneered. "He was a pain in the ass. I tried everything to get him to work for me. That asshole couldn't be bribed. He was determined to take you guys away from me. It's his fault he forced my hand."

Goosebumps broke out across her skin. He wasn't saying what she

thought he was saying, right? The hand gripping the gun shook. It was the first time in her life she wanted to use it and she wanted to hurt someone. “Mason... you didn’t...”

He sneered at her. “Of course I got rid of him. Peter here actually took care of him for me. He did a good job too. You weren’t suspicious at all. When we get home, I’ll give you his wedding ring. Peter had to make it look like a robbery so he brought his things to me.”

Delaney wanted to throw up. She wasn’t sure who she hated more.

Rosa opened the passenger door and stepped out. “Just breathe Delaney. Stick to the plan.”

Her mom’s voice gave her the calm she needed to refocus. She had to get Eli away from them, then she’d take care of her brother. Mason needed to pay.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Dominick cursed when he heard Mason's confession. He knew Mason was a piece of shit, but doing that to his sister was disgusting.

Rosa choked on a sob. "My babies."

"Grandma, what's wrong?" Caleb's tiny hand patted her shoulder.

"Nothing. It's okay."

Dominick's mind was racing.

"What's the holdup over there?" Tex asked over the headset.

"Mason unalived Joseph." He had to pray Caleb wouldn't understand that.

Tex cursed. "Is she good? Should we move in?"

Before he could stop her, Rosa stepped out of the car. Thankfully, she stayed behind the door and spoke quietly to Delaney. After a few seconds, she got back in. "They're switching."

"They're on the move." He repeated to Tex. "When they cross paths, we move."

He watched Delaney with her hand still on the gun, as she slowly walked toward the building. With every step, his unease grew. He hated her getting so far away.

When she got to Eli, she paused and hugged him. She was supposed to be telling him the plan so he would know what to do. They just had to hope he wasn't too badly hurt to run. It was going to have to be a fast getaway.

They separated and took a few more steps when Dominick gave the signal.

All hell broke loose as soldiers swarmed. Several were on adjacent rooftops, yelling at everyone to freeze.

Dominick only had eyes for Delaney as she spun around to run back to the car when Mason ran up behind her and grabbed a fistful of her hair.

Dominick jumped out of the car and ran for them. He ignored the fights going on around him. He didn't care that bullets were whizzing by. Delaney was being dragged, and Mason looked ready to kill.

His stomach dropped when he saw her pull the gun and aim it at her brother. Peter kicked her hand and pushed Mason away. It was enough for her to get free.

"Delaney, get to the car. There's an address in the GPS already. Get on the plane and get out of here."

Mason was back on his feet. They were running out of time.

Tears rolled down her face. "I'm not leaving you. Mason isn't taking another man from me."

He kissed her quickly. "I won't lose. But I do need you guys as far away as possible. Please."

Eli hadn't listened to directions and had caught back up to them.

"Seeds take her. Please."

She shook her head but let herself be pulled away.

He heard Mason roar Delaney's name as she was pushed into the SUV. He spun around in time to avoid Mason's fist.

"They are my family," Mason yelled.

"Not anymore. They don't want to be around you." He knew he was poking the bear, but it was the truth. Mason was acting like a spoiled brat.

He easily dodged the next swing, but doubled over when Mason came back quickly and hit him where his stitches were.

He saw stars when Mason's fist connected with his temple. He shook his vision clear and tackled him to the ground. He tuned out the fights going on around them as they wrestled for control.

It was pure satisfaction to hear the bones in Mason's nose crunch as he broke it.

Dominick ignored the pain in his side and kept going. He managed to pin Mason to the ground in a choke hold. "Enough. It's over."

"I'll never let them go." He gasped out.

At the last second, Dominick saw the knife as Mason pulled it from a holder strapped to his ankle and swung backward. Dominick had to let go to stop Mason's arm. They twisted and rolled until the blade finally hit its mark.

Dominick gasped for breath as he pushed Mason off him. He hadn't

wanted to kill her brother, but Mason didn't give him a choice. Death was always too easy of an outcome for people like him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Delaney stared at the small private plane sitting on the runway. If it wasn't for Eli pulling her toward the car, she's not sure she could have left Dominick behind. He could take care of himself, she knew that. But there were enough people there with weapons that there was a risk of something going wrong.

He had become everything to her in such a short amount of time. She had loved Joseph, but it paled in comparison to what she felt for Dominick. If she were honest with herself, she'd realize that Joseph was the safe choice. He was everything her family wasn't. She would have never had to look over her shoulder waiting for the police or an enemy to take them down.

Because of her selfishness, she brought him into the family and it got him killed. She may not have done the actual murder, but it was just as much her fault he was dead.

Rosa opened the car door and grabbed Delaney's hand. "Come on. We need to stick to the plan."

Thank god for her mother. Once again, she was strong enough to keep Delaney and Caleb safe while she spiraled.

The car with Bard and Ava pulled up behind them. It was a struggle, but she managed to get out of the car and rush over to Eli. "You asshole. You said run, and we ran. Why the hell didn't you listen to yourself?"

He gently pulled her into a hug. "I love you too."

Maybe it wasn't so wrong that she worried about Dominick. It was obvious they worried about each other.

"I'm heading back for Dominick." Bard called out as he jumped back in the car.

A pilot stuck his head out of the door. "We're on a strict schedule. Can

everyone get in and get buckled?”

Delaney helped Caleb up the steps of the plane and got him situated before walking up to the cockpit. “Excuse me. We’re still waiting for one more. He’s paying you, so I think it will be okay if we wait for him.”

The pilot shook his head. “Sorry. I have strict orders to be wheels up in fifteen minutes with or without him. I’m only responsible for making sure you, your mother, and the boy are on this plane.”

His matter-of-fact tone was shocking. If she got off the plane, would that force him to wait?

Ava walked up and grabbed her hand. “I know what you’re thinking, and it’s not going to happen. Even with one arm, I can make sure you stay on this plane. You know this is what Dominick wants. He’ll be fine.”

She nodded and went back to sit next to Caleb. This was going to be the longest fifteen minutes of her life.

Rosa and Ava were cleaning and bandaging Eli. He had a deep gash on his arm, but everything else looked superficial.

Guilt consumed her. She reached over and touched his knee. “Thank you for taking care of my family, and I’m sorry for what my brother did to you.”

He squeezed her hand. “You have nothing to be sorry for. This is what we do,” He glanced at Ava. “We save people and we get scars. It’s kind of our thing.” He winked at her and then winced when they pulled gauze from the gash.

She turned back to the window and watched the runway. Any minute now, Dominick would drive up.

He had to because she didn’t want to imagine what it meant if he didn’t.

“Okay, folks. Time’s up. Prepare for takeoff.”

Delaney spun around, praying Ava or Eli would do something. They shook their heads. Ever the loyal soldiers.

For the millionth time, she repeated to herself that he was fine and would meet up with them as soon as they landed.

Tears rolled down her face as she watched the ground fade away.

* * *

AS SOON AS the plane touched down, Eli was on the phone Ava had given him, getting an update. Delaney wanted to rip the phone from his hands and

hear Dominick's voice herself.

"Got it. We'll let you know when we're settled."

Eli ended the call and glanced up, just noticing he was the center of attention. "Crash is okay. He's banged up, but okay. They've rounded everyone up that was still alive. He asked that we all go to your house here and hunker down until we hear from him again."

"My son?" Rosa's eyes were filled with unshed tears.

Eli frowned. "He didn't specifically say, but if it's safe to go to your house, I'm going to assume they have him."

Delaney didn't know what to feel. There were so many emotions swirling inside her she was ready to explode.

Ava was the first to get up. "There's no use sitting here. Let's get you guys settled in. Seeds and I will lock down the house and then I think we could both use a little rest. I can't remember the last time either of us were this banged up."

Eli laughed and agreed with her. It was just more guilt for Delaney.

She hadn't been to their family home in Italy in years. While they were there, she'd make sure they were properly taken care of and well fed. What else was she going to do, stare out the window and pine for Dominick?

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Delaney showed Ava and Eli to the nicest guest rooms in the house. They tried to argue they'd share a room, but Rosa joined in and strong armed them into agreeing.

They got really pouty when the doctor showed up to take care of them.

"Really Delaney. We're fine."

She rolled her eyes at Ava. "It's awesome that you can field dress wounds, but we're safe now. Let yourself be taken care of for a little while."

They grumbled like wounded animals as the doctor cleaned, stitched, and bandaged their injuries.

When they were done, Rosa had a buffet of food laid out. How her mom worked so fast was beyond her. She always loved entertaining and hadn't been able to since Mason took over. She hated that Mason was taken, but she was grateful her mom was finally free. No men to control her any longer. She'd step into the matriarch's role and restore their family name.

She'd just gotten Caleb to sleep when Eli met her in the living room and held out his phone. "He wants to talk."

She took the phone and ducked out to the back porch. "Hello?"

"Hey. Is everyone okay? Caleb good?" She smiled. Of course, he'd ask about them first.

"We're fine. A doctor has already seen to Ava and Eli who, it turns out, are terrible patients. But what about you? Are you okay? Is Mason pissed?"

There was silence for a few seconds. Her stomach twisted into a knot.

"I wanted to tell you in person," He sighed into the phone and Delaney knew. "Mason is dead. I am so sorry. I thought I had him, but he pulled a knife. I really tried to take him alive."

Hot tears ran down her cheeks. Not for the man who was dead but for the brother she grew up with, who had played house with her when they were little, and looked out for her when she had first started dating. He wasn't always bad. At one point, they'd been best friends. Maybe if she hadn't gone off to college, she could have prevented all of it. It was the shoulda, coulda, woulda's that would kill her.

"Delaney?"

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. "I'm glad you're okay. Tex didn't lose any men, right?"

"No. Everyone is good on our side."

At least there was that. "So when should we fly back or do you want to come out here and recoup with the rest of your team? We have a pretty amazing house right on the water."

"I think you guys should stay there for a bit. Caleb needs some normalcy and you and your mom need time to grieve. I'll talk to Seeds and Gabby. If you don't mind them staying there for a bit longer, it would make me feel better knowing you guys are safe."

"You won't come?" She couldn't hide the hurt in her voice.

"We have dead bodies and crime scenes across several states. I'm going to help Tex clean all this mess up. I still have a few clients scheduled for my business and it will be the new guy's first jobs. I need to take care of things here. Then in a couple of weeks we can talk again."

That was it? She needed to tell her Mom about Mason and then she'd deal with him. "I understand. I'll let you get back to what you're doing. I need to go tell Mom. Be safe."

She hit end on the call before he could reply. It was childish, but she was so damn angry. Why did she think she meant anything more to him than a distraction while he was watching over her? Did he sleep with all his clients?

She growled her frustration into the night sky, then went inside. She had to let her mom know she'd lost her child.

Eli was standing inside by the door, waiting. The look of pity made it clear he already knew. "I'm sorry about your brother."

"I appreciate it, but he did hold you hostage, so I wouldn't blame you for being happy."

He shook his head. "You lost your brother. That's what I'm sorry for."

He stiffened for a second when she hugged him. "Thank you. Can you keep an ear out for Caleb while I go tell my mom?"

He nodded and planted himself on the couch. “Take as much time as you need.”

Her stomach was in her throat as she made her way to Rosa’s room. They’d had enough death in their family over the last five years that this shouldn’t be hard.

She knocked gently and waited for Rosa to call out. “Hey Mama.”

Rosa was propped up against her headboard reading on the new Kindle she’d gotten her after they landed. She studied Delaney’s face and then burst into tears. “He’s gone, isn’t he?”

Delaney sat next to her and pulled her into a hug. “I’m so sorry Mama. Dominick said he tried everything he could, but Mason wasn’t giving up.”

She rubbed her mother’s back and let her sob against her, just like she’d done for Delaney when she’d lost Joseph.

She knew she should be crying too, but she felt numb. That wasn’t what her mother needed from her right then. She needed her strength, and that’s what she would be for her.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Dominick was going insane. It had been two weeks since Delaney had left. He could have asked her to come back, but instead he'd made excuses. He wasn't ready to face her or Rosa yet. He killed their son and brother. That was unforgivable. As long as he avoided her, he could pretend there was still a chance for them to have a future.

Bard walked into the office and handed him a file. "Not that I don't love being your assistant, but when are Seeds and Gabby coming back?"

That was the other problem. He missed his friends. He was able to sleep at night knowing they were there watching over Delaney and they couldn't work until they were healed anyway, but that didn't mean he didn't wish they were nearby to hang out with when the nights got lonely.

"I have an ad out for an office manager, so you'll be free soon." Delaney didn't need the money, but he'd had the insane dream they could date and she could work with him and help him grow the business. All of that was gone now. All because he hadn't seen the knife Mason pulled until it was too late. "It's getting late. You can head home if you want. I'll be leaving soon."

Bard nodded and left. Unlike Seeds and Gabby, Bard didn't wait around to make sure he left. That made it easier for him to stay as late as he wanted. Most nights he curled up on the loveseat and caught a few hours sleep when he was too exhausted to stay awake.

He laid his head back and stared up at the ceiling. It was his usual activity when he didn't want to think anymore.

"Excuse me. I'm here to interview for the office manager's job."

He froze. It couldn't be. Seeds and Gabby would have told him if they were flying home.

He spun his chair around. There she was, Delaney, standing in his doorway. He didn't know how to react. If she were here, she wasn't blaming him too much for Mason's death, right?

She walked inside and sat in the chair across from his desk. "I've been out of work for a bit, traveling overseas. I heard you were a great boss, an incredible lover, and a pretty amazing bodyguard."

He couldn't speak. What did he say?

After a second, she sighed, got up, walked around his desk and turned his chair so he would face her. "It took a few days before Eli and Ava realized you were probably blaming yourself for how everything went down. It took them a few more days to convince me you were just being stupid, and I needed to come here and get you." She leaned forward so her face was inches from his. "So, what is it? Do you not want me, or are you avoiding me out of shame?"

He wanted to pinch himself and see if this was real. Was she really there or had he fallen asleep at his desk and was dreaming?

He must have paused too long. She stopped smiling and pulled back. "Maybe I misread all of this. I'm sorry."

He reached out and grabbed her wrist. "I am so sorry. I thought you or Rosa would blame me for Mason's death, and I was trying to give you space."

He stood up, pulled her close, and rested his forehead against hers. "I've missed you so much... all of you... even Harry."

He'd never felt so vulnerable in his life, but he knew he could trust Delaney.

She tilted her head and kissed him. It was even better than he remembered. How did he ever think he could let her go?

"Knock, knock." Gabby and Seeds popped their heads around the door. "We gave you long enough. So, who won the bet?"

Delaney rolled her eyes at them. "You guys were right. He was just being stupid."

"Hey!"

She shrugged. "Sorry, not sorry."

Dominick let go of her and rushed over to his friends. "You guys look a lot better than the last time I saw you."

"A two-week vacation in Italy will do that to you," Eli shot back.

"Vacation? You were supposed to be watching them." He teased.

“We did. We watched them cooking, going to tourist spots, lounging by the water.” Gabby plopped onto the loveseat. She looked around, then shook her head. “It doesn’t look like you’ve been going home much. You really can’t survive without us, can you?”

He blinked away tears. An hour ago, he felt so alone. Now he was surrounded by his best friends and the woman he hoped to spend the rest of his life with. Maybe he’d done something right in his life.

EPILOGUE

Two months later

DELANEY Poured two cups of coffee and brought one to Dominick. “Your coffee, sir.”

He gave her a side-eye. “Still playing that game?”

She winked at him. “A little role play never hurt anyone.”

He smacked her ass as she walked away to the desk she kept right outside his office.

This was her life now, and she loved every minute of it. Tex had helped clear her and her mother of any charges related to anything Mason was involved in. Rosa was now in charge of the family business and was taking it legitimate. They found out Nicky was the one who gave Mason her burner phone number. That wasn't illegal, but Dominick and Eli ran into him on a dark street and made sure he knew never to speak to or think about her ever again.

Caleb loved Dominick almost as much as she did. He pouted every time Dominick went home. He was driving her crazy, not wanting to move in yet. He wanted to make sure she was really ready. Sometimes she just wanted to scream at him for being so honorable.

He poked his head out, holding up a bookkeeping report she'd sent him earlier. “The price of gas on all these company cars is ridiculous.”

“Well, if you don't mind tipping your toe in the gray area, I know a guy-”

“Non una possibilità.”

She gasped and jumped up to swat him. “You ass. I knew you understood Italian. Oh my god. I’m going to kill Eli.”

He laughed as he pulled her into his arms. “You might not need to worry about that. It sounds like his job has gone off the rails and he has a royal pain in the ass now.”

The End

Dominick, Delaney, and the whole gang will be back in 2024 featuring Eli!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cassidy lives in the Tampa, Florida area with her high school sweetheart, their three children, her dog Flynn, who she loves obsessively, and her grand dog, Ryder. She loves reading and going to the movies. She also loves to travel and hopes to one day watch a baseball game in every MLB stadium in the country.

She also writes under the pen name CK. O'Connor. Books by Cassidy range from paranormal to reverse harem to fairytale retellings.

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There are many more books in this fan fiction world than listed here, for an up-to-date list go to www.AcesPress.com

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As you know, this book included at least one character from Susan Stoker's books. To check out more, see below.

SEAL Team Hawaii Series

Finding Elodie

Finding Lexie

Finding Kenna

Finding Monica

Finding Carly

Finding Ashlyn

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Eagle Point Search & Rescue

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Searching for Elsie

Searching for Bristol

Searching for Caryn

Searching for Finley (Oct 2023)

Searching for Heather (Jan 2024)

Searching for Khloe (May 2024)

The Refuge Series

Deserving Alaska

Deserving Henley

Deserving Reese

Deserving Cora (Nov 2023)

Deserving Lara (Feb 2024)

Deserving Maisy (TBA)

Deserving Ryleigh (TBA)

Delta Team Two Series

Shielding Gillian

Shielding Kinley

Shielding Aspen

Shielding Jayme (novella)

Shielding Riley
Shielding Devyn
Shielding Ember
Shielding Sierra

SEAL of Protection: Legacy Series

Securing Caite (FREE!)
Securing Brenae (novella)
Securing Sidney
Securing Piper
Securing Zoey
Securing Avery
Securing Kalee
Securing Jane

Delta Force Heroes Series

Rescuing Rayne (FREE!)
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Rescuing Emily
Rescuing Harley
Marrying Emily (novella)
Rescuing Kassie
Rescuing Bryn
Rescuing Casey
Rescuing Sadie (novella)
Rescuing Wendy
Rescuing Mary
Rescuing Macie (novella)
Rescuing Annie

Badge of Honor: Texas Heroes Series

Justice for Mackenzie (FREE!)
Justice for Mickie
Justice for Corrie
Justice for Laine (novella)
Shelter for Elizabeth

Justice for Boone
Shelter for Adeline
Shelter for Sophie
Justice for Erin
Justice for Milena
Shelter for Blythe
Justice for Hope
Shelter for Quinn
Shelter for Koren
Shelter for Penelope

SEAL of Protection Series

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Protecting Alabama
Protecting Fiona
Marrying Caroline (novella)
Protecting Summer
Protecting Cheyenne
Protecting Jessyka
Protecting Julie (novella)
Protecting Melody
Protecting the Future
Protecting Kiera (novella)
Protecting Alabama's Kids (novella)
Protecting Dakota

New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author Susan Stoker has a heart as big as the state of Tennessee where she lives, but this all American girl has also spent the last fourteen years living in Missouri, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas. She's married to a retired Army man who now gets to follow *her* around the country.

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