

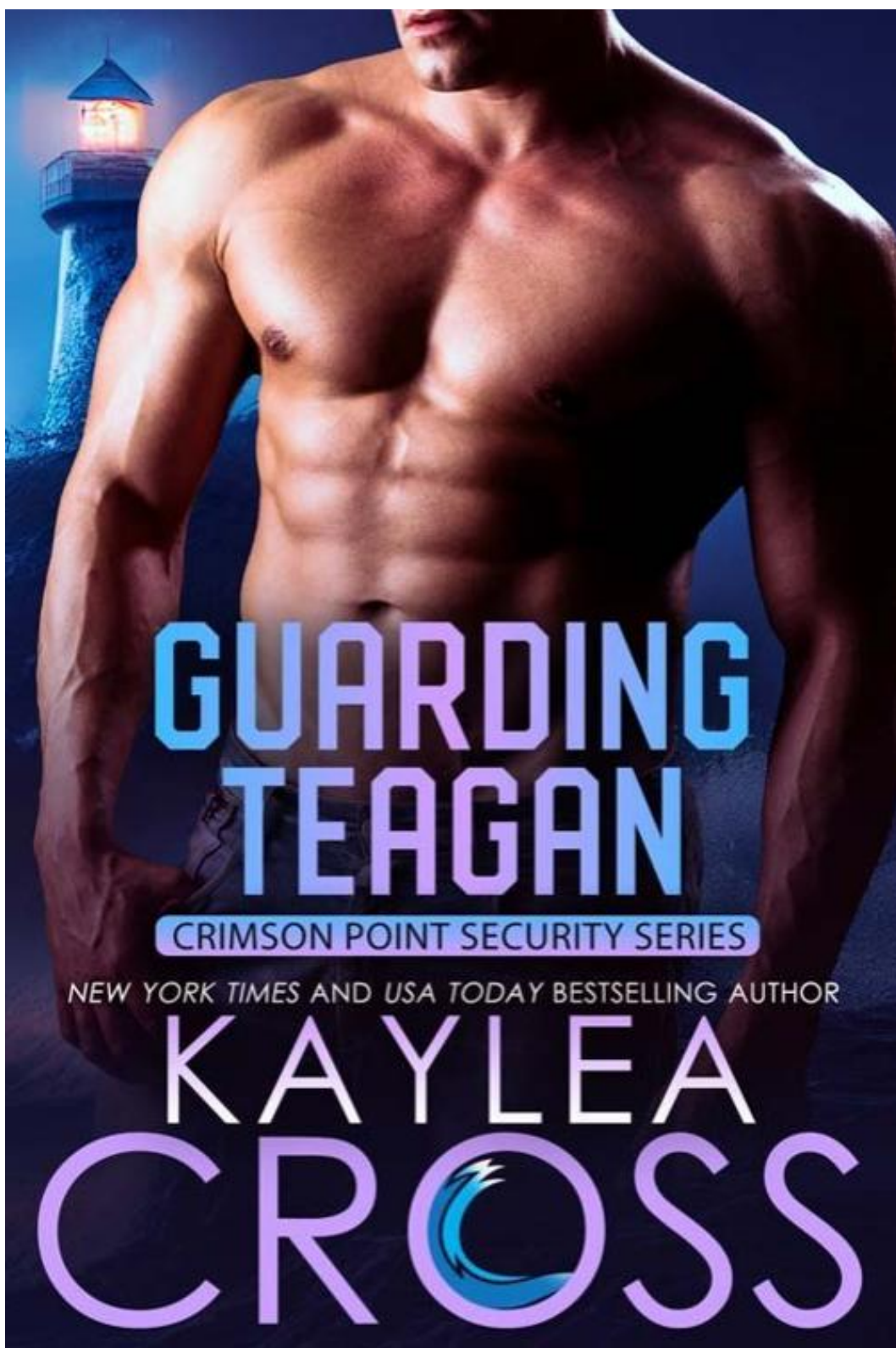


GUARDING TEAGAN

CRIMSON POINT SECURITY SERIES

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KAYLEA
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Crimson Point Security

Kaylea Cross

GUARDING TEAGAN

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ABOUT THE BOOK

She's out for justice.

Teagan Kim is on a mission to find her cousin's murderer, the same one she suspects nearly killed her. She's used to operating on her own, but the DEA assigns her a bodyguard for a job she's handling—and he turns out to be the man she had a one-night stand with the last time she was in town. Now they're forced to work together as she hunts down a murderer. And when the danger closes in, her sexy one-night-stand-turned-bodyguard is all that's standing between her and the people who want her dead.

His job is to keep her alive long enough to get it.

Decker Abrams is Crimson Point Security's newest personal protection specialist, and he's just been handed his first assignment: Teagan. The woman who saved his sister's life and then ghosted him after the hottest night of his life. She's just as much a mystery to him now as the first time they met. He wants to know why she left without a word, but he's got a job to do and refuses to let things get personal. Except everything about Teagan feels personal. And as the danger mounts, they'll have to learn to trust each other if they want to make it out alive.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Welcome to the start of the **Crimson Point Security Series**! I love the setting and community I've created in Crimson Point, and I'm excited to bring you a whole new cast of characters to fall in love with there. Hope you enjoy it.

This one is dedicated to my bestie, Katie Reus. We hit a major and unforeseen speed bump during our plotting trip this past April when my gallbladder suddenly gave up the ghost, but as always she was there for me. I wouldn't be the writer I am without her support. Love you big time! xo

Kaylea

Prologue

Teagan finished scooping out the guts of her second pumpkin onto the newspaper she'd spread out on her kitchen table and wiped her hands on a rag, then paused to glance up as Disney's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* played on her TV across the living room. Poor Ichabod was starting his lonely midnight trek home after the party at the Van Tassel farm, with no clue about what he was in for.

It was a classic for a reason. Every time that trumpet blared as the headless horseman's mount reared on its hind legs, its rider brandishing its sword, she got chills.

She picked up the sharp paring knife and began cutting a triangular eye into the pumpkin flesh, feeling like a kid again. Halloween was still almost a week away, but you wouldn't know it from the state of her Pacific Heights neighborhood. Almost everyone on her block had their Victorian porches all decked out with spooky witches and ghosts and bats, spiders and cobwebs hanging from the railings along with strands of orange and purple lights. San Fran did up Halloween right.

Once the eyes were done, she checked her phone for the time and saw that her cousin should be on her way over soon. She and Lily had carved pumpkins together ever since they were little, but Lily had picked up an extra shift on a research boat today and told Teagan to start without her.

Teagan loved this time of year, the weather turning cool and crisp, leaves changing into their brilliant autumn colors. Having a whole Saturday to herself was a luxury she planned to make the most of. In anticipation of Lily's arrival, she had a Crockpot full of homemade spiced apple cider ready to go on the kitchen counter, along with a tray of cupcakes frosted with purple and green icing.

Once Lily got here, they'd decorate them with little spiders on top made of chocolate wafer cookie bodies, slices of marshmallows and mini chocolate chips for eyes, and thin

black licorice strings for legs. Their rule was, calories didn't count at Halloween, Christmas, or Easter.

Just as she picked the paring knife back up to start the jagged outline of her grinning jack-o-lantern mouth, her phone rang. She hit the TV remote to pause the movie, then answered Lily's call. "Hey, you all done down there? I'm just carving my pumpkin face now, and—"

"I'm hiding in a boat, and I'm scared," her cousin said in an urgent whisper.

She tensed. "What's wrong?"

"Remember how you told me to keep my eyes and ears open for anything suspicious?"

Oh no. "Yeah, why?"

"I saw a couple guys acting suspiciously on a boat moored next to us. It was already dark, and they didn't know I was there, so I moved in closer until I could hear them. I overheard their conversation. It was about something bad. Then they saw me and stopped. I left in a hurry."

This didn't sound good, and Lily was still whispering. Teagan set the knife down, pulse accelerating. "Where are you?"

"Still at the marina. My car's parked out back."

"Did they try to confront or follow you?"

"No. Well, I'm not sure, actually."

"What did they say?"

"Something about avoiding certain checkpoints to get the shipment through tonight. And other stuff, but it was enough for me to tell they were definitely talking about smuggling."

Unease built in the pit of Teagan's stomach. There had been a large uptick in drug smuggling and related crime all along this part of the coast in recent months. She'd been briefed about it again the other day, including chatter about exactly the kind of thing Lily had just described. "You're sure they saw you?"

“Yes, they both went dead still and stared at me in a creepy way. I turned away and pretended to keep working on deck as though I hadn’t heard anything alarming.”

She stood, ready to head for the door. “Do you feel unsafe?”

“Yes, and I don’t know what to do. They definitely suspect I heard them. I know you have contacts, so I’ll tell you everything when it’s safe. I don’t want to say more over the phone in case anyone overhears me, because that’s how people die in the movies.”

Not just in the movies.

Teagan was genuinely concerned about her cousin’s safety. “Hang up, and call the cops.”

“No, I don’t want to involve the cops yet. I want to talk to you first and see if you think I’m right.”

“You need to get somewhere safe.” She rushed for the back door. Dammit. She’d been the one to put Lily in this position by asking her to keep an eye out for anything suspicious when she was at the marina. “Where are you at the marina?”

“Hiding below deck in another boat. I was too scared to go to my car in case they’re waiting for me in the parking lot or something.”

“I’m coming to get you,” she said, grabbing her keys as she shoved her feet into her boots. It was completely dark out, making it easier for someone to attack or follow Lily.

“No, just wait and stay on the line with me. I’m going up on deck now to take a look around.”

Teagan bit back an argument, not liking the feel of this at all. She had military training. Lily was a civilian. A marine biology student working on her Master’s degree and making a bit of extra money by picking up shifts on research vessels on the weekends. “Be careful.”

“I will.” A full minute passed before Lily spoke again. “Okay, I think they’re gone. Don’t see anyone else around. But

I'm going to ask someone at the office to escort me to my car just in case."

Good. "Are you sure you don't want me to come get you? It's no problem. I can be there in twenty minutes." With a weapon.

"No, I'm good," she said at normal volume, clearly feeling less afraid. "I was just spooked, that's all."

"Never ignore your intuition. It was warning you for a reason." Women dismissed that inner danger detector way too often.

"Okay."

"I'll stay on the phone with you while you go to the office."

"All right. I'm up on the dock now." Hollow footsteps sounded in the background as Lily hurried along the wooden planks. Then a door squeaked open. "Hey, Bob. Would you mind walking me to my car?"

"Sure," a male voice answered. "Everything okay?"

"Yes. I'd just feel better with an escort."

"No problem."

"Don't hang up," Teagan told her, the sharp edge of anxiety easing slightly now that Lily had someone with her. If the men from the boat were watching her, they were less likely to try anything in front of a witness.

"It's okay, Bob's taking me to my car now," Lily said.

"You know him? Enough to trust him right now?"

"Yes."

Teagan would still have preferred to come get her herself. "You still want to come over? Or you want me to meet you somewhere?"

"Actually... Can you come over to my place instead?"

"Yeah, of course. I'll leave right now."

“Thanks,” Lily said on a relieved sigh. “I’ll fill you in on everything when you get there.”

“Okay, but call if anything feels off. Anything at all. Promise?”

“Yeah, promise.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too. See you in a bit.”

Teagan shrugged her coat on and drove to Lily’s place over in the Marina District. Road construction and detour traffic delayed her by ten minutes, and when she arrived at the townhouse complex, Lily’s little black car was already sitting out front at the end of her walkway. Her front porch light was on, and so was the one in her bedroom in the second-floor front window.

Teagan rang the bell and waited but there was no answer. She tried knocking. Then texted, thinking maybe Lily was in the shower.

Hey, I’m at the front door.

But after several minutes, there was still no response. It was cold out, and a light rain was starting to fall, so she decided to get the spare key and let herself in.

She went around to the side of the townhouse and through the wooden gate into the tiny backyard. Lily kept the key hidden in a faux rock set in the little garden off the back patio. Teagan picked it up, slid the top portion to the side, and took out the key in the slot before heading back around to the front again.

“Hello?” she called as she stepped inside, locking the door and taking off her boots on the mat in the entry. “Lil?”

Still nothing.

She jogged up the stairs to the lower landing, paused. She didn’t hear the shower running upstairs. “Lil?”

Frowning, she kept going to the second floor and stopped outside the master bedroom door. Knocked. “Lily, I’m here.”

She knocked again. “Hey, are you okay?”

When her cousin didn’t answer, she tried the doorknob. It was locked.

“Lily, I’m getting worried,” she called out in a louder voice. “Are you in there? Just answer me.”

She waited another ten seconds, then went to the hall closet and took out a coat hanger, anxiety buzzing in her gut. She straightened out the hook and stuck it into the hole in the lock, jimmied it around while turning the knob and pushing it in.

It snicked open. She shoved it wide and barged in—only to freeze in horror.

Lily lay sprawled facedown on the carpet beside her bed. Her head was turned toward the door. Eyes open, her lips blue.

“Lily!” She raced forward, knelt beside her cousin and cupped her face in her hands. “Lily, can you hear me? Come on, wake up.” She checked her carotid pulse. Felt only the tiniest flutter, and Lily’s chest wasn’t moving.

Swearing, she rolled Lily to her back, quickly checked her airway for a blockage and then began chest compressions with one hand as she whipped out her phone with the other and put it on speaker to call 911. The instant the operator answered, Teagan cut her off to list the address and explain what was going on. She kept up with the compressions all the while, frantic to keep Lily’s heart beating.

“Come on, Lil,” she choked out, her own heart hammering. Tears blurred her vision. This wasn’t happening. Couldn’t be.

But Lily wasn’t responding to anything. Her lips were turning purple now, the rest of her face an awful ashen gray, her half-closed eyes staring at nothing.

“Paramedics and the police have been dispatched,” the operator’s voice said through the phone.

Teagan didn’t answer, busy tipping Lily’s head back to give her a breath and then jumping back into the

compressions. Knowing her cousin was dying right in front of her and determined to stop it from happening. *No, no, no...*

Something fell out of Lily's right hand as her fingers relaxed. A small plastic bag. Tiny multicolored pills spilled out onto the carpet.

Teagan stared at them, ice trickling up her spine. She knew what they were instantly.

Rainbow fentanyl. A deadly opiate lethal in even the smallest doses.

Except Lily had never taken an illicit drug in her life.

This was a setup.

Her cousin had just been murdered. And Teagan knew it had been the men from the marina.

Chapter One

Another icy blast of wind gusted through the trees, almost stealing Decker's breath. He gritted his teeth to keep them from chattering. When he'd been told he had to attend this training course in Montana, he hadn't expected it to be this hardcore.

"Man, this is *fun*," Creed said next to him as they awaited their next instructions. They were part of the six people here from Crimson Point Security, all recent personal security expert hires. The bosses had sent them here to Rifle Creek Tactical right after New Year's for three days of team building and training. Even though they all came from either military or law enforcement background, as bodyguards they had to keep their skills sharp.

Decker eyed Creed, fighting not to shiver and failing miserably. He'd served most of his career in the Marine Corps as an MP and was no stranger to physical discomfort, but standing out here in the open in January, in Montana, soaked to the skin from the waist down after traversing a flooded stream...

That wasn't his idea of *fun*. But Creed was former SF, so that explained a lot. Those guys were a different breed.

"What? You're not having fun?" Creed asked him.

He grunted. They were on the final day of the three-day course, and every one of them had been packed from the time they got up at 0600 until they crashed an hour or two before midnight. For this most recent exercise he'd been the bodyguard, and Creed his protectee, while they simulated being on the run from attackers.

For two hours he'd been hauling Creed around everywhere while his new buddy had played the part of a middle-aged, out-of-shape CEO with a bad knee. He'd barely even been splashed during the trek through the water, while Decker was drenched. At least the bastard was shivering too.

"All right, lady and gents, listen up." Mason, their instructor, stopped in front of the group wearing cargo pants, a

plaid flannel shirt and no jacket. He was former Canadian SOF and seemed oblivious of the temperature. Probably born with antifreeze in his blood. “I know you’re cold and tired and wet, but so is your VIP protectee. You’ve managed to get him or her to this point safely. All you have to do now is get them into a vehicle and to the safe house two miles away.” He pointed behind him.

Decker gauged the distance to the vehicles lined up side by side on a rise, longing to get in one and crank the heat. They’d spent yesterday doing advanced tactical driving techniques and drills. Now *that* had been fun.

“Keys are in the ignition.” Mason reached down to absently pet his dog, Ricochet. The Aussie-shep mix wore a service dog vest emblazoned with the Rifle Creek Tactical logo. He went everywhere with Mason, following him like a shadow and attuned to his every command. Decker had rarely seen that kind of bond outside of military dogs and their handlers. “Get your VIPs secured at the safe house and report to HQ, then there’ll be hot showers and chow waiting for you after.”

Oh, God, yes. Decker could practically feel the hot water rushing over him. But the SUV’s heater would do just fine until then.

“Any questions?”

Everyone was too cold to ask anything, eager to get this done so they could get warm and fed, and they’d already been thoroughly briefed on what to do and what the expectations were first thing that morning.

Mason nodded. “All right. On three, two, one. Go.”

Decker immediately turned to Creed, who was grinning at him in spite of the bluish tinge around his lips, bent and levered him up over one shoulder. Christ, he was heavy. “How the hell much do you weigh?” he muttered, heaving upward. Guy was built like a damn linebacker, a couple inches shorter than Decker, but stockier.

“No clue. I’m just keepin’ it real for you, playing my role to the best of my limited acting abilities.” He hung draped over Decker’s shoulder like a near dead weight, making him seem even heavier.

Decker grunted and shifted his feet, leg and back muscles straining while he steadied himself, then turned toward the line of vehicles parked on a slight rise behind the main building. Dammit, he could smell the chow cooking in there. Something savory and spicy that had his stomach growling in protest.

He rushed for the vehicles lined up ahead, passing everyone except for one other guy carrying the lone female of their group.

“I can’t believe we’re getting paid for this,” Creed called out as Decker loped onward, enjoying himself thoroughly. Though considering the selection, training and missions he would have gone through during his SF career, Decker could see how he would think this was a good time by comparison.

And it further solidified he’d made the right decision in not wanting to go into SOF.

“Next time...I get to be...on top,” he said through panting breaths. The good news was, he wasn’t feeling the cold so much now.

Creed snorted. “If you think I’d ever bottom for you, think again.”

Decker was too busy sucking in air to shoot a clever comeback. He reached the top of the rise and bore left, heading for the far black SUV. Once there, he slid Creed off his shoulder and wrenched open the back passenger door, drawing his sidearm as he did to sweep the area for “threats” as they’d practiced. “Get in.”

Creed dutifully climbed in the back, making sure to act slow and clumsy. Decker sped it up by shoving him down onto the floorboards, putting extra muscle into the second shove because Creed’s shoulders made for a tight fit in the small space, and receiving a glare that was only partly pretend in reaction.

He shut the door and rushed around to the driver's side, cranked the heat and then took off down the slope toward "town," a cluster of wood and concrete buildings used for urban combat and hostage-rescue tactics on the property.

The maps they'd studied earlier had showed three routes to their destination. He took the left one through the forest, leaving the other two vehicles to pick a different one. The tall trees closed in on either side of him as the dirt road narrowed. He drove a little faster than he should, given the terrain, smirked whenever the SUV's tires hit a bump or hollow and a grunt came from the back as Creed bounced up and then hit the floor.

"Your VIP is gonna be bruised as shit and maybe concussed by the time you get to the safe house. No bonus for you," Creed said.

Decker ignored him and kept driving—until a quad suddenly burst from the trees fifty yards up ahead and swerved to race straight at them, the rider holding a rifle. "We got company. Hang on," he said, a surge of adrenaline flooding him. He took his foot off the gas and pushed the transmission into neutral, then hit the brake and cranked the wheel hard left.

The SUV swung around in a tight circle, kicking up mud and gravel. Another thud sounded as Creed hit the back of the front seats.

Grinning, Decker dropped the transmission back into drive and hit the accelerator once more, speeding away from the quad. Whoever was driving it raised their weapon. "Stay down," he commanded, now enjoying himself immensely. Best part of the course by far.

Seconds later, Simunition rounds smacked into the rear of the vehicle. Decker swerved left and right to avoid the spray, heading for a fork up ahead. "Sharp turn in a few seconds. Brace yourself."

"Yeah, little late for that shit," Creed muttered.

Decker barely took his foot off the gas as he made the turn. The SUV's back tires skidded slightly over the muddy surface.

He let up on the pedal momentarily and steered into the skid until it stabilized, then hit it again. “Another sharp left. Hang on. Stay down.” He swung onto the secondary route and sped down the hill. The quad appeared in his rearview moments later, but it was losing ground now, not fast enough to keep up.

Decker scanned the terrain ahead, then glanced in his rearview. The quad was way behind them, and the “town” was visible in front of them.

He didn’t slow down. Bumpier that way, and after the cushy morning Creed had been having, he deserved this. “Safe house is up ahead. Almost there.”

“Very reassuring.”

No other threats popped up. In less than two minutes, he made it to the designated safe house, pulled around back, and brought them to a hard stop with another satisfying thud and grunt from the back.

Decker jumped out, drew his sidearm, and scanned the area to make sure it was clear before opening the back door and grabbing Creed. “We need to hurry.”

“I got a bum knee, remember? And I’m shaken and seeing double after being chased and getting bashed around back there,” he added, deadpan. “You gotta be patient.”

Nuh-uh, there was a hot shower and chow waiting at the end of this. No messing around.

Decker bent and dragged him out, locked an arm around Creed’s waist and half-carried, half frog-marched him to the back door, weapon in his right hand. Keeping Creed behind him, he opened the door and swept the room, then pulled him inside and shut the door.

“Wait here.” He left his “shaken” VIP standing there while he went to sweep the rest of the house.

Three steps down the hallway, a cardboard target jumped out of a bedroom. He spun toward it and fired, hitting it center mass with two big red dots from the Simunition rounds, and kept going.

One more popped up in the back bedroom. He took care of it too, then quickly cleared the remaining rooms before coming back to get Creed, who was leaning a shoulder against the doorjamb, arms folded, eyebrows raised.

“We’re clear.” Decker grabbed him and hauled him farther inside as he radioed HQ. “VIP secure.”

“Copy that, Abrams,” a female voice replied. Tala, back at the office.

Decker faced Creed as he holstered his weapon, grinning. “Oh, yeah, hot shower and chow time, brother.” He held up a hand for a high-five.

Creed gave him a half-assed one, expression dry. “Next time—and I’m so hoping there’s a next time—I drive and you get to be the human pinball in the back.”

“Aw, sorry, there’s no time,” he said as the sound of the quad arriving reached them. The engine cut out. Booted footsteps hurried up the wooden steps outside, then the door opened. A man walked in, tugging off his helmet.

Tate Baldwin, one of the owners and a fellow former Marine, gave them a quick smile. “Nice moves back there. Just gonna check the targets.” He stepped past them into the hallway, glanced at the target there and then in the back bedroom. “Okay, you guys are good to go.”

Hell, yeah. “I get first shower,” he said to Creed, shoving past him to be the first one out the door.

“Screw you, jarhead,” Creed said, a gleam in his eye that Decker already recognized as competitive. They’d first met a few weeks ago when they were brand-new hires, but this training course had forced them to get to know each other a lot better in a hurry. “Last one to the truck walks back.”

They both bolted for the SUV, made it to the vehicle at the same time. Creed narrowed his eyes at him. “Rock, paper, scissors. Best outta three.”

“Nope. I still got the keys, so just get in before I change my mind and make you ride on the back of Tate’s quad.”

Creed got in.

Decker hadn't anticipated making a buddy this weekend, but he had. He also respected the hell out of Creed. He had a dry wit that was amusing as hell. And holy shit, could he operate. The way he'd performed in the shoot house and on the range this weekend was damn near awe-inspiring.

Not that he would ever admit any of that to Creed's face.

They were the first ones back to HQ. Tala was there to welcome them. She was a Paralympian biathlete, and a wicked shot with a rifle. With her dark hair and eyes, she reminded him a little of Teagan.

Shit. Stop thinking about her, idiot. She's gone. Get over it.

He'd tried, but he kept thinking about her anyway, way too much since their night together back in November. Their one and only night together, and he hadn't heard from her since, even though he'd tried reaching out twice.

It stung his ego because he'd thought they were frickin' amazing together. Not only that, he still had so many unanswered questions about her. Like who she was, who she worked for, and what kind of military or law enforcement background she had.

In the space of a few days, the woman had gone from lost and vulnerable the first time he'd met her, to saving his sister's and Warwick's lives by tracking and shooting the man who had hired her to bring Warwick in. No one did that without serious training.

"Welcome back. Here, go get warmed up," Tala said, handing them both towels and a small bag of toiletries. "Coffee's almost done brewing."

"Thanks."

With all the showers still unoccupied, there was no need to battle for first dibs. He and Creed emerged from the room within moments of each other, dressed in dry clothes.

Decker spied a line of fresh bruises forming across Creed's triceps. No doubt from trying to brace himself on the floor of

the SUV. “You know what? You’re right. This *was* fun.”

One side of Creed’s mouth kicked up, a glint in his gray eyes. “I get first dibs on chow.”

“Fuck you. You laid around like a sack of potatoes all day. I did all the work, so I need food more than you.”

They stared at each other a moment, then simultaneously broke into a run, racing for the chow hall where two long picnic tables were set up for them. Creed beat him there by half a step. They jostled for the tray sitting on top, nearly sending a stack of them crashing to the floor in the process.

“Just for that, I’m eating all the mashed potatoes,” Creed said, letting go of the tray to snatch up his own.

“You greedy bastard. You know they’re my favorite.”

“Are they?” Creed made a show of scooping up an obscene amount of them, stared pointedly at him as he released the small mountain onto his plate with a slap.

Gauntlet thrown.

“Boys, whatever you put on your plate you have to finish,” Tala called out, watching them from the other side of the room, amusement lacing her voice.

Decker grinned at Creed. “Yeah, good luck with that.”

Creed continued piling his plate high in defiance, looking straight at him as he ladled a generous portion of gravy over the top, then sat at the picnic table and proceeded to eat as the others all filed in.

About halfway through Creed’s mound of spuds, Decker could tell he was starting to lose steam. Decker and the others had all finished eating by then. Everyone was silently watching Creed struggle through the remainder of his meal.

Creed swallowed hard. Inhaled a deep breath as he confronted the amount of mashed potatoes and gravy still before him. Enough for three people at least.

“Twenty bucks says he pukes before he gets more than half of that down,” one guy said from down the table.

“I’ll take that bet,” Cassie, CPS’s first female bodyguard said. “But double or nothing.”

“You’re on.”

Everyone leaned forward to watch, and even the Rifle Creek Tactical crew gathered around.

“Come on, Creed, don’t be a pussy. Man up and get that down the hatch,” Mason said.

Decker raised his eyebrow at Creed. Creed held his gaze and defiantly shoved forkful after forkful into his mouth, until the small mountain of potatoes was gone. When the last bite had been swallowed, Creed looked more than a little queasy.

Cheers and applause broke out around the table.

Mason stepped forward to clap Creed on the back. “Good job. And now that you’re all fed and warm, guess what.”

A hint of alarm crept into Creed’s expression, and Decker was caught off guard too. They’d all thought the course was over.

Mason’s smile was sharp. “Another circuit on the O course, then one more run through the secondary driving course.” He lowered his voice to a murmur, looking into Creed’s eyes. “That’s the one with the extra windy turns and switchbacks. Have fun, brother.”

Laughter broke out as Creed closed his eyes, swallowing convulsively.

“You’ll work in the same pairs again,” Tate said as everyone stood, the third owner, Braxton, standing next to him. “Our staff will be positioned at different points along the route to grade your performance. Each mistake will cost you two points. Losing twenty or more is an automatic fail.”

Everyone filed toward the door. Creed was moving decidedly slower on the way. “*I’m* driving this time,” he said to Decker.

“Only if you can beat me to the truck.” Decker checked his phone before leaving the table and saw a message from his boss.

We've got an assignment for you and Morgan. Report to HQ at 0800 Monday morning.

He glanced over at Creed, who was looking at his own phone. They would have to leave immediately after the course finished to get back to the Oregon Coast tonight, rather than staying in the barracks here as originally planned. "Hey, you get a text from—"

"Yep." Creed tucked his phone away and shook his head, expression and tone wry. "Looks like you and I are gonna be stuck together for the foreseeable future."

Decker was actually looking forward to it now. "Last one to the vehicle's the human pinball," he said, and bolted through the door as Creed cursed and chased after him.

Chapter Two

“Enough is enough, Teagan. You’ve made your point, and you’ve already done your best. Come home.”

Teagan set her jaw at her mother’s commanding tone coming through her car’s hands-free device and kept driving. That tone and the deep disapproval behind it never failed to get her hackles up, and they’d been through this many times before. “I’m not coming home. Not until this is over,” she replied in Korean.

Her parents had hated her initial decision to join the military years ago. They’d wanted her to become a lawyer or a doctor. Instead they’d gotten an intelligence analyst, a job they didn’t understand and saw as a complete waste of her talents.

A taut silence filled the line as her mother digested her response. “This is insane. Just what are you trying to prove? You almost died last time you pursued this.”

It was true. She had almost died. Had almost been murdered, that is—twice. First when the guy on the boat had knifed her. The second when he’d tossed her overboard into the icy waters off the Oregon Coast.

She’d been lucky to survive. But she still wasn’t giving this up. If anything, she was even more determined to identify the attacker and bring him to justice. And not just for herself.

She was certain the same man who had tried to kill her was connected with Lily’s murder as well. That was why she’d snuck onto that boat in the first place. The men Lily had overheard talking had been working aboard it, and the man’s reaction to seeing Teagan on deck was telling, attacking her without any provocation. He was definitely trying to hide something.

She drew in a calming breath and pulled out to pass the slow-moving truck in front of her, speeding up to get past it before the dashed centerline changed to a double solid. This

highway was full of curves. Passing opportunities were limited, and traffic from Portland had been awful. It was a dark, dreary January day, the clouds steel gray and heavy with rain. She had to be down in Crimson Point within the next half an hour if she didn't want to be late.

She hated being late. And she didn't feel like going another round with her mother about this. "Mom, let's just drop it and change the subject. How's Dad?"

"No, I will not change the subject. You're my only child. Your father and I left everything we knew behind in Korea to come here when I got pregnant, because we wanted to give you a better life than we had. This is not the life we want for you, and not why we made all the sacrifices we did."

"But it's my life," she said firmly, unmoved, and tired of hearing that same line over and over again so many times over the years. "Not yours. I have the chance to do something about what happened to Lily and me. To see the people responsible brought to justice. I'm taking it. And I'm sorry that you don't approve, but I have to do this. I'm *going* to do this."

Her mother's sharp sigh was equal parts frustration and annoyance. "We're worried about you. Can't you understand that? Especially after what happened in October."

The genuine concern behind the words blunted the edge of Teagan's temper slightly. "I know. And I'm sorry for that too." She pulled into a passing lane to zip past a minivan. "Listen, I get that this is hard on you both. But I have backup this time." The DEA had asked her to assist them with their own investigation into the local smuggling problem here. With their help, she could finally bring Lily's killer to justice.

"What kind of—"

"I can't tell you. In fact, I can't tell you *anything* about what's going on, so maybe it's best that we not talk again until this is over." That would at least give her a break from repeating this same argument again for a while.

"Well, how long will that take?" her mom said in exasperation.

“I don’t know. Could be weeks. Could be months.” Longer maybe.

Another sigh, this one annoyed. “I hope you’ll at least keep in touch to let us know you’re all right.”

“I will if I can. Look, I’m running late. Give Dad my love and try not to worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

“Please be careful. Just promise me you’ll be extra careful and not take any crazy risks like you did before.”

“I promise.” It wasn’t a complete lie. She would at least have someone watching her back on this next mission. “Love you.”

A beat of silence passed. “I love you too.”

“Bye.” She ended the call and exhaled, struggling to set aside the emotional weight sitting on her chest. As always, this same conversation left her feeling completely raw and vulnerable and hyper-aware of her parents’ displeasure.

She focused on the road and centered herself, took a steadying breath and banished all the whispers of self-doubt crowding around the edges of her mind. Why did her parents’ approval still matter so damn much anyway? She was a grown-ass woman, not a kid.

And she’d meant what she’d said. Unless she kept pushing, no one else was going to step up and solve her cousin’s murder, which authorities were still treating as an accidental overdose. So it was up to her. She was going to see this thing through for better or worse. That was the least she could do for Lily.

The exit sign for Crimson Point appeared up ahead through the mist and rain. As soon as she rounded the bend in the highway, the ocean came into view at the bottom of the hill, an endless iron-gray line spreading out across the horizon as far as the eye could see. She took the exit and began the descent down the hill into town, a flood of memories hitting her.

She’d been found washed up on the beach just a few miles south of here, and in the nick of time. If Warwick hadn’t picked her up and rushed her to the hospital, she would have

died from exposure and blood loss. As it was, she'd woken disoriented and confused, not even remembering who she was or what she was doing there. There had only been little fragments of the struggle on the boat.

Seeing the man's silhouette. Him rushing toward her. The hot slice of the knife across her ribs. The moment of sheer terror when she'd been pitched over the side into the black ocean, and the shock of it plunging over her head, the cold stabbing her, driving the air from her lungs.

She blocked the images and thought instead of another, vastly different night here when she'd returned several weeks after all that. Of a tall, sexy and protective man undressing her. His big, powerful body pressing her down into the bed and making every inch of her light up with pleasure.

She shook that away too. It had been a one-night fling based on mutual attraction and a spontaneous decision. Nothing more. She didn't have space in her life for anything else.

At the bottom of the hill, she turned onto Front Street and headed north through the heart of Crimson Point's waterfront. All the little multicolored shops, restaurants, and businesses crowded both sides of the street with the white-capped breakers crashing onto the beach to the left. The area was practically empty of people today with the nasty weather, but she still spied a lineup inside Whale's Tale, the community's most popular café and bookshop, where everything on the menu was made from scratch each day.

She kept heading north, and through the gloom spotted the lighthouse perched on the point of the cliff north of town. She turned right and headed a few blocks up the hill to where Crimson Point Security occupied a historic brick building that had been the old offices of the local lumber company from before the turn of the twentieth century. On the outside it looked exactly like it would have when it had been built off lumber money in the 1890s. On the inside was a whole other matter. The owners had spent a lot of money to ensure the security and tech inside was state of the art.

Her newly appointed security detail was waiting inside. She was curious to find out who the DEA was paying to be her bodyguard.

The lot was almost full when she pulled in and parked in the far corner. While the mark of a true Pacific Northwesterner was ditching an umbrella unless it was pouring out, she wasn't a local and had gone to a lot of trouble styling her hair this morning. She grabbed the umbrella from inside the armrest console and jogged to the main entrance through the steady rain.

A security guard took her information and let her inside. He entered a code into the elevator, and she rode it alone to the top floor and stepped out into a sleek, modern space with big windows and glass doors lining the offices and other rooms on either side of the hallway. The original exposed brick walls gave it a bit of warmth, saving it from looking cold and industrial.

After announcing herself to the upstairs receptionist, she took a seat in the waiting room. It felt weird to be back here again. The last time she'd been trying to get her damaged phone repaired for clues about her identity. On the way out, she'd met—

“Miss Kim?” A blond woman strode down the hall wearing a tailored navy-blue pant suit, smiling at her. “I'm Kerrigan, head of HR.”

Teagan rose and shook with her. They hadn't met last time. “Nice to meet you.”

“You as well. Ryder and Callum are just finishing a meeting and will be with you shortly. Can I get you anything in the meantime? Coffee? Tea?”

“A green or herbal tea would be fantastic.”

“Coming right up. Make yourself comfortable, and I'll be right back.”

Teagan had just swallowed her first sip of steaming-hot red hibiscus tea with honey when two big men walked into the waiting area. Ryder Locke, former Marine and owner of CPS,

and Callum Falconer, his second-in-command and former Delta. She rose.

“Teagan, hi.” Ryder shook with her first, then Callum. “Your DEA contact will be meeting you once we’ve gone over everything here. If you’ll follow us, your security detail is waiting in the meeting room. They’ve already been briefed.”

“Great.” She followed Ryder down the hall, Callum a few steps behind her. After five seconds in their presence, it was obvious they were both former military even if she hadn’t known about their backgrounds. Their bearings, the way they moved, made that clear.

Ryder pushed open a door near the end of the hall, smiled at her. “After you.”

Teagan stepped inside—and stopped dead.

There were two men seated on the far side of the rectangular table set near the large picture windows overlooking the wind-whipped bay. And one of them was Decker Abrams.

Oh, shit, no. He was supposed to be away for some training thing. She’d checked with his sister, Marley, last night to find out whether she’d needed to prepare herself for the possibility of bumping into him here.

But he seemed just as surprised to see her, his hazel stare locked on her, big shoulders tensing slightly.

Ryder stepped past her, glanced from her to Decker and the other man she’d barely noticed, then back to her. “Everything okay?”

A beat of awkward silence passed before she could find her voice. “Yes.” She cleared her throat. “I’m just surprised.” Taken off guard, more like.

Ryder gestured for her to sit and took the seat at the head of the table, while Callum sat next to her. “We thought you would be more comfortable with Decker given the history between you,” Callum said.

Teagan wanted to laugh. Oh, they had history all right. And way more of it than anyone at CPS was aware of. She smiled politely. “Of course. Decker, good to see you.”

He nodded, his intent hazel stare doing all kinds of things to her insides. “You too.”

“And this is Creed Morgan,” Ryder said, indicating the other man, “the other half of your detail. He’s former SF, and we’re thrilled to have him as part of our team.”

Teagan exchanged a polite smile and nod with him. He was big too, maybe even bigger than Decker though not as tall, and also good-looking, but every ounce of her awareness was drawn inexorably back to Decker. He was dressed in a pewter-colored button-down that hugged the muscular contours of his chest and shoulders to perfection, his brown hair cut short.

Under the force of that stare, a wave of heat rolled through her even as the awkwardness lingered. She knew every plane of that hard body intimately. Had run her hands and tongue all over it. And he knew every inch of hers from their single night together back in November.

Only one night, but it had left an indelible mark on her. He had. And oh, man, now they were going to be in each other’s space—intimate space—for the foreseeable future on this job.

But he wasn’t saying anything about their past, so she sure as hell wasn’t going to bring it up. They were both professionals. They could both deal and get through this without things getting awkward.

Besides, as soon as this job with the DEA was done, she would be leaving Crimson Point and out of Decker’s life for good.

She could pretend they were little more than strangers for a few days. No problem.

Chapter Three

Watery gray light streamed through the large windows of the meeting room behind him, rain tapping against the glass in the background as the next meeting got underway. Decker's strict discipline was the only thing preventing him from staring at Teagan like an idiot.

It was after one now. He'd had several hours to digest all of it, and he still couldn't believe this was happening. Or that Ryder and Callum hadn't given him a heads-up first, since they were aware that he and Teagan knew each other.

Just not how well they did.

He was normally good at compartmentalizing, but he kept getting distracted, his gaze pulled to her way too often. She was stunning, her long black hair pulled up into a knot at the back of her head, a little bit of makeup accentuating her dark eyes and a sheer pink gloss that kept dragging his gaze back to her mouth. Her insanely sexy mouth he'd tasted and felt all over him.

He shouldn't be doing this. Not staring, definitely not thinking about their night together. Absolutely should have pulled Ryder aside and disclosed the nature of their history together as soon as she'd walked into that meeting room this morning. He shouldn't be on her security detail at all when he knew the way her naked body felt beneath him, the sound she made when he hit just the right spot with his fingers and tongue.

Seeing her again so unexpectedly had thrown him. It also proved that he wasn't over her. His attraction to her was stronger than ever, yet she was so cool and collected, seemed completely unaffected by him. Telling him their night had meant a lot more to him than it had to her.

It was a swift kick to his ego.

"How's your sister doing?" she asked during a lull.

He looked up at her across the table, steeling himself for the instant he met that dark brown gaze. This contract was only going to be for a few days. If she could play things this cool, pretend they barely knew each other, so could he. “She’s good.”

“I talked to her briefly last night but didn’t get a chance to chat. She said you were at a training thing.”

“I was. Creed and I drove back last night for this assignment.”

“Ah. She and Warwick got married?”

“Just before New Year’s.” He understood what she was doing. Fishing for information while making it seem like they hadn’t been in contact since they’d first met in October. But he wasn’t giving her anything she didn’t ask directly, and maybe not even then if he didn’t want to disclose it. One, he was incredibly protective of his family and personal life. Two, he was here to do a job, not to be friendly and make conversation.

And three, the way she’d ghosted him and had reacted to him today made it clear that she was over him and prepared to treat him as just an acquaintance from now on.

Still, Marley and Warwick were going to flip when they eventually found out about him being assigned to protect Teagan. Not that he would tell his sister about any of this until after it was all over.

“Okay,” said Clive, the older DEA agent running the meeting, “as I said before, we have evidence suggesting that a group of locals are running a significant drug operation through a bar several miles south of Crimson Point, and it’s a good bet they’re involved with the local smuggling operations that have been on the rise here. Initial surveillance identified three men in particular we’re interested in.” He showed their pictures on the large screen mounted on the wall. “This crew is cagey and wary of outsiders. We need eyes and ears inside the back office to confirm our findings so we can get a warrant. Sending Teagan in to plant the bug will be less suspicious because she appears non-threatening, and it will also allow us a chance to determine if anyone inside recognizes her.”

“Why would someone recognize her?” Decker asked.

“Because the people involved in this operation might include or at least know who attacked me on the boat back in October,” she said.

He frowned, bit back his response at the last second as he put more of the puzzle pieces together. The scar across her right ribs. From a blade, and too big to be a surgical incision. He’d asked her about it the night they’d been together, and she’d distracted him to get him to drop it, had refused to tell him anything about her or her past. But holy shit, he’d had no idea she’d been linked to any of this, only that Warwick had found her injured and washed up on the beach one morning. “What happened?”

“I was doing recon on a vessel called the *Destiny*. Whoever was aboard wasn’t happy. We fought. He sliced me through my wetsuit and dumped me overboard. It was dark, and it happened so fast I didn’t get a good look at his face. I woke up later in the hospital without a clue who I was or what I was doing there.”

He tensed inside, an icy wave of anger mixing with a hot flood of protectiveness. When he’d first seen her at the hotel, she’d been banged up and hurting. He’d assumed she’d been on the run from an abusive partner. He’d had no idea how dangerous the situation truly was.

“Where do you want me to plant it?” she asked Clive, and it was suddenly clear to Decker why the DEA was using her for this job.

“Wherever you think they won’t spot it easily. We’re going to need at least a couple days to monitor what’s being said.” He nodded at Decker and Creed. “One of you will go ahead and watch outside to record who comes and goes. The other will accompany Teagan inside, observe the patrons’ reactions to her, and provide backup if necessary.”

“Do you know if there are any weapons inside?” Decker asked, studying the floor plan and images of the interior spread out on the table.

“No, but count on it. Pistols, rifles, and blades. Grenades or other explosives are also possible.”

Great. And they were sending Teagan in there.

“What kind of security do they have?” Creed asked.

“They run a loyal crew. Two bouncers posted near the doors. A few cameras inside and out. It’s the one in the back office that counts. It’s mounted in the far corner by the ceiling.” Clive tapped the spot on the picture of the office onscreen. “Teagan, if we can’t hack it before the op, you’ll have to disable it when you go in.”

“Okay.”

“They routinely have lookouts posted around the parking lot or in the immediate vicinity. We’ve had reports of bags being smuggled in and out, but so far we don’t have enough evidence to act on it.”

Decker studied her a moment while her attention was on the same picture he’d just been looking at, bursting with even more questions about her. He’d held her naked body under his, had been inside her, yet she was still a complete enigma. He was struggling to put all the pieces together to fill in the blanks.

He’d realized she had training after the day she’d saved Marley and Warwick by shooting the man who had initially hired her to bring in Warwick. But she’d never said what kind or where she’d been trained and refused to give him any details. And she was taking all this in stride with no visible signs of concern at all.

All this time, he’d assumed she must be FBI. But maybe she was actually DEA, since they had brought her in for this job. Either way, he didn’t understand the need to keep him and Creed in the dark about her background at this point.

He tore his gaze from her, noticed Creed looking at him closely.

Decker looked away, getting the unsettling feeling that Creed had picked up on the underlying tension between him and Teagan. Their time together in Rifle Creek had taught him

a lot about his new partner. Creed was a smart son of a bitch, and way more perceptive than most. Decker had to be extra careful not to give anything away that might make Creed suspicious about him and Teagan. This was his first job with the company. He didn't want anything to tarnish his reputation.

“Any other questions for now?” the agent asked.

Decker and Creed both shook their heads, and Teagan didn't say anything.

“All right, let me see what our team wants to do next, and I'll be back in a few minutes,” he said to Teagan.

As the door shut behind him, leaving just Decker, Teagan, and Creed in the room, a slight tension built in the vacuum of silence. They knew all they were going to know about the plan for the time being. Now Decker just wanted to know more about Teagan. And the things he wanted to know most he couldn't ask about in front of Creed without giving himself away.

“Are you DEA?” he asked her.

She shook her head, took a sip of her now cold tea. “I'm a contract agent, so I work with whoever hires me.”

“What branch did you serve in originally?”

“Naval intelligence.”

That explained where she'd learned her skills. “Did the DEA approach you about taking this contract?”

“Yes.” She lifted a shoulder. “It's good money.”

He doubted that. And even now that he knew she had a strong personal motivation to be involved with this investigation, he knew in his bones that there was way more going on here than he was privy to. “Is it about more than IDing and bringing down the guy who attacked you?”

She met his gaze, the steely determination in her eyes resonating deep inside him. “Yes.”

Before he could say anything else, another DEA agent stepped back in. “Clive’s going to contact you once you’re at the safe house,” he said to Teagan, then turned his attention to Decker and Creed. “That’s all for now. I need to brief Teagan on a few more things, then you can escort her to the safe house.”

Decker got up, some intrinsic part of him hating to be separated from her now that he knew part of what was going on and had been assigned to protect her. But he stepped outside and walked to the waiting area with Creed. The upcoming op seemed simple enough. So simple that two highly trained bodyguards seemed like overkill. Not that he was going to say that here.

Sitting in a comfy chair to wait for Teagan to finish the briefing, he glanced over to find Creed watching him steadily from the next chair. “What?”

“Nothing.” He looked away, picked up a magazine and started flipping through it.

Yeah, he was pretty sure Creed already suspected that something was up between him and Teagan. They weren’t really friends yet. Decker hoped he could trust him not to say anything to management about it.

Ryder Locke appeared in the doorway, raised his eyebrows as he dragged a hand down his trimmed black goatee. “You guys good to go?”

Decker nodded, all business and ready to get going on this. “We’re ready.”

A steady rain drummed on the roof of the safe house the DEA had set Teagan up in. Gusts of wind moaned through the trees outside her bedroom window as another winter storm battered the coast. Wasn’t all that different from when she’d first come here back in October.

She rolled onto her side in the comfy bed and closed her eyes, all snuggled up beneath the warm flannel sheets and thick duvet. Seconds later, she was transported back in time to

that night she'd boarded the *Destiny*. To the exact moment when she'd known she'd been spotted.

"Hey, bitch—what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Her heart shot into her throat at the man's voice coming from the shadows, full of menace. A silhouette detached itself from the wheelhouse and stalked toward her.

She backed up a step, cataloguing everything about him.

Average height and build. The lack of light and angle he came at her from made it impossible to see his face.

The deck of the boat pitched as it hit a trough in the waves. She stumbled back a step, came up hard against the metal railing.

"I said, what the fuck are you doing here?" he snapped, coming closer.

There was nowhere to go except through him as he advanced on her. She braced for the coming fight.

A second later, he lunged for her.

Too late, she saw the blade come up in his fist. She whirled to the side as it came down. Sucked in a breath as it sliced a fiery path across her ribs.

She doubled over, pressing a hand against her side to stem the bleeding, trying to block the pain and terror.

Fight, Teagan. Stand up and fight, or you're going to die.

She straightened. Spun around to deliver a side kick, but he was already on her.

He hoisted her off her feet and dragged her toward the railing. "Have a nice swim, bitch."

He flung her overboard.

Her heart stopped, terror crashing over her in the endless moment between being airborne and hitting the water. The shock of the impact paralyzed her. She plunged under, the icy cold stabbing her like a thousand knives. Freezing her muscles. Locking her lungs.

She fought to kick and claw her way to the surface. Dragged in a ragged, desperate breath of air. A wave slammed over her head. Pushing her down, down into the darkness. Then...nothing.

Nothing until the nurses were talking to her in the emergency room.

She opened her eyes, took a slow, shaky breath to calm her racing heart. She had always had a healthy respect for the ocean. Loved looking at it, the sound of it, but didn't like being in deep water, even though she was a decent swimmer.

It was a miracle she hadn't died that night. That she'd somehow survived the water and made it to shore, pulled along with the prevailing winds and currents. But if not for Warwick finding her in time...

Slowly her pulse returned to normal. The sound of the rain was soothing. More soothing yet was knowing that Decker and Creed were both outside, watching the house.

A selfish, lonely part of her wished Decker was here with her right now, lying in bed next to her, her cheek resting on his chest. She'd never known a man like him. From the first moment they'd seen each other at the hotel in October, he'd displayed a sincere concern and protectiveness toward her. Even though she'd been a stranger.

It made her a little weak inside to think about that. And their night together...

No, she wouldn't forget that anytime soon either.

She hadn't planned it ahead of time. But she hadn't been able to stop thinking about him and when she'd found out he was at that wedding, she'd made the snap decision to stop by to see if he was still there. And oh my God, the sight of him in that suit, the tailored jacket hugging his muscular frame to perfection...

It was totally out of character for her to take a guy home, let alone for a one-night stand, but she had zero regrets, even now. And she still couldn't stop thinking about him.

Not that anything more was going to happen between them. Didn't matter if their chemistry still ran hot as ever. His job was to guard her, and she didn't dare give in to her weakness for him a second time.

She had a mission to complete. Couldn't afford distractions.

The minutes kept ticking by as she lay there, thinking. It was well after midnight now, and it was obvious her brain wasn't going to let her sleep anytime soon.

She sat up and reached for her laptop to review the latest intel she'd compiled before driving down here. Any sightings of the *Destiny* along this part of the coast over the past month.

There had only been a few. Not enough for her to discern a clear pattern that would give her a good idea of where to look next. She needed to find it, get aboard to search it for evidence. The DEA wasn't helping her with that so far, and she wasn't willing to wait for them to get around to it.

The *Destiny* was one of eight boats owned by an LLC operating throughout the Oregon Coast region. Since Lily was killed, Teagan had managed to find intel on a few of the crew members assigned to her, but none of them stood out as matching her attacker, and the seasonal turnover rate was high.

She pulled up the spreadsheets she had made on the company's social media accounts and those of the known crew members. Warwick's local friend Ivy was some sort of tech whiz and had been assisting her a bit, sending her some recent financial records for the men Teagan had flagged.

One person had a large amount deposited into his bank account three weeks ago. It stuck out enough to be suspicious. The kind of money one could expect for running drugs.

She opened her emails next, pulse jumping when she saw a new one from Ivy, and opened it. But as soon as she read the first line, her heart sank.

The deposit is from a small inheritance from his grandfather who died recently. I've checked it all out, and it's legit. If you need anything else, let me know.

Teagan responded with a thank you and closed her laptop, stemming the disappointment seeping in. This was merely a setback. Every lead she eliminated narrowed down the field of suspects. All she needed was one good lead to point her in the right direction.

She wasn't stopping. Not until she found Lily's killer and saw him brought to justice.

Chapter Four

Teagan took in the bar as she pulled into the parking lot. The Pirate Den looked even shadier in person than it had in the surveillance video they'd studied leading up to this op, the cedar shingles weathered and worn, skulls and crossbones printed on signs and stickers covering the sides. It was dark out, already just before ten, so the neon signs were on around the building and the lot was mostly full. A mix of raised pickups with gun racks in their back windows and expensive luxury cars.

She chose a parking spot on the south side of the gravel lot, turned off the ignition and sat there while the rain tapped on the roof and hood as she texted her DEA handler and bodyguards.

I'm here.

Little dots appeared as someone typed a response. *I see you,* Creed answered. *Decker's already inside. Owner's in there too. I'll wait thirty seconds after you go in before moving.*

Damn, it was reassuring to know that Creed had eyes on her right now and Decker would be in there watching over her. Literally having her back, all his innate protectiveness focused on her.

This is not the time for tingles, Teagan, she told herself sternly.

She glanced up, scanned the lot again but didn't see anyone sitting in one of the vehicles, and Creed would be moving into position across and down the street to wait and watch out of view. Deleting the message, she tucked her phone into her coat pocket and exited the car, tugging her hood up to keep her hair dry on the dash to the door.

One of the bouncers she and the others had been briefed on opened it for her. "Thanks. Man, it's pouring out."

He didn't say anything, just looked her up and down with a frown that said she didn't belong here and let her inside.

Teagan pulled her hood down, glanced around for a moment to get her bearings. Amongst the rough-looking men seated at the small tables, she spotted Decker in the far corner instantly. She forced her gaze to skip past him and keep going, a bit alarmed by the way her pulse jumped, even as a sense of security wrapped around her. And even without looking his way, she was intensely aware of his presence in the room.

She sauntered to the L-shaped bar off to the right in the back. Football highlights were playing on the TVs set around the bar. There was only one other woman in here, sitting on the far left with a man at least twenty years older than her.

Teagan could feel the eyes on her as she walked up to the bar, warmed inside that one pair was Decker's, and smiled at the stone-faced bartender who looked at her as he dried a glass with a rag. Hopefully a clean one, but she wouldn't bet on it in a place like this. "I'll have a pint of whatever you've got on tap, please."

"Sure." He turned away and grabbed a glass from the rack behind him and proceeded to fill it.

A sharp clack sounded in the background as someone broke the racked balls on the pool table. She kept her back straight, didn't look around again, using her peripheral vision to check out the hallway to the bathrooms and office. She hadn't seen the other bouncer yet, or the owner.

The bartender set her beer in front of her.

"Thanks." She sipped her drink, barely kept from making a face at the taste of warm beer as she glanced around again once, pretending she was waiting for someone. The owner still wasn't out here and although she was receiving a certain amount of male attention, she didn't think anyone was openly staring, didn't pick up on a hostile vibe from anyone, and none of the strangers in here triggered a sense of recognition.

But the men the DEA were interested in targeting were known to be wary, potentially dangerous... And one of them

might have killed Lily and tried to kill *her*. She had to stay focused and keep her game face on, appear unthreatening while not drawing enough attention that many people here would remember her face.

A few minutes passed. No one else came in, and no one left. Decker remained at a table in the far corner, pretending to nurse his bottle of beer and watch the sports highlights. Still no sign of the owner or other bouncer, so presumably they were in the back office.

She swallowed another few sips of beer, prepared to settle in and wait. If necessary, they'd planned for Creed to come in and cause some kind of a diversion to draw the owner away from the office and allow her to get to work.

Just as she thought it, the owner suddenly appeared, walking through the bar with the other bouncer to talk to the one at the door. A few moments later, they all stepped outside together.

Her heart rate kicked up a notch. *Go time.*

She pulled her phone out and glanced at it, pretending she'd received a message. "Oh, damn."

The bartender looked over at her with a bored expression. "Problem?"

"No, it's just... I was supposed to meet someone and... Well, I guess I got stood up." She gave an embarrassed smile and pulled out some cash to pay for her drink. "Keep the change. Is the bathroom just down the hall?"

"Yep." He tucked the bill into his jeans pocket and turned away to clean up something.

She slid off the stool, didn't so much as glance in Decker's direction but knew he was tracking her every move as she headed down the hallway toward the bathroom, the feel of his gaze like a low-level current of electricity sliding across her skin.

The office was at the far end. The door was closed, and there were no cameras in the hallway that she could see. She

had to be fast, might only have seconds before the owner came back inside or someone came into the hallway.

With a quick glance over her shoulder to ensure she was still alone, she pulled her gloves on and slid the lock pick tool from her jeans pocket, quickly inserting it into the doorknob. It gave almost instantly with a quiet click.

She slipped inside, shut the door, and did a quick scan. There was no camera mounted near the ceiling. The DEA had said that was a possibility because the owner had become increasingly paranoid and suspicious about being watched lately so it made sense that he'd moved it.

She looked around to find its new hiding spot. She didn't find it, but even with everything she'd been briefed on, the number of weapons in here was still a surprise. One entire wall displayed a mounted collection of military blades, a shotgun, and ammo. And she had no doubt that the pistol lying so casually on the desk was loaded—and that the owner and bouncers were carrying right now.

There was no more time to hunt for the camera because she wouldn't have long in here. The tech team would just have to hack and disable it remotely.

Now where to hide the bug...

Stacks of files and papers littered the desk beside the computer. Speakers and other electronics filled a nearby cabinet. More ammo and another pistol sat on one of the shelves.

Her gaze landed on a small statue of a naked woman sitting on a shelf across the room. The big-breasted blonde was lying on her back in a provocative pose, giving whoever was in the room a come-hither look.

So Teagan went hither.

It seemed so incredibly appropriate—and satisfying—to nail this son of a bitch by sticking the thin electronic bug on the ass of this statue. But no sooner had she put it in place and pulled out her phone to message Clive to activate it than her phone buzzed in her hand.

A message from Decker.

Incoming. The owner and one of the bouncers. Get out of there.

“Shit,” she whispered, shoving her phone into her back pocket and searching for the best place to hide. The closet was small and jammed with crap. That left her no option but to go out the window.

Moving fast, she climbed up on the edge of the desk and slid the blind aside to access the lock on the window. She could hear the men’s voices now, coming ever closer.

Her heart raced as she forced the window open and glanced down into an overgrown shrub. She shoved the window wide enough to squeeze through, got her foot caught up on the sill for a moment before she could yank her other leg out and drop into the shrub.

The instant she found her footing, she reached back up to slide the window shut, cringing a little at the tiny noise it made right as she heard the office door open. She slid quickly into the shadows near the edge of the building and waited with her back pressed hard to the rough cedar shingles, listening while the rain dripped from the clogged eaves above her.

Her phone buzzed again in her back pocket. She ignored it, all her attention on the window. Another alert from Decker wasn’t going to help her now, and she couldn’t answer anyway without the light from her screen giving away her position to anyone watching. If there was a new problem, she would find out firsthand in the next few seconds.

The voices got clearer. Just on the other side of the window now.

It slid open. She shrank back hard into the wall and stared up and to the side, holding her breath.

The owner stuck his head out. Looked right past her. “The fuck? I swear I heard something.”

“Want me to check it out?”

The owner kept looking around, now scanning the back of the property while Teagan's heart thudded against her ribs. "Yeah. Hurry." He disappeared inside and shut the window again.

Shit.

Teagan made her break for her vehicle, her shoes crunching lightly over the gravel. She couldn't risk going to the parking lot from here. It would look suspicious if anyone spotted her coming from this direction.

A wire mesh fence marked the far end of the property. Beyond it was a vacant lot overgrown with grass. She glanced behind her once to make sure she hadn't been spotted, grabbed the fence up high and clambered over to drop down into the grass on the other side. She cut left and skirted the far side of the fence line, all the way back around the bar to where the gravel parking lot began.

Even Creed wouldn't be able to see her, waiting in position out of view down the road. Decker was still inside, probably wondering what was happening, but she couldn't stop to message him right now. It would have to wait until she was in her vehicle and heading back to Crimson Point.

That had been close, but the job was done. She was outta here.

Seated at a table near the window, Jayden glanced toward the hallway again, every muscle in his body tight. Where the hell was she?

He was still trying to overcome the sickening sense of shock. He'd done a double take when she'd first walked in, then immediately looked away. But it was definitely her. He would never forget *her*.

Had she recognized him? What the hell was she doing here?

All this time, he'd assumed she was dead. Not only was she alive, she was back in town, maybe even talking to people. Trying to find out who he was.

He ran a hand over his mouth, ordering himself to calm down. There was no way she could have recognized him. Right? It had been way too dark that night on the boat. He hadn't been wearing a mask, but she couldn't have gotten a good look at his face anyway. At least not a good enough one to be able to ID him to the cops. If she had, he'd have been locked up by now.

But what if she did? What if she knows?

Christ. He had too much riding on this. Too much of his life at stake to get caught now. His stupid bitch ex was still trying to take his kids from him. He needed the money desperately, but one brush with law enforcement and the courts would take away his custodial rights, and then he'd never see his girls.

“You want another?”

He looked up at the server, startled. “Nah, I'm good.”

“That'll be nineteen-seventy,” she said in an uninterested tone.

He pulled out a twenty and a one. “Here.”

Her expression soured. “Gee, thanks.” She stormed off, blocking his view for several moments as someone exited through the doors.

He glanced toward the bathrooms. No way the woman was still in there. Not for this long. Shit, had she just walked out and he'd missed her?

He strode to the bar. “The woman who was just here. The hot one. Was she with someone?”

The guy didn't even look at him. “Nope. Got stood up.”

“Really? Thanks.” He headed for the door, mind working fast. She could have recognized him and left.

He needed to follow her. See where she went.

Paranoia took hold as he stepped outside, his eyes darting all around the parking lot. He couldn't believe she'd survived. It had been cold that night, the water temperature chilling. He

knew he'd cut her. And they'd been far enough out that she shouldn't have been able to make it back to shore. Not in those conditions.

She would have reported what happened to the police. Shit, what if this was all a setup and the cops were already onto him? They might already have him under surveillance, had dangled her in front of him to see what he'd do.

Fuck it. He couldn't just leave this alone.

His truck was parked near the doors. He jumped in, turned the key, and pulled out of his spot. With one hand, he reached into the center console and grabbed the little plastic bag he kept inside. He popped three pills and swallowed them dry, grimacing at the bitter taste on his tongue. But fuck it, he was on edge and needed a fix to get him through this. Needed to figure out what the hell to do.

His truck's headlights caught on a dark-haired woman as she got into her car at the far end of the lot. His insides clenched when he got a glimpse of her face.

It's her.

And best he could tell, she was still alone.

He followed her out of the lot. Hung back a safe distance and kept her in his sights as she got on the highway and headed north toward Crimson Point. He didn't see anyone else tailing them. He was starting to think she really was alone.

That was good. Because he needed to make her go away once and for all this time.

This stretch of highway was dark. Full of curves, poor sight lines. Double-solid centerline, no passing lanes. Nearly empty this time of night.

Jayden fixed on the red glow of her taillights and picked up speed, the magic drugs already swirling through his veins. Pulse thudding. A sense of triumph and euphoria engulfing him in a haze.

Get her.

The instant her taillights disappeared around the next bend, he pressed his foot down on the accelerator. Ready to ram her off the rain-slick road.

Right through the guardrail to plummet down to the base of the cliff below, where she could never trouble him again.

Chapter Five

Decker resisted the urge to turn around and look toward the hallway behind him. Teagan had gone down there almost six minutes ago now and counting. Plenty of time for her to plant the bug and come back out.

The owner and bouncer walked back through the front doors.

He texted her immediately to warn her. Watched the two men continue down the hall, heading straight for her.

Shit.

He stood and started for the hallway, ready to draw his weapon and intervene at any moment. Just as he turned the corner, he saw them enter the office, but there was no sign of Teagan, and she hadn't messaged him. He stopped there in the middle of the hallway facing the office, body tensing, ready to spring into action at the first sign of trouble on the other side of that door.

But there was no shouting. No cry of alarm or scream for help. Not even raised voices. Meaning Teagan wasn't in there.

So where the hell was she?

He knocked on the ladies' room door, thinking she might have darted in there. "Sarah?" he called, using her fake name. "You in there?" When she didn't answer, he pushed the door open and walked in. Both stalls were empty, the window was barred shut, and she was nowhere to be found.

He checked the men's room next. She wasn't there either. And that left only one other place she could be.

Trapped in the office and hiding somewhere.

He texted her one last time, gearing up to bust in the door and rescue her if necessary. He would check outside quickly just in case, but if she wasn't there, he was going to bust down

the office door and take down whoever was inside to get her out.

She didn't reply.

He spun around and strode past the bar to the doors to look around outside. Just as he reached for the door handle, his phone rang. It was Creed. "You got eyes on her?" he said, quiet enough that no one else would be able to overhear.

"She just left."

He went rigid. "What?"

"She literally just turned out of the lot and went the other way behind me."

"What the *hell*—"

"She was in a hurry. A couple other vehicles left right after her. Neither of them were speeding or seemed like they were trying to chase her, but I'm going after her."

Decker opened his mouth to reply, stopped when a sharp beep indicated a new message. He pulled the phone from his ear to look at it. It was from Teagan.

I'm on the highway headed back to Crimson Point.

"She's heading back to CP," he muttered to Creed, shoving through the door and stalking outside into the rain. Jesus *Christ*. "I'll go after her. You take the alternate route and meet us at the house."

"You sure?"

"Yes." He disconnected and called Teagan as he ran for the SUV he was using, annoyance and disbelief lashing through him.

She didn't answer.

He slid behind the wheel, fuming. This was unreal. How the hell had she gotten out of there without Creed seeing her? And why the hell hadn't she told either of them?

Decker shook his head and fired up the engine, reining in the rush of anger. She'd been cagey with him from the

moment they'd met, right up until the night they'd slept together. Even now that he'd been assigned to protect her, nothing had changed. He'd almost gone full tactical and taken on two armed men alone to get her out of there.

She'd just ghosted him for the second time, taking off without a word when he and Creed were sitting here like clueless fucking idiots. How the hell was he supposed to protect her if she didn't stick to the plan?

He dialed her again as he drove, reining in his temper. Not only had she put herself in danger by taking off without anyone knowing, she'd also just made them look completely inept and useless. Not a good look for either of them on their first assignment.

She didn't pick up.

He tore up the road in the direction she and Creed had gone, ordering himself to calm down. The good news was she was okay, and no one appeared to be after her.

Unwilling to let this go, he called her again. The ringing sound filled the vehicle as he sped for the highway. He couldn't see her, but he couldn't be more than a few miles behind her. He should be able to catch up in a few minutes.

This time she actually answered. "Hey." Her voice was casual. Way too casual considering what she'd just pulled.

"Where are you?" His tone was clipped. Hard. He was done with even trying to be polite at this point. She had seriously pissed him off. This was his first assignment. Ryder and Callum weren't going to be happy when they found out she'd ditched him and Creed without either of them having a clue.

"I already told you—"

"No. Where *exactly*. What mile marker." He passed a minivan and then a pickup, racing to catch up to her. He didn't know whether someone was tailing her.

"One-eighteen."

"Are you being followed?"

“No.”

“I’m headed your way.”

“There’s nowhere to stop along here.”

Wasn’t that convenient for her. “Creed’s going a different route to the safe house. Do *not* approach it until he gives you the all clear. Understood?” Oh, the other things he wanted to say right now and couldn’t.

A beat of silence passed. “Yeah, got it.” Her tone was a little testy.

The wipers flashed back and forth across the windshield to clear the rain away as he merged onto the coastal highway and sped north. Teagan was about three miles ahead of him already. “What happened?” he demanded.

“I was still in the office when you messaged me, so I had to improvise.”

“Improvise how?”

“I climbed out the window.”

Just imagining it gave him palpitations. How the hell had she managed to squeeze through that tiny thing in time without anyone noticing? “Did anyone see you climb out?” The brush and clutter at the back would have prevented Creed from seeing her in his position.

“I don’t think so. The owner poked his head out to look for a second, but he didn’t see me hiding there. That’s why I didn’t stick around or take the time to explain myself.” There was a definite defensive edge to her voice now.

He brushed it aside. “Did you plant the bug?”

“Yeah, of course.” She sounded almost insulted that he would question it.

“Okay, good.” This had turned into a bit of a shit show, but she was okay and had planted the bug. Mission accomplished. Though he and Creed weren’t going to come out of this looking too good. And he just knew deep down in his gut that there was still way more going on beneath the surface here

than he had been made aware of. By both the DEA and Teagan. It was odd enough that the DEA had hired them to protect a contract agent, and that they'd used her for something like this.

"I didn't mean to cause you any trouble," she said.

The admission caught him a little off guard. She wasn't the type to offer an apology, so he guessed this was the closest he was gonna get. "We'll talk at the safe house." No way he was letting this go, and by then he should be calm enough to discuss it. He and Creed both needed to make it *crystal* clear that while they were tasked with her safety, she had to follow the plan they set.

He shook his head. To him it all came down to trust, and it was obvious now that neither of them really trusted the other. He desperately wanted to know what she was keeping from him. It rankled that she still didn't trust him even now, and that this whole operation had put her in more danger. God knew she'd been through way too much shit already. He didn't want anything else to happen to her.

"I'm about a mile or two behind you now," he said, driving much faster than he normally would in these conditions. He wanted to catch up to her and escort her the rest of the way back. At least do something to partly salvage this mess.

"Okay. I'd slow down but there's some asshole right behind me with his high beams on, and there's nowhere to pull over."

"Is he tailing you?"

"Tailgating me."

Red flag. Shit. "There's an exit about a mile north of you. Take it and see if he follows," he ordered.

"I don't think it's—oh, shit!"

His whole body went taut as her sharp cry rent the silence. A loud bang came a split second later. Then the squealing of tires.

"Teagan!" He floored it, racing to her as fast as he could.

Another bang. Then a heavy thud.

“Teagan!”

There was no answer.

Chapter Six

Teagan sat there frozen for several long moments, willing her heart to climb back down her throat. Reeling from both the impact of whatever she'd hit and the airbag that had just punched her in the face and knocked her hands off the wheel. Her fingers were now locked on the door handle and the center console, digging in like claws.

The truck that had rammed her was long gone. Or at least she hoped it was.

She let go, shoved at the deployed airbag as it started to deflate, and looked around her. Her stomach gave a sickening lurch at what she saw through the sheet of rain past the buckled hood.

Through the cracked windshield, she could see the crumpled guardrail she'd plowed into...and the terrifying empty blackness on the other side that marked the edge of the cliff.

Her fingers fumbled to press the engine button, but she realized it had already shut off. Jesus, what the hell had that asshole been thinking, blinding her with his high beams and then tailgating her around such a blind curve?

She pulled in a shaky breath, took stock of what was going on in her body. There was no pain, just a bit of soreness in her face and across her chest and collarbone where the seatbelt had dug into her. But there was also the jarring reality that someone had just run her off the road and almost sent her plunging headfirst over the side of a fucking cliff seconds ago.

Her phone. Where was it? She'd been talking to Decker. She glanced around. Undid her seatbelt to lean over and feel on the floor.

Headlights gleamed in her side mirror. For just an instant her heart constricted in fear, but as the vehicle slowed and

pulled over close to her, she recognized the SUV Decker had been driving.

Relief flooded her. She let out an unsteady breath, felt the tremors start in her limbs and jaw as shock began to settle in.

Decker jumped out and raced over to her, managed to wrench her door open. “Teagan.” He leaned inside and took her face in his big hands, the dome light illuminating his face. His gorgeous, worried face that she’d never been happier to see. “Are you hurt?”

“N-no.” Damn, she was shaking like crazy and a little queasy. “He r-rammed my b-bumper and took off.”

Decker was running his hands over her, checking her for injuries. “Did you see the driver?”

“N-no.”

“What about a description of the vehicle?”

“P-pickup. Wh-white.” Dammit, her breathing was so choppy, it was embarrassing. She didn’t know what make or model or any of the plate numbers. “H-his high b-beams were on,” she forced out, hating that she was reacting this way, especially in front of Decker, but she couldn’t stop shivering. “C-couldn’t...s-see.”

He took her face in his hands again, stared directly into her eyes. And oh, hell, she felt something crack inside her. This beautiful, strong man was crouching in front of her, the naked concern on his face undoing her. “It’s okay now,” he said, drawing her to him, one hand cradling the back of her head to nestle her cheek against his shoulder, his other arm banding around her back. “You’re okay.”

She tried to nod. Couldn’t get her neck muscles to function and gripped the front of his shirt inside his open jacket instead, holding on while she tried to steady herself. *You’re okay. Get a grip.*

The pressure of his embrace increased, pulling a small, unauthorized moan from her. Not of pain. Of sheer relief. “S-sorry,” she whispered, cringing inside. She tried to make

everyone think she was so tough and capable and look at her now, shaking like a scared little girl.

“Nothin’ to be sorry for,” he murmured, his Kentucky drawl sliding over her senses like warm honey. “That was scary as hell.”

There was something to be sorry for, but the way he held her was exactly what she needed. He felt so incredibly good. A solid wall of muscle to burrow into.

The pressure on the back of her head eased, and his long fingers began rubbing against her scalp. Flooding her with tactile memories of the way they had explored and caressed her all over that one night.

She swallowed. Cleared her throat and patted his shoulders before pushing upright. “Thanks. I’m okay now.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

He studied her a long moment as the rain beat against his back, then nodded once. “Sit tight while I get you a blanket. I already called the cops.”

“Okay.”

He came back moments later with a blanket, reached in and wrapped it around her while he talked on the phone. She pulled the folds of it tighter around her, grateful for the warmth while she focused on the sound and timbre of his deep voice and kept watch around them for any sign of more danger.

Decker ended the call. “Cops are on the way. Let’s get you outta here while we wait.” He reached in, drew her to him and scooped her up into his arms, ignoring her feeble protests. “Nope. You’re comin’ with me, sugar.”

Sugar? That was so...Southern of him. And she wasn’t sure it fit because she’d been anything but sweet to him. Well, except for that one night. But she liked it. A lot.

He stood, turned, and hurried through the rain to his SUV. After putting her in the passenger seat, he tucked the blanket

around her more securely and then turned on the heat, aiming the vents at her. “Better?”

She nodded, feeling perilously close to tears. Because she knew the tender, protective way he was taking care of her had nothing to do with his job. This was all Decker, and it pierced her. If she hadn’t taken off on him, this would never have happened. “Thanks. I need to contact—”

“I’ll take care of it.” He shut the door, went around to the driver’s side, and climbed in, sealing them in the enclosed space together. She could smell the rain mixing with his clean, tangy scent. He started sending messages on his phone, probably alerting Creed, her DEA contact, and maybe CPS as well.

She waited until he’d finished before speaking, feeling steadier and warmer now. And contrite. “I shouldn’t have taken off on you, but the owner heard me leave and sent someone out to look, so I had to haul ass.”

He didn’t argue or try to placate her, his gaze steady on hers. “I’m just glad you’re okay. Tell me what happened.”

Everything seemed like a confusing blur, but she explained the order of events as she remembered them, starting with picking the lock on the back office door.

“Did anyone follow you from the bar?” he asked when she finished.

“I didn’t think so, but I pretty much dropped my guard once I hit the highway.” She hadn’t noticed the truck until it raced up behind her around that bend in the road, but now she was starting to wonder if...

Initially she’d thought it was just an accident. That the driver had been reckless in tailgating her on that section, or maybe drunk. But it definitely could have been targeted. Although they hadn’t stuck around or come back to finish the job, so she was thinking it must be a drunk. She hoped. “Did you see anyone leave the bar around the same time I did?”

“Two guys. Neither of them acted suspiciously. I’ll give descriptions of them both to the police and DEA. They’ll

review the security camera footage to assist with an ID.”

Flashing red and blue lights appeared in the distance. Two cop cars stopped close to them, and the deputies got out. Decker met them and filled them in before they came to talk to her. “Mr. Abrams explained the situation and asked us to call the sheriff. He’s on his way.”

Good. She knew Sheriff Buchanan from back in the fall, and he was used to working with government agencies. “Okay. And you can cancel the ambulance.” A fire truck came around the corner as she said it. “I don’t need the fire crew either.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

Decker stayed outside with the deputies while they blocked off the road and began working the accident scene. The sheriff’s vehicle arrived twenty minutes later.

Buchanan spoke to Decker briefly, then came over to the SUV to talk to her. “Hi there,” he said with an easy smile as he slid into the front seat next to her, his short brown hair soaked from the rain. “Good to see you’re okay, but sorry to see you again under these circumstances.”

“Thanks for coming.” It was late, and he and his wife had a young son. He’d likely been dragged out of bed to come here, so she would make this as quick as possible. “Did the DEA call you?”

“I talked to Clive on the way here. He’s en route, should be here within the next twenty minutes. Why don’t you fill me in on what happened after you left the bar in the meantime?”

She told him everything. But without a good description of the vehicle or driver, there wasn’t much for him to go on. And there were zero cameras out here to capture any footage of the incident. There was still hope that it had only been some drunk asshole with no business getting behind the damn wheel.

After they finished, Decker drove her back to the safe house. They didn’t talk on the way, and she was glad because she needed the quiet right now. There was too much going on in her head. Too many thoughts and feelings about Decker.

Something about him made her feel safe on the deepest level, and she craved it.

A sharp pang hit her. Because if she were a different person, Decker was exactly the kind of man she would want a relationship with.

As soon as she thought it, she dismissed it with a firm *no*. That wasn't happening. It would be too messy. She couldn't even let herself think about it.

Within minutes they reached the house. Creed was waiting outside. "Everything's secure." He gave her a long look through the window, gray eyes assessing. "You good?"

"I'm good."

He nodded and focused on Decker. "I'll stay out here while you get her settled."

"Okay."

Decker walked up to the front door with her and let her inside. And suddenly the space felt much too small. Too intimate.

"I need to call Clive again," she said. "And then I'm gonna have a hot shower."

"Sure. Then we'll talk."

She didn't pretend not to know what he meant. And she deserved what he was going to say. But she wasn't ready to get into that yet.

She escaped down the hall to the master bedroom and called Clive. Told him that she was safe and sound at the house, and then where she'd placed the listening device. "Is it working?"

"Yes. The owner suspected someone had been inside, but he didn't find anything missing or tampered with, so he dropped it. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes." She was tired of being asked that, and she didn't really think he genuinely cared anyway. Thankfully the rest of the call was brief.

“I’ll call tomorrow when I have more information,” Clive said. “Until then we’ll coordinate with the police to see if we can determine whether or not this was an accident.”

“All right. Bye.” She took a long, hot shower, letting the water soothe away the stiffness in her neck and shoulders while she let her mind empty.

Except it wouldn’t empty completely.

It kept conjuring images of Decker.

Decker lying in bed next to her. His smile, rare enough that it made her heart flutter every time she earned one. The genuine concern on his face tonight when he’d taken care of her. And the tenderness as he did so.

While part of her wanted to hide in here the rest of the night to avoid him, she refused to be an immature coward. Dressed in pajamas and a robe, she left the bedroom and found him in the kitchen.

He glanced over one broad shoulder at her as he stood at the counter pouring water from the kettle into a mug. “Made you some peppermint tea.”

“Oh. Thanks.” She would prefer he stop being so sweet. It made it even harder to keep the boundaries in place between them.

He set the mug in front of her on the island and leaned back against the counter, crossing his arms. She couldn’t help but admire the way it made his muscles flex. The look on his face was calm, but no nonsense. “If our history makes this whole thing too awkward, I’ll inform my bosses that I’m stepping down from your detail. Without divulging what happened between us.”

“What? No.” She didn’t want that. “We’re both adults, we can manage this.” She eyed him. “Unless you feel it’s too awkward.”

“I can handle it.”

“Good.” She picked up the tea, relieved. She felt far safer both physically and mentally with him guarding her. “I won’t

take off again. Promise. I wasn't thinking."

He nodded once. But the searching, almost tender look he gave her made her melt inside. She wanted more of it. Was desperate to know whether he'd thought about her after she left Crimson Point, or whether he even liked her as a person, especially after tonight.

More than that, she wished things were different between them. That the timing would have been different. That...*she* could be different.

But this isn't about you, a voice in her head reminded her. Your feelings don't matter. This is about helping find Lily's killer.

Decker didn't move, his expression unreadable. The professional mask firmly in place. "So you're gonna stay inside for the night?" she asked.

"Yes. Unless you'd rather Creed and I switch spots."

"No, it's totally fine. There are extra blankets in the hall closet if you want to make up a bed on the couch."

"I won't be sleeping."

No. Of course he wouldn't, he was on the clock, and she might just have been targeted again.

She cleared her throat, the urge to retreat beating at her. She'd said what she needed to say. Now she needed to leave. "Well. Thanks for the tea. See you in the morning."

He nodded again, hazel gaze steady on hers. "Sleep well."

But huddled under the covers in the master bedroom minutes later, sleep eluded her. It was impossible to stop thinking about what had happened, and about Decker, just down the hall yet out of reach with his job standing between them. That was probably a good thing, because she secretly wished he was next to her in this bed.

If she'd been wrapped up in his arms right now, she was sure she would have been able to fall asleep immediately.

Chapter Seven

It was now almost an hour since the collision, and not knowing what had happened was driving Jayden insane. The last he'd seen of the woman from the bar, he'd sent her car skidding across the slippery road toward the edge of the cliff.

He left his neighborhood and drove south toward the accident scene. He'd taken off immediately to avoid being there when any potential witnesses showed up. Now he regretted that. He should have waited to find out if he needed to finish her off or not.

There had been talk recently about someone calling around to local marinas and people in the mariner community, looking for information on the *Destiny* and its whereabouts. A woman.

Jayden had a bad feeling he knew exactly who it was.

He drove the borrowed car down the rain swept highway with an intensifying sense of anxiety. He was due on shift soon, but he couldn't go to work without first finding out what had happened to the woman. Thankfully the drugs in his system were in full effect, giving him a sense of numbness he badly needed right now to keep him calm. There was too much shit going on in his life as it was without this added nightmare to worry about.

Up ahead, a line of red taillights glowed through the gloom, marking where the southbound traffic had slowed to a crawl about half a mile from the site. It took another agonizing fifteen minutes to get there, and with each one the tension in him ratcheted higher. He shifted restlessly in his seat, fingers tapping a nervous rhythm on the wheel, palms slick and the back of his shirt sticking to him.

He got his first look at the scene as he rounded the final curve in the highway. Three cop vehicles were parked along the side of the road, straddling the shoulder and blocking the southbound lane. The woman's car was crumpled against the guardrail. It hadn't gone through as he'd hoped.

His pulse accelerated as he strained to see clearly through the driving rain. The car was definitely totaled. But there was no tarp covering the driver's side of the wreck to mark a fatality inside. No ambulance or coroner's van on site with crews loading a body bag in the back.

Which meant the bitch probably wasn't dead.

His hands tightened on the steering wheel as he slowly edged his way to the cop directing traffic around the totaled car. When he got close enough, Jayden recognized him as an acquaintance and former classmate he occasionally met for a beer or two. He lowered the passenger window, acting way calmer than he felt. "Hey, Colin."

The cop drew closer, squinting at him through the rain. "Hey, man." He eyed Jayden's uniform. "Just about to start, or finishing?"

"Starting." He nodded at the wreck. "Did the driver survive?"

"Yeah."

Dammit. He feigned concern even as dread and annoyance filled his chest. The only thing he had going for him was that Colin trusted him and would probably give him what he needed to fill in the blanks. "A girl I used to work with drives a car just like that one, same color. Asian, early thirties. Damn, I can't remember her name..."

"Teagan?"

Teagan. "Yeah. Teagan... Damn, I've forgotten her last name. It's common—"

"Kim."

Teagan Kim. "Was it her?"

"Afraid so."

"Shit. Is she okay?" he asked to keep Colin talking. He needed all the information he could get. "That looks bad."

"She's okay. And lucky. Declined a medical eval and went home."

“That’s good news.” It was terrible news. He’d put himself at severe risk again to get rid of her, and for nothing. He wanted to ask where she lived, but he couldn’t ask that without looking overly suspicious. Or like a weirdo stalker. “What happened?”

“Some asshole rammed her from the back and took off.”

“Damn. On purpose?”

“Not sure. Could’ve been a drunk.”

That was good if the cops still thought it could have been an accident. “Any suspects?”

“Nope. She didn’t even have time to get a good look at the truck.”

Relief sluiced through him. “So I guess that means you’re gonna have a long night.”

The cop gave a wry grin. “You know it. Have a good shift, man.” He straightened and stepped back, directing him to pass the ruined car.

On the way past the wreck, Jayden spotted the sheriff talking to another guy near the ruined car and picked up speed as soon as he was clear of the site. Getting Teagan’s name and hearing the news about there being no current suspects should have relaxed him. Instead he was getting more agitated.

Twice he’d tried to get rid of her. Twice he’d failed.

The good news was that she hadn’t seen or recognized him tonight, and he was pretty sure she hadn’t that night on the boat either. But she had come back here for a reason, and that didn’t bode well, so she had to be dealt with. This wasn’t something he could leave alone.

He also wouldn’t bother Craig with this. Things had been a bit bumpy between them lately. Jayden was still trying to prove himself and didn’t want to give Craig any reason to cut him loose.

Or worse. Because if Craig found out he’d gone after Teagan tonight, there was no telling how he’d react. Jayden had no desire to find out.

At least now he had some clues to put to use. Kim was a common surname, but Teagan wasn't. Shouldn't be that hard to find her. But to do that, he needed help.

When he got to work, he stayed in his car for a few minutes while he sent a message off to a contact higher up the chain. *Need a favor. Woman named Teagan Kim. Early thirties or so. Currently either in or near Crimson Point area. Need a location.*

Maybe this guy could find her phone number and track her that way. Or maybe find a credit card charge for wherever she was living that would give him a place to start searching for her. A utility bill. A food delivery. Something.

He hated this helpless feeling, the constant fear eating at him. Why the fuck had she come back here if not to find him? She was up to something. Fishing. Snooping around, and it made him fucking nervous.

His shift was starting momentarily. He palmed more pills, swallowed them with a gulp of lukewarm soda. Just two, to steady his nerves.

His little stash was almost gone. He'd only taken a tiny amount from the last shipment. They were damn potent, so he had to be careful not to get hooked on them. He'd seen too many guys' lives go to shit because they got too comfortable sampling the merchandise, and he was aware enough to recognize that he liked the way the drugs made him feel a little too much.

There were only a handful left. He already wanted more, but taking more would put him at even greater risk than he was now. If the organization found out he was compromised in any way, if they even got suspicious that the cops or some government agency was sniffing around him... And if they found out he'd been sneaking some product, no matter how small an amount—

He was dead. And it wouldn't be an easy death.

The last of the day shift came out of the building in front of him. He reached for the door handle. Stopped. His mind

started to race and his heart along with it. He thought of his girls, how he might never see them again if this Teagan bitch ruined everything, or if anyone found out about the drugs he'd been stealing.

No! Fucking stop. That's not happening.

He cursed under his breath and ran a hand through his hair, willing the extra pills to take hold, and fast. There was no way out for him at this point. He'd made a choice in the beginning, had known the potential consequences going in, and understood the underlying threat.

The organization didn't let people walk away.

Just as he was getting out of the car, his phone beeped with an incoming message from his contact.

Give me a day or so. I'll see what I can do. But it'll cost you.

Yeah, he'd known that before he'd contacted him. But what other choice did he have now? The bitch was still alive. He had to take care of this himself, and fast. Make her go away forever before she stirred up more trouble and led the cops or whoever else right to him.

No problem, he answered, then tucked his phone away and hurried to the entrance.

It would cost him a good chunk of his cut of the next shipment to track her, but he couldn't do it without outside help. Once he had her location, he could end this before it got worse.

That was his only option if he wanted to stay alive.

Chapter Eight

The morning had dragged by at an agonizingly slow pace, and the two broken hours of sleep Teagan had managed to get last night weren't helping improve her current mood any. Now it was almost noon, and the only productive thing that had happened since dragging herself out of bed was this meeting with Clive.

She sat up straighter in her chair and reached a hand back to knead her neck as she faced him opposite her at the kitchen table, translating the parts left out of what he'd just said. Her face was tender from the airbag too. "So basically, you're saying we still have zero clue who hit me last night and can't be sure whether or not it was an accident."

"Basically."

"Great." She exhaled and rolled her head around from side to side, trying to loosen the knots in her neck and shoulders. Last night the effects of the impact hadn't seemed that bad, but she was definitely stiff and sore as hell today.

"Do you want to go to urgent care?"

She didn't believe for one moment that he was truly concerned about her pain level—or even that he cared about her as a person. She was merely helping them during this investigation and that was always at the back of her mind. But the sooner she fulfilled her obligation to them, the sooner they could assist her in looking into Lily's murder. "No, let's just keep going."

"All right." He eased back in his chair, assessed her with light blue eyes surrounded by dark-framed glasses. "Was there anyone in the bar last night that seemed familiar at all? Anyone you instinctively thought you recognized?"

"No one." She wished there had been. It would have made her feel a lot better if they'd at least wound up with a lead to follow. "There haven't been any reports of a ditched white

pickup anywhere? Or someone bringing one into a body shop or anything?" The police were looking at the security footage from inside the bar last night to try and rule out whether or not anyone there had hit her. But in order to link anyone to it, they needed to find the pickup.

"Not yet, but we're on top of all that."

She hoped so, but she wasn't sure it was any kind of priority for them. The operation at the bar and the larger smuggling ring connected to it was their focus. She wondered what they would have her do for them next. "Do you have enough from the device I planted yet to get a warrant?"

"No, but we're getting some good intel already."

"Such as?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that with you."

She gave a startled laugh, then sobered. "You can't be serious. You briefed me on the operation happening in the bar and all the players involved. You hired me to plant the bug."

"And we appreciate your assistance."

She stared at him, a cold, empty feeling spreading through her gut. My God. They were going to shut her out through this whole thing. She should have realized it sooner. What a bunch of assholes. "So I'm on a need-to-know basis, is what you're saying? You'll use me to help gather intel, but I don't get to hear any of it."

"I wouldn't put it like that."

No, of course he wouldn't. Prick. She gave him a steely stare. "You and the taskforce have to help me ID Lily's killer, and the man who tried to kill me. That was the deal when I signed the contract."

"I'm aware." He folded his arms. "We need to discuss the matter of your security detail."

She frowned, not liking the set look on his face. "What about it?"

“Abrams and Morgan were hired to protect you, and both of them failed to do that last night. You could have been killed.”

“What happened last night wasn’t their fault,” she said, bristling at the accusation and feeling protective of them. “I crawled out the window, snuck around the far side of the building, and left without alerting either of them. Creed was where he was supposed to be, and from his position, there was no way he could have known or seen me until right before I got into my car. He alerted Decker right away, and Decker had almost caught up to me when the collision occurred. I was on the phone with him when it happened. That’s on me, not them.”

Clive’s expression remained unimpressed. “We have filed an official complaint against them both with Crimson Point Security, along with a request for a formal reprimand by the company.”

“What? *No*, that’s—”

“And you have the right to request a new detail.”

“I don’t want a new detail. It wasn’t their fault,” she insisted in a heated tone. Screw this guy for making assumptions about what happened, and Decker’s and Creed’s conduct. Clive hadn’t even been there. He’d been in his cushy hotel room at the time here in Crimson Point, waiting for word about the op and working on the bug she’d planted.

His phone rang. He grabbed it from the table, glanced at it, then looked back up at her. “I’ll be in touch when we have something more for you.” He stood.

She blinked. “Wait, so that’s it?”

“What’s it?”

“There’s no next job for me?”

“No.”

She had to be misunderstanding. “You’re terminating my contract?”

“No, but we have nothing further for you at this time.”

She frowned, taking a moment to interpret that. They didn't have anything else for her to do at the moment, but they also didn't want to cut her loose yet in case she might be useful to them somewhere in the duration of the timeframe stipulated in her contract.

Hell, she'd never remotely anticipated this. "What am I supposed to do in the meantime? Just sit here twiddling my thumbs?" She wanted to be involved. Actively involved. Wanted to help nail the people responsible for what happened to her and Lily.

She *knew* the two incidents were connected. Knew it in her bones, whether there was proof or not. And while she was legally tied up with the DEA for at least the next three weeks, she couldn't take any other jobs that came along.

"Yes." He answered the call as he turned his back on her and walked out the door, leaving her sitting there fuming.

"Goddamn it," she snapped, raking her hands through her hair. They were brushing her off, patronizing her and treating her as a complete outsider, even after everything she'd given them and everything she'd done for them. And on top of that, she'd gotten both Decker and Creed in trouble.

The headache building at the base of her skull spread up to her temples. She got up and took some pain meds, then pulled aside the edge of the bedroom window blind to peek outside.

Something softened inside her when she saw Decker's SUV parked across and a little ways down the street. He'd switched off with Creed this morning around six so that Creed could go back to wherever he was staying and get some sleep, and had been sitting in the vehicle out there ever since.

Watching over her even though he had to be exhausted, bored, and now undoubtedly pissed at her after being written up to his bosses by the DEA.

She pressed her lips together in irritation and let the blind fall back into place, marched back into the kitchen to get her phone and dialed the Crimson Point Security office. "This is Teagan Kim. I'd like to speak to Ryder, please. It's urgent."

“Let me check if he’s available, Ms. Kim,” the receptionist said.

Teagan paced the room while she was on hold, angry at both herself *and* the DEA. Their high-handedness and the lack of both transparency and urgency about her cousin’s death infuriated her.

“I’m putting you through now,” the receptionist said.

“Thank you.” A beeping tone sounded for a few moments, then Ryder answered.

“Teagan. Everything okay? I heard about last night.”

“I understand the DEA issued a formal complaint against Decker and Creed and that Crimson Point Security reprimanded them.”

“We—”

“I want it made clear that what happened last night was *not* their fault. At all,” she cut in before he could get another word out. “Creed was in position exactly where he was supposed to be when it happened. Decker was inside at his post. He can’t see through walls, and he couldn’t burst into the office without causing a scene and major suspicion with the men we’re trying to gather evidence against.”

“Okay. Go on.”

“Decker was also the first one to me after the collision. He made sure I was okay, secured the scene, and looked after me. Both men did exactly what they were supposed to do last night. It was me who changed the script last second without informing them. I want the reprimand withdrawn and both their records wiped clean of any wrongdoing or misconduct, and I’ll sign a formal statement to that effect or anything else necessary to ensure it happens.”

A long beat of silence followed, broken by Ryder’s deep chuckle. “You seem to feel pretty strongly about that.”

“I do,” she said, riding a wave of outrage. “And I still trust both of them with my safety and well-being. So what do I need to do to make this happen?”

“Nothing.” Amusement laced his voice.

She blinked, deflating a little as the indignation began to ebb. “What do you mean?”

“The DEA issued the formal complaint and requested a reprimand. We haven’t taken any action yet and wouldn’t until we conducted our own investigation, which would include interviewing all three of you. I was actually just getting ready to contact you when your call came through.”

“Oh.” She paused. “So they’re not in trouble with you or the company?”

“Not now.”

“Okay. Well, good,” she said, feeling a little deflated and slightly awkward now. “They’re both really good at their job. Clive’s just a prick.” She felt the need to have that said out loud.

“I know. Just to clarify—you’re saying you don’t want to have a new detail assigned?”

“Correct.”

“Understood, and I’ll put that on record. Thanks for the call, I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. Have a good day.”

Another low rumble came through the line. “You too.”

She ended the call, turned toward the hallway—and jumped to find Decker standing just beyond the threshold to the kitchen. She put a hand to her heart, startled. “You scared me.”

“Sorry. I would’ve said something when I came in, but you were clearly busy, and I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“I was just...talking to Ryder, actually.”

He nodded, the mix of affection and pride in his eyes making her heart squeeze. Almost as if...he liked her. As a person. Despite everything.

It was the pride that affected her most. No one who'd mattered to her had been proud of her lately. Except for Lily. "I gathered that," he said. "And I appreciate what you said."

She lifted a shoulder. "It's the truth. I'm just sorry I got you both in trouble." She felt awful about that. Hadn't considered it when she'd taken off last night.

A spark of amusement lit his eyes, one side of his mouth lifting ever so slightly. Almost a smile. God, she loved his smile. Wanted to tease one out of him right now just to bask in the glow of victory for a minute. "You definitely are trouble."

She flushed, but that fluttery sensation was back, a swarm of wild butterflies scattering in her stomach. But she couldn't argue with what he'd said, because he was right. Every time they'd met, she'd been in some kind of trouble. "I realize this is hard to believe, but I'm actually not that bad once you get to know me."

Humor gleamed in his eyes for an instant, followed by a flash of desire that had her tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth. "I know."

There was zero doubt what he was thinking about right now. And now she was too, so much that the air seemed to thicken between them, making it harder to breathe.

He cleared his throat. "I just wanted to check on you before I go off shift."

"Oh. I'm okay. Just a bit stiff." She rubbed the back of her neck. The pain was already more bearable.

"Good. Do you need anything before I leave?"

You. She bit the answer back before it could come out. But it was the truth. She wanted him, and it was getting worse by the hour. "No, but thanks."

He nodded once, that intense hazel stare doing all kinds of unsettling things to her insides. "Creed'll be here in a few minutes, then I'll leave. But I'll have my cell on me if you need me."

She was beginning to think that she did need him. In a way that shook her fiercely independent spirit to the core. “Okay. Sleep well.”

He stood there, looked for a moment like he was going to say something else, then turned and walked away.

She blew out a breath and sank onto the edge of a chair, her heart tripping all over itself. Then her phone vibrated in her hand. She glanced down to see a text from Marley.

Just checking in. You still in town? Would love to meet up if you have time.

The message warmed her heart. She really didn't have anyone in her life now other than her parents, and things with them had been extra strained since the fall. Lily had been far more than just a cousin, she'd been her best friend. They'd talked all the time, hung out together, gone shopping and on vacation together. Since she'd died, the world had seemed empty and lonely.

I'm still here but tied up for the next while, she answered, unable to say anything about the current situation or that Decker was assigned as part of her security detail. And she knew for certain that Decker wouldn't have told his sister what was happening. The man was a vault. *Would absolutely love to see you guys when I'm free though.*

We'd love it too. Take care.

You too.

She set the phone in her lap, heard Decker's SUV engine start up across the road, then fade as he drove away.

An unexpected stab of loneliness hit her. She brushed it aside, annoyed with herself. The DEA had made it clear it wasn't in any hurry to pursue the investigation into Lily's murder. She needed to keep digging on her own.

She wasn't sure whether the DEA knew what she'd been up to and didn't care. If she had to find the answers she needed all by herself, then so be it.

She accessed the list of marinas along this part of the coast she kept on her phone, noted the ones remaining to contact about the *Destiny*, and started making calls.

Jayden jolted awake when his phone rattled across the nightstand beside his head. He pried his eyes open, threw out a hand to feel for it, then brought it toward him and squinted to see who it was.

A buddy who worked at a marina up north that he'd delivered drugs to before, and it was already past 16:00. That meant he'd been asleep most of the day after working a twelve-hour night shift.

"Hey," he grunted into the phone. He was so tired his brain felt like it was moving in first gear.

"You *still* sleepin'?"

"Was until you called."

"Sorry, man, but I knew you'd want to know this. Just got a call from some chick looking for the *Destiny*."

He shoved upright, the cobwebs clearing instantly from his brain. It had to be Teagan. "What did she say?"

"Wanted to know if it was at or had been at the marina recently. Or if I'd seen it."

"What did you tell her?"

"I said no."

"But it's there now?" he stressed.

"Yeah, of course. Been here since last night."

"Did you get her name?"

"No."

Damn. "What about her number?"

"Display says 'unknown,' so I don't think it's traceable."

Of course, he thought sourly. "Hang on." He opened an app on his phone. "Okay, tell me the exact time the call came

in.” He typed it as his friend recited it, planning to pass the info on to his techie contact to see if he could somehow find a number or location.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Wait for my call.” He messaged his contact, told him it was urgent and offered to pay double the fee. And bingo, ten minutes later he had the number.

He dialed the marina. “Call her back and say the *Destiny* just pulled in,” he said when his buddy answered.

“Really?” The guy sounded startled.

“Yes.” This was perfect. “Do it now.”

“Okay. This mean you’re coming up then?”

“I’ll be there in half an hour. Be ready.”

“Ready for... Oh. Shit.”

Yeah. *Oh*. “Text me once you’ve called her and let me know what she said. I’m on my way.” He ended the call and jumped out of bed.

Teagan would probably want to see the boat in person, and he was betting she would head there soon. He had to get there before she did. Needed enough time to set everything up and make this whole brewing disaster go away for good, plus destroy any forensic evidence he might have left onboard in the process.

When she came sniffing around, he could kill both those birds with one stone.

Chapter Nine

“Did you clear this with Clive?” Decker asked, his gut saying he already knew the answer.

“As in, did I ask permission? No,” Teagan said, annoyance burning in her eyes. “He made it clear at our meeting earlier how the DEA sees my role in all of this. But I did pay him the professional courtesy of texting him to let him know what I’m doing and where I’m going.”

“And you have to be the one to go because...”

“Because they’re not going to follow up on this, at least not anytime soon. So I have to.”

“Why right now?” What was so important that she needed to go and do this on her own right now instead of letting the DEA follow up on it? She had possibly been targeted for a second time last night.

“The boat I was attacked on is at this marina. I don’t know for how long. I want to see if I recognize anyone aboard her, or at least take a look around and see if I can find any evidence linking things together.”

This was definitely a gray area in terms of his contract and obligations as one of her security agents. Nothing formally stipulated that he couldn’t allow this, but it definitely came with added risks to her safety. “And if I say no?”

“Then I’ll go alone.”

Yeah, that’s what he’d thought. And he understood her frustration. The DEA had basically patted her on the head and told her to sit here waiting like a good girl until they needed her again. A really bad move where Teagan was concerned. And no way in hell would he let her leave this house without protection. “You’re just going to look around?”

“Yes.”

He considered his options. Say no or try to dissuade her, which would piss her off and maybe even make her try to sneak off by herself again. Or he could go with her and make sure she was safe while she did this.

There was no choice to make. “What did Clive say?”

She pulled up a message on her phone, turned the screen around for him to see a reply from Clive. *Fine. Take security.* She raised her eyebrows at him. “Satisfied?”

He met her gaze briefly, a sudden loaded tension infusing the space between them. The only time he’d been *satisfied* in recent memory was the few hours they’d spent tangled up in bed together. Where he’d also made good and sure she was satisfied as well. But neither of them were acknowledging that night, and now he was responsible for her safety. “Okay. I’ll coordinate with Creed—”

“No, just you. I’d rather it was just you,” she added in a softer tone.

He studied her for a moment, wanted to ask why, but the show of trust in him soothed something deep inside. Tugging at a soft, unguarded spot he had to be careful to keep closed off from her. “All right. Someone should stay here to watch the place anyway. Give me five minutes, and I’ll be back to get you.”

He went across the street to talk to Creed, laid out a plan and a timeline.

“She sure is determined,” Creed said, the ghost of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Yeah.” While it frustrated him, it was also one of the things he admired most about her. “I’ll update you when we get there.”

“Good luck,” Creed called out as he walked away.

Decker laughed under his breath and kept heading for the house, raising a hand in acknowledgment.

The sky was already growing dark when he and Teagan arrived at their destination forty minutes later. A small marina

tucked into a little harbor town up the coast. He got out of the SUV and looked around first to make sure everything seemed secure before opening her door, his weapon secured in the holster under his jacket. “Let’s make this quick.”

He was right behind her as they hit the dock, the hollow sound of their footsteps echoing on the wooden planks. Ropes and chains clanked gently against masts in the breeze. Lights reflected off the water, the smooth, calm surface disturbed by occasional raindrops that spread out in concentric circles. It was so quiet. There was no one around outside that he could see and no one above deck on any of the boats, but the lights in the office were on.

“There she is,” Teagan said, pointing to a vessel moored in the farthest slip. Larger than he’d expected.

“You sure?”

“Yes.” Her voice rang with conviction. “Let’s see what I can find out about her.” She went straight to the office and walked in.

A young guy in his mid-twenties looked up at them from behind the counter, blinked in surprise when he saw her. His nametag read Donny. “Can I help you?”

“I called about the *Destiny* earlier,” Teagan said, her cool confidence and appearance making the guy stare blankly at her. Decker couldn’t blame him. She was gorgeous. “Can you tell me who brought her in, and if they’re still here?”

“Ah... I’m not sure who it was.” He fumbled with some papers lying on the desk, then moved the mouse around and studied the computer screen in front of him. “No, doesn’t say who was captaining her or anyone else onboard. Just that she arrived at four-fifteen or so this afternoon.” He looked up at her. “Why, is something wrong?”

“No, not at all, but if you find out, please let me know,” she said smoothly, putting on a smile that had Donny staring helplessly again as she wrote her number down on a piece of paper on the desk and slid it toward him. “Thanks, I’ll just go take a look myself.”

Donny blinked at her. “I—”

“Have a good night.”

Decker scanned the marina as they left the office. He still didn’t see anyone else around, and there were no lights on in the *Destiny*’s wheelhouse. “Wait here a minute,” he told her, stopping her next to the metal gangplank leading to the deck above.

He went up it alone, took a look quick around before coming back to get her. “It’s empty.”

She nodded and pulled a small flashlight from her coat pocket. “Let’s start in the wheelhouse.”

He let her take the lead this time, standing back a little with his own flashlight while she stepped inside the small room and began looking through the logbook. “I’m gonna do a quick check below deck,” he told her.

She nodded but didn’t look up, busy studying the information in front of her. He walked out and took the metal staircase down to the crew cabin. There was a light switch on the wall at the bottom. He reached a hand up, was about to flip it, when something in the corner caught his attention.

A flickering red light. Faint, but standing out in the darkness.

He swung the beam of his flashlight at it and took a step closer. Saw what appeared to be a digital timer and immediately flipped on the light switch.

He sucked in a breath, his heart hitching. Wires led from the timer to a bunch of C4.

A fucking bomb. And the time display read twenty-one seconds and dropping.

He whipped around and tore back up the steps. “Teagan, get out!”

She stuck her head out of the wheelhouse. “Why, what’s the—”

“Get off the boat!” he shouted, taking the stairs three at a time. “Bomb! *Run!*”

She came out, eyes wide. He grabbed her arm, started running toward the gangplank near the bow. “Go-go-go!”

He could feel the seconds ticking down, and the gangplank was too fucking far away. There wasn't enough time. “We're gonna have to jump,” he warned, dragging her toward the railing instead. He grabbed her around the waist, boosted her up. “Jump,” he commanded, climbing up next to her. “Do it, *now!*”

Teagan's face was stiff with alarm but she did as he said, using the railing as a springboard to dive headfirst into the water. He was a second behind her, knifing through the water right next to her.

The shock of the icy water burst through him, making his lungs seize. He fought past the initial reaction, swimming as hard as he could as he reached out a hand in the growing darkness to locate Teagan. His fingers brushed her kicking legs.

A second later an explosion ripped through the water, turning the murky green water around them to a glowing orange as the fireball erupted above the surface.

As soon as it faded, Decker shot out a hand, grabbed the back of Teagan's jacket and hauled her forward and up, swimming hard for the surface a safe distance away. He pushed her head and shoulders above the waterline first, breaking through a moment later.

She shoved water and hair off her face and turned in a circle as she treaded water, staring in disbelief at the fireball engulfing the middle of the *Destiny*. Including the wheelhouse where she'd been standing only moments ago. If they hadn't jumped when they had, they would have both been killed in the blast.

There was no time to dwell on it. The water was too fucking cold, and she had to be in shock. She was also smaller than he was, with less muscle mass, and would be losing body

heat faster. He needed to get her out and dried off before her core temp dropped too much.

“Come on,” he said, grabbing the back of her jacket again and propelling her toward the nearest dock. She didn’t argue, didn’t say a single word as she turned onto her front and swam with skilled strokes toward the end of the dock about thirty yards away.

Over the sound of the flames crackling behind them, he heard running feet. Looking up, he saw a man running down the dock toward them and assumed he was there to try and help.

He opened his mouth to call out to him just as the man’s arms started to rise. Then the clouds above them shifted at the last moment, and a thin shaft of moonlight revealed the weapon in his hand.

Fuck. “Gun!” he yelled, reaching out to put a hand on the back of Teagan’s head and shove downward.

She managed to suck in a quick breath and dove back under just as shots ripped through the air. He plunged down beside her, dragging her deeper while bullets punched white streaks in the water mere feet from them.

He pulled her right down into the blackness where the shooter wouldn’t be able to see them, prayed she could hold her breath long enough for them to get to safety. He had to get them back to the surface fast, but first they had to make it past this dock, all the way under the next one and surface on the far side of it without being seen.

His own lungs were already burning, the cold sapping the strength from his muscles.

Next to him, Teagan began to struggle, trying to break his hold and swim frantically for the surface. She was out of air and starting to panic. But if they surfaced too soon, the shooter would see them.

Hold on. Hold on just a little longer, he urged her, gauging the distance as he swam.

The instant he thought they'd gone far enough, he propelled her back up. The water around them turned from black to deep murky green, and then the lights above became visible. Teagan was in full panic now, clawing her way toward the surface.

She broke through an instant before him. He dragged in a heaving breath, allowed her one more, and then forced her back under, not as deep this time, shoving her forward instead of down.

The next dock was straight ahead, he could see its outline through the water above. All they had to do was make it another fifteen to twenty seconds or so underwater to swim beneath it and come up on the other side. He just hoped the hell they'd gone far enough to evade the shooter.

A long rectangular shadow appeared above their heads, marking the outline of the dock. He kicked hard, holding tight to Teagan while they swam beneath it until they were clear and then propelled sharply upward.

They broke the surface right next to each other. Teagan sucked in a ragged breath and flailed her hands out in front of her, her hair plastered to her face. He steered her to the edge of the dock, made sure she had a solid grip on it as he moved in behind her.

"You okay?" he gasped out as quietly as he could. His hands and feet were almost numb already, his heart racing in an effort to warm him. She had to be freezing.

She nodded, shoved the wet hair out of her eyes. "The shooter," she whispered back through chattering teeth. "Is he..."

"I dunno." He leaned back a little to scan the dock they were clinging to. Didn't see him or anyone else, but he could hear voices along the gangplank closest to shore. Someone was bound to have called 911 by now. "Don't move yet."

"Okay," she whispered back, and he could feel her shivering.

He moved in closer, pulled her tight to his chest and curled his body around hers, their cheeks pressed together, trying to give her what warmth he could. Until he was sure the shooter was gone, it wasn't safe to move from their position. But he couldn't keep her submerged in this freezing water for much longer either.

The minutes ticked past with agonizing slowness. He couldn't feel his limbs now, not even the arm he had clamped around her waist. She was shivering harder, her teeth chattering audibly. He needed to get her out of here.

The sound of an approaching siren sent a wave of relief through him. He eased away from her a little more to take another look around. A group of people were gathered on the dock alongshore. He spotted the flashing lights of the emergency vehicles near the parking lot. He was betting their lives on the hunch that the shooter was long gone. "Can you climb out if I boost you up?" he said quietly next to her ear.

"I...m-maybe."

That was a no, then, and he wasn't surprised because while he was chilled to the bone, she would be worse. "Okay, hold on tight. I'm gonna get out first and pull you up."

He reached up for the edge of the dock above him. Hauled himself up and over, thankful when he saw this dock was still deserted, then knelt and immediately reached down for her, grabbing hold of her wrists.

Teagan looked up at him, and their gazes locked. He felt a twisting sensation in the middle of his chest, the need to protect and take care of her a wild, living thing inside him that had nothing to do with his job.

He pulled her up, his numb muscles straining. "I gotcha," he said, overwhelmed by the need to hold her. Wrap around her and block everything else out.

The moment she cleared the edge, he hauled her dripping wet right into his arms and crushed her to him. She shuddered and flattened herself against him, drawing a shuddering breath.

“Christ, that was close,” he breathed into her soaked hair. He couldn’t even think about what had just happened. Couldn’t think about how close or how many times he’d almost watched her die in the last few minutes.

He needed to get up and find help. Get her warm and dry. And he needed to call Creed to extract them as soon as fucking possible because he couldn’t trust that the vehicle he’d brought them in wasn’t compromised. But he couldn’t seem to move. Couldn’t make himself let her go.

“A bomb,” she said shakily, shuddering uncontrollably in his arms as he finally forced himself to stand, bringing her with him. “They knew I was coming.”

Yeah. It sure as hell fucking looked that way.

Chapter Ten

All was quiet outside the empty safe house. Not that he'd expected anything different.

Creed smothered a yawn and huddled up tighter in the driver's seat to stay warm, trying not to let his mind wander. Fatigue always made it harder to stop. He'd known going in that this job would entail stretches of time where he was required to keep watch alone, and that it would challenge him.

He just hadn't realized how big a challenge it would be.

Keeping watch on an empty place was inherently boring. His mind naturally wanted to drift. But every time he dropped his guard and let it, his thoughts automatically went to the one place he didn't want them to go.

Bella.

A razor-sharp pain lit up his chest, same as it did every time he thought about her.

He quickly slammed the door shut on the trickle of memories before they could become a flood and drown him. But shit, when would it stop?

This was the private battle he fought each day. Every. Fucking. Day. Each morning he woke up and prayed he would finally be over her. That he could move on.

It hadn't happened yet, and apparently today still wasn't that day either.

Nothing he'd tried had helped. He felt stuck in this solitary hell he'd been living in. It was impossible to move past it or get closure for a loss that huge when he still had no answers for why the woman he'd loved had up and walked out on him so suddenly. Without explanation or a backward glance.

He reached for the cup of cold coffee sitting in front of him, refocusing his thoughts. Decker and Teagan had left for the marina just over an hour ago.

His phone rang on the center console. The number on display wasn't familiar but only a handful of people had this phone number, so he answered, glad for the distraction. "This is Creed."

"It's Decker," he said in a taut voice. "We've got a situation."

He straightened, instantly on alert. "What's up?"

"We need immediate evac. Someone just tried to kill us. Twice."

Creed shot a hand out for the key in the ignition. *Holy shit.* "I'm on my way. What happened?" He put the vehicle in gear and tore down the quiet street.

"It was a setup. Someone knew Teagan was coming and planted a bomb."

"What the *hell*?"

"Yeah. If I hadn't seen the timer, we would've been killed in the explosion. Whoever planted the bomb was watching, because he saw us dive overboard and when we surfaced, he was there waiting with a pistol."

Jesus. How had this happened? No way in hell anyone could have followed Decker all the way up there without him noticing. None. "Are you both all right?"

"Yeah, just wet and cold. Cops are here now. Can you grab some towels and dry clothes for Teagan?"

They were both real damn lucky it wasn't a whole lot worse. "I've already got a go bag for her in the trunk." Decker could use his. "Is the marina secure now?"

"Secure as it's gonna get for the time being. Fire department just got here. I doubt the shooter's gonna hang around. Gotta go, the cops are waiting to talk to us. Text when you get here."

"Will do. Watch your six."

"Always."

Creed sped through the darkened streets, winding his way toward the highway where he headed north. By the time he'd arrived at the marina, the parking lot was full of emergency vehicles.

A cop stopped him at the entrance. He showed his ID and credentials, explained what he was doing, then texted Decker.

Be there in two minutes, came the reply.

He parked close to the exit, jumped out, and did a visual sweep of the area. The boat at the far end of the dock was still on fire, flames and smoke billowing high into the darkened sky. A crowd of people stood near the path to the gangplank at the edge of the parking lot, and cops and firefighters were rushing around trying to secure the area.

He spotted Decker within moments, his big frame cutting through the gawking crowd, leading Teagan by the hand. She was draped in a blanket.

Creed hopped back in the vehicle and drove it over to meet them. Decker quickly put Teagan in the back before getting in next to her. "Let's go," he said.

"Any problems since we talked?" Creed asked as he turned out of the lot and drove for the highway.

"No."

He glanced at Teagan in the rearview mirror. "There's a bag of clothes back there for you and some towels."

"Thanks," she said quietly, reaching one hand out from between the halves of the blanket to grab it.

Creed kept his focus on the road and everything going on around them, ready to take evasive action if the shooter was waiting somewhere up ahead or even thinking of following them.

Decker was already on the phone talking to someone. Teagan passed a towel to him. "CPS wants us to report to HQ immediately," Decker said when he finished the call.

Creed nodded. Ryder and Callum would rightfully want to be more personally involved in this, now that one of their own

had almost been killed. “What about the DEA?”

“Clive’s heading there now. They’re dispatching a team to the marina to conduct their own investigation.”

Decker took the edge of Teagan’s towel and wiped the side of her face with it. “Doing okay?”

“Yes.”

Creed saw him keep studying her for a second, and it was more than professional concern.

He and Decker hadn’t known each other long, but one thing Creed *did* know about him was that he was all business. Decker was focused and tended to be remote. Didn’t talk about anything personal and kept all that shit locked down tighter than a goddamn drum.

But Creed saw the way Decker looked at Teagan. The way he watched her, and he recognized that this was personal for him. She meant something to him, and the subtle undercurrent between the two of them was proof enough that they had history of some sort. Not that it was any of Creed’s business.

Teagan sat unmoving in the backseat. She was staring out her window, the blanket still wrapped around her.

He had to look away, because with her dark hair and stoicism, in that moment she reminded him too much of Bella. “Who else knew you were going to the marina?” he asked her.

“No one except Clive and whoever he told.” She shook her head. “It doesn’t make any sense. We arrived at the marina maybe forty minutes after I told him, tops. The guy at the marina office couldn’t have known I was coming, but someone might have asked him to report it if anyone asked about the *Destiny*. How would anyone have had time to set all that up before we got there?”

He met Decker’s gaze in the rearview, knew they were thinking the same thing. If someone within the DEA was involved in this, then they were all in a fuck ton of trouble.

Jayden exited the highway a few miles north of the marina and pulled over to the side of the road to get hold of himself. His heart was racing a thousand miles an hour, and he was breathing so fast and shallow he was starting to feel light-headed.

He'd taken one too many pills before planting the bomb. The adrenaline crash was normal. The rest of what he was feeling was not.

He turned off the truck, folded his arms across his chest and clenched his hands into fists beneath his armpits to stop the shaking. Squeezed his eyes shut and ordered himself to breathe. To calm down.

Elation and terror whipped through him as he thought of what he'd just done.

He'd been so certain the bomb would fix everything. He'd planted and armed it with only minutes to spare, then retreated to a hiding spot overlooking the parking lot to keep watch. His face had been covered by a balaclava, and he'd worn a hat. There was no way anyone could ID him on the security camera footage.

Teagan and her hulking bodyguard had arrived within two minutes. He'd waited in position, watched until they boarded the boat to start the remote timer. But that big motherfucker just had to go below deck to check things out.

Jayden didn't know how he'd even spotted the bomb, but he must have, because he'd dragged Teagan to the railing and dived off it with her. The explosion was bigger than he'd expected. Must have ignited the fuel cans in the hold.

Watching them escape had been torture. He'd been forced to run down onto the dock and stand there waiting to see if they surfaced. He'd fired nine rounds at them in the water.

They hadn't come up again. He was pretty sure he'd hit them. Either that or they'd been injured by the blast wave or hit with shrapnel. He hadn't seen their bodies floating anywhere as proof, but he hadn't been able to stick around and search for them.

There had also been witnesses, though it had been dark and he'd been fast, getting the hell out of there before anyone had a chance to try and stop him or the cops could arrive. His only real concern now was Donny getting scared into talking when the cops interviewed him. Although he was aware that the consequences for talking would be deadly.

He jumped when his phone rang. Fumbled to grab it from the passenger seat. Thankfully it wasn't Craig, it was his contact. "Hey," he answered, feigning a calm he wasn't even close to feeling. His fucking heart refused to slow down. He'd never been this high before.

"You got a minute?"

"Yep. You find something?"

"Couldn't get the actual number, but I hacked the call log activity and triangulated the origin of the incoming call based on the location of the cell towers in the vicinity. It's a small residential area, maybe a few blocks square. No address or anything specific, but it's better than nothing."

"Great, can you send it to me? And keep trying to find the actual phone the call came from."

"I'll see what I can do, but it's a long shot."

"Understood. If any calls go out from it, or if any incoming ones are taken for more than a minute or two, let me know." He was almost positive she was dead, but he needed confirmation, and this would help.

"I'm gonna need another thousand before I do any more work on this." The line went dead.

Jayden swore and dropped the phone in his lap, frustration battering him. He was already in debt. How was he going to come up with a thousand more out of thin air?

The phone rang again. This time it *was* Craig, and his stomach contracted into a hard knot. His first reaction was to ignore it, but word about what had happened was no doubt already circulating, and he was going to have to come clean eventually. Might as well get it over with now. "Hi."

“What the fuck’s going on?” Craig demanded, making him wince. “I just got off a call with Donny at the Whitecap Point marina. He said you were there, and then the *Destiny* blew up.”

He ran a hand through his hair, grabbed a fistful, his mind spinning. “I was getting rid of a problem.”

“What problem?”

There was no help for it now. He had to say it. “The woman who stowed away on the *Destiny* in October. She’s back. She was looking for the *Destiny*, trying to find out who crewed her that night. Donny called to tell me. I had him call her back to tell her it was there, figuring she’d take a look. So I got there first and took care of it.”

“You blew up the fucking boat to do it?” Craig demanded.

“I thought the fire would get rid of any forensics too.”

Craig made a frustrated sound. “I don’t believe this. Is the problem gone now?”

“Yes. I made sure.” Except he was only ninety-seven-percent sure. Not that he would admit that to Craig without being under torture. He was in enough shit as it was. “We’re in the clear now.”

“You’re positive.”

He set his jaw, anger burning in his gut. “Yeah, dammit, I said I handled it. And you said you’d have another run for me soon. Do you have one yet?”

“After this? You gotta be shitting me.” Craig gave a humorless laugh. “You need to sit the next few out, let everything cool down.”

“I *can’t*. I need the money, man. I’ve got lawyer’s fees and bills, and my kids’ softball registration’s about to happen.” He swallowed, tried not to think of the hole he’d dug himself into. Without the flow of cash from his extracurricular activities, he was screwed. “I need this, Craig. Please, man, you know I’ll get it done.”

Another few seconds of silence passed before Craig responded. "I'll think about it and get back to you."

"Noah?"

He snapped awake at Poppy's whisper, shoved up on one forearm and squinted at her standing in the doorway. After a long night on the job, he'd come home from the station at just before three this afternoon and crashed in the guest room to stay out of her and their son's way so he wouldn't disrupt their routine. "Yeah?"

"Sorry to wake you, but your phone's been ringing and buzzing like crazy, so I figure it must be important."

"What time is it?" He felt half-asleep still.

"Almost seven."

Okay, so he'd only been asleep for three hours. "Who is it?"

"Ryder and Callum mostly, but another few names I don't recognize." She came over and handed him his phone.

There were eight messages and five voicemails, mostly from Ryder and Callum. He read the messages first, stunned. "What the *hell?*" he muttered, going through all of them before calling Ryder back. A bomb at a marina a few towns north? "I just got your messages. Teagan and Decker okay?"

"Yeah, but it was close. And this time we know it had to have been targeted."

"When did this happen?"

"About fifteen minutes ago. The DEA's sending some people up there, and Teagan's being brought here to debrief. I wanted to let you know in case you want to be here for it."

"I appreciate that." Teagan was staying in Crimson Point, and Decker was a local. If there was an ongoing threat to this community, Noah wanted to know about it and would do what he could to mitigate the danger for everyone. "I'll be there."

He slid out of bed and took a quick shower, the hot water helping to clear away the lingering fatigue a bit. Downstairs, he found Poppy pulling something out of the oven while their son Hudson played with some trains on the kitchen floor.

She spared him a glance over her shoulder, taking in his uniform. “You got called in again?”

“Yeah. Boat bombing in Whitecap Point. Indications are that it was targeting someone staying here to assist with a DEA investigation.”

“Oh no. It’s not the same person from the accident last night, is it?”

“Yes.” He came up behind her, wrapped his arms around her middle and set his chin on her shoulder. “Sorry about this. It’s been crazy lately.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said, but he could hear the underlying strain in her voice, could see it in the tired shadows beneath her big brown eyes.

On the mornings she went to work, she was up at four to get into the café and get all the baking done before opening. She worked a ten-hour shift, then stopped to pick up Hudson from daycare and came home to do everything else that had to be done.

He tried to take some of the load off her shoulders whenever he could, and his family was great about helping them too, but his job as sheriff meant getting called out at all hours and working overtime and weekends when something came up. The past few weeks had been especially nuts.

He was proud of what he did, hadn’t minded the hours much until Hudson had come along. But lately it seemed like both he and Poppy were burning the proverbial candle at both ends. He’d known from the outset that being sheriff would require certain personal sacrifices, but it had begun to take its toll in the past few months, and neither of them wanted to hire a nanny.

“It won’t be like this forever,” he murmured, kissing her neck. She rarely complained about his job and him not being

home enough. But he could tell it was wearing on her too.

His term as sheriff was almost up, and he'd pretty much already made up his mind not to run for reelection. He needed a change of pace. Something steadier with more normal hours and a forty-hour workweek instead of the chaos he was living with now. Hopefully something still connected to law enforcement. He loved his family and wanted to be there for them. Wanted to be with them, and not miss out on milestones and important events because he was called out. And Hudson was already getting so big.

"I know," she murmured. "Do you have time to eat before you go?"

He stopped himself from saying an automatic no. "You know what? Yeah, I do." He could get caught up on anything he missed if they started before he got there.

She glanced up at him. "Really?"

Guilt pricked him, her surprise and delight at such a simple thing as having dinner together as a family hitting home. "Really." He grabbed plates and cutlery, then scooped Hudson up off the floor and set him in his little chair at the table with a smacking kiss on the top of his brown curls.

They all sat down together to eat. "When's the last time we did this?" he asked, cutting himself a piece of halibut. "I can't even remember." Things had been a blur lately.

"Thirteen days."

He digested that in silence, trying not to wolf down his food but keeping his eye on the microwave clock across the room. He couldn't sustain this kind of schedule. None of them could.

"That was great," he told Poppy when he was done, rising to take his plate to the sink. After he loaded it in the dishwasher, he went back to her, wrapped his arms around her again, and set his knuckles under her chin to tip her face up. "Love you," he murmured, brushing a kiss across her lips.

It had been way too long since he'd actually been able to crawl into bed with her at night or wake up beside her on a

rare weekend morning, when no one from work had called. He missed that, hated the lack of physical intimacy their relationship had suffered recently, and knew she did too.

She smiled up at him, the love and warmth in her eyes reminding him what a lucky son of a bitch he was. “Love you too. Hurry back.”

“I will.” He kissed her again, went around the table to kiss the crown of Hudson’s head. “Bye, buddy. See you later.” He held out his fist.

Hudson grinned and bumped his pudgy little fist into his. “Boom!”

“Boom,” he said with a chuckle, his heart squeezing hard and the word making him think of the bombing. He refused to sit back and let that kind of violence come near his family.

Driving away through the steadily falling rain, his gaze was drawn to the picture framed by the rearview mirror. The cottage’s lower-floor windows were all aglow, warm yellow light spilling out into the gloom, and the two people who meant the most to him on this earth were safe within its walls.

Yeah. It was definitely time to make a change.

Chapter Eleven

Down in the gym in the CPS basement, Teagan took her time in the shower, letting the hot water clear her head and chase away the lingering, bone-deep chill she couldn't seem to shake. The numbness from earlier had thawed. Now she couldn't get her mind to shut off, analyzing every single thing about what happened at the marina, as well as before and after.

That was twice now some asshole connected to the *Destiny* had tried to kill her. And if it hadn't been for Decker's keen perception and decisiveness tonight, she would be dead right now.

He'd stayed glued to her side right up until the moment she'd entered this bathroom, even though this had to be the most secure building in the area by far. Strong and independent as she was, she'd been grateful for his steadying presence in the aftermath. The FBI had taken her dead phone to use as evidence. Whether or not they could recover anything after it had been submerged in seawater was another matter.

Diving into the water had thrown her right back to the night when she'd been tossed overboard into the churning waves. The instant the frigid water had surrounded her, an avalanche of panic had all but suffocated her. It had taken all her will to push past it, force the terror and physical discomfort aside and focus on getting out of range.

Just thinking about it sent cold fingers sweeping up her spine. She reached out and cranked the water temperature higher, stood under the flow with her eyes closed while she emptied her mind and geared up for what came next. When she was ready, she got out, towed off, changed into warm, clean clothes Creed had brought her, and plaited her hair into a braid down the center of her back.

She paused in front of the mirror to look at her reflection. Her face was pale, expression somber, the knowledge of her own near escape from death—again—written in her eyes.

No. You're stronger than that. “Damn right. I’m a survivor,” she said quietly to herself, holding her reflected gaze. She raised her chin. Slowly, the lingering shadows of shock and fear transformed into steely determination, flowing through her in a tingling rush of power.

Much better. And her part in this was far from over.

Oh, yeah, she was going to personally see to it that the asshole responsible for all this was caught. If he thought tonight had finally subdued or scared her into submission, he was about to find out just how fucking wrong he was.

Filled with determination, she took the elevator to the top floor and entered the conference room at the end of the hall. Everyone seated around the long table stopped talking when she stepped inside: Decker, Creed, Ryder, and Callum.

“No word from Clive yet?” she asked, skirting the end of the table to where Decker sat, drawn to him on an intrinsic level she didn’t question. Whatever history was between them, he cared and had her back. That was all that mattered to her right now.

“He’s on his way,” Callum answered from the far left end, eyeing her in concern. “You sure you’re up for this meeting right now?”

“Yes, of course.” She sat in the chair Decker pulled out for her next to him, could feel the weight of his assessing stare as he looked her over. She wished they were alone so she could crawl into his lap and burrow back into his arms for a while. Wanted all this red tape and paperwork to be over with so she could go back to the safe house and unwind.

“Can you walk us through everything again from the start?” Ryder asked, scribbling notes on a pad in front of him.

“Sure.” She began with how she’d been trying to locate the *Destiny* starting back in October and went from there.

Decker was silent and grim as she explained the sequence of events after arriving at the marina. She glanced at him mid-sentence, and it hit her all over again that she could have gotten him killed tonight by insisting on going there. After

this, and given how distant she'd been with him—not to mention how she'd ghosted him back in November—she wouldn't be surprised if he was starting to hate her a little.

A jolt of distress lit up the middle of her chest. The last thing she wanted was for him to hate her. He'd gotten under her skin in a big way months ago, and she still couldn't shake him loose. She cared about him. Tonight had solidified that, and had also driven home that she wanted him more than ever.

Someone knocked on the door, breaking her concentration. Clive strode in with two other DEA agents, along with two men dressed in navy FBI windbreakers. "Sorry we're late. Took a little longer at the marina than I anticipated." He and the other DEA agents sat across the table from her, next to Ryder. The FBI agents sat at the far right end beside Creed.

"Any suspects so far?" Teagan asked.

"Not yet, but we've got agents down there interviewing people to generate tips and try to get a list. The fire's out, but given the damage onboard, I doubt forensics will be able to salvage much about the device." He ran his gaze over her and Decker. "You were both lucky as hell tonight. Whoever planted the bomb knew what they were doing and that you were coming. And that same person or persons can now identify you *both*. That puts targets on both your backs."

She'd had a target on her back for months. They were just catching up now. Decker, however, was a different story.

He folded his arms and shifted in his chair, leaning subtly toward her. He'd showered too after arriving here. She could smell the scent of soap and shampoo on him. "We know."

Clive shifted his gaze to Teagan. "Given the seriousness of the threat against you, we suggest you go into protective custody with us."

"No," she said automatically, not even having to think about it.

Clive's eyebrows twitched in disapproval. "You came to us initially, to share intel and wanting to assist in this investigation. That's why we brought you on board. But after

tonight, the circumstances have changed. We have to assume the current safe house is no longer secure, being that you're now a material witness—"

"I've been a material witness the whole time, ever since I was thrown overboard on the *Destiny*. So I disagree. The circumstances haven't changed at all, it's just that you're now taking me seriously because of the attack tonight." She glanced at Decker for validation, thought she saw the edge of his mouth twitch.

"I really think you should consider our offer," Clive pressed. "Your security detail has—"

"Done its job perfectly thus far, or I wouldn't be sitting here now. So thank you for the offer, but no. I'm going to retain my current security detail and move to wherever they put me."

A taut silence filled the room as she finished speaking. Clive had obviously not expected pushback on this, or for her to shoot him down so flatly in front of everyone. But it was her neck, her life, and she trusted them to Decker and Creed. Not the DEA or the FBI. Decker had saved her tonight, and that wasn't something she could ever forget.

"What about you, Deck?" Ryder asked. "You're compromised now too, and it would be best if you went to ground until a suspect has been taken into custody."

He nodded. "I'm open to it, but I'd still like to provide protection for Ms. Kim until this is over. Even if it's not in an official capacity."

Warmth bloomed in Teagan's middle. She didn't dare look at him, afraid she wouldn't be able to conceal her true feelings, but everyone else in the room was now staring at him.

Ryder's dark eyes flicked to her. "Teagan?"

"I'd prefer that as well." For reasons both practical and personal, and the latter were nobody else's business.

Ryder exchanged a look with Callum, then nodded slowly. "All right, we'll work something out. I believe the FBI has more questions for you, so Callum and I'll leave you to it and

make arrangements on our end.” He and Callum got up and left the room with Creed.

“Mr. Abrams, if you wouldn’t mind accompanying me to another room,” the younger FBI agent said, standing and gesturing to the door.

Here we go. Protocol dictated that they had to separate her and Decker to make sure their stories lined up, but it was a little too late now.

“Sure.” Decker stood, laid a hand on her shoulder, and squeezed in silent support before leaving her with the older FBI agent, Clive, and his colleagues.

Facing the FBI agent, she geared up for the coming barrage of questions. *Let’s go.*

“All right, Ms. Kim. Let’s begin.”

As expected, it was long and detailed, involving a lot of repetition. She was well aware that the DEA would have already exchanged some information with them prior to this meeting, and that the agent was trying to establish whether her responses matched with what they already had.

“What about the man working in the office?” the agent asked. Clive was watching her closely too, arms folded across his chest.

“Donny. I spoke to him on the phone earlier this afternoon. He told me the *Destiny* wasn’t in port, then called back an hour or so later and said she’d just pulled in.” He was definitely a major suspect or would likely know whoever else was involved. Maybe he was even involved in the actual bombing.

“He wasn’t at the marina when we arrived. We’re looking for him now and establishing a list of possible suspects and accomplices. Is there anything else you can give us at this time that might help narrow the search?”

“If I had names, I would have given them to the DEA when I first approached them months ago.”

It took another hour to wrap things up. By the time it was over, she was drained and tired and craving a quiet place to crash for the night. And she really hoped Decker would still be allowed to stay with her because she didn't want to be separated from him right now.

Given everything that had happened, she wasn't expecting to have any reason to smile tonight, but her face broke into one anyway when she reached the reception area and found Ivy and Walker both waiting there with Decker. He looked up at her, the impact of his hazel gaze hitting her right in the chest. "Okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good. Just glad that's over." She smiled at Ivy and Walker. "Well, hi. Long time no see." She hadn't seen them since the day she'd shot the guy who'd been about to kill Warwick and Marley in the woods. They'd swooped in for the rescue, providing medical support and backup until emergency crews had arrived.

Ivy grinned and stepped forward to hug her, light brown hair tucked behind one ear. "Hi yourself. Hear you had some more excitement tonight, huh? Good for you." She patted Teagan's back, let her go, and nodded at Decker. "Callum called us in. We're here to escort you to your new digs. Creed's gonna do overwatch tonight."

"Just me?" she asked. "Or..."

"I'm coming with you," Decker answered, and the lingering tension inside her eased.

"Oh, okay. Good." Better than good. With him in the same space, she would be able to let her guard down and hopefully rest a while. "Are you still officially part of my detail?"

"No. I'm on administrative leave for the moment."

Yet he still insisted on coming with her. "But you're still being paid, right?" she asked, concerned that he wasn't.

Something flickered in his eyes. Something that told her he would have stayed with her even without pay. "The DEA is terminating its contract with CPS, effective immediately."

"But—"

“It’s a bit of a hike down there, so we should get going,” Walker said in his deep Southern accent. It was more pronounced than Decker’s, his speech pattern a bit slower, the words more drawn out.

“I’ll talk to them,” she said to Decker, horrified that he was being put through all this without pay.

“It’s fine,” he said.

“No, it isn’t. I’ll fix this.”

Outside, they piled into Walker’s SUV and headed south on the coastal highway. She was acutely conscious of Decker next to her in the backseat, the quiet, controlled power of him, and that he’d requested permission to stay with her. He’d said it was to protect her, but was it more than that? She wanted it to be more.

“You’ll like this one,” Ivy told them from the front passenger seat. “Quiet spot, really private—and it’s got an ocean view. You can thank Beckett and Jase for it. They just finished renovating it and were going to list it next week.”

“Hopefully we’ll be out of there by then,” Teagan said, desperately looking forward to decompressing. “But I really appreciate everyone’s help.”

“No problem. Oh, and we stopped at the store and got you guys some groceries to tide you over until tomorrow. If you give me a list, I can drop more off in the morning.”

Twenty minutes later, Walker turned down a narrow unpaved road that wound through a band of forest. The house came into view up ahead, a small cottage with the porch light on.

“Wait here a minute,” Ivy told them, hopping out with Walker, weapons drawn. They did a perimeter check, then Walker went to open the door, and Ivy came back for them. “All clear. Let’s get you settled. Creed or I can bring the rest of your stuff to you in the morning.”

Teagan wandered in and took in the small space. There were two bedrooms, one with a king-size bed and the other a double. “You take the master,” she said to Decker.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, you’re over six feet tall,” she said with a laugh, only to stop short in surprise when Ivy stepped into the second bedroom with her and shut the door.

Ivy regarded her for several moments, hazel eyes intense. “Show me your left hip.”

Teagan blinked at her. “Sorry?”

“Humor me.” She gestured impatiently at Teagan’s hip. “Let’s see it.”

Having zero clue why Ivy would want to, Teagan angled her body, undid the button and fly on her jeans and pulled down the left side of the waistband to expose the edge of her pink lace thong and bare hip.

Ivy made a soft sound of confirmation and met her eyes again. “Okay. Just checking.”

“For what?” She pulled her jeans back up and redid the fastenings. She was so damn curious about Ivy. The things she’d heard about her made her seem like an insanely badass female spy or assassin of some sort, although no one she’d asked seemed to know much about Ivy’s professional background except that she was a highly skilled hacker. Walker would know the real story, of course, and there were bound to be a few others around here who did too. Teagan wanted in on the secret.

“Nothing, I was just curious.”

“Liar. What were you looking for?” A birthmark or something?

“Do you need anything before we leave?” Ivy asked, putting an end to that conversation. “Or do you want to talk about anything with me? Anything you want to stay just between us girls?”

She let it go, but only because she knew she couldn’t force Ivy to tell her the truth. “No, I’m good. But I appreciate the offer. I’ve talked about everything to death tonight already.”

Ivy nodded. “Yeah, I get it. It’s a standing offer if you change your mind, fyi. Here’s your new phone, by the way.” She took one from her coat pocket and handed it over.

“Untraceable number?”

Ivy’s eyes lit up. “For most people, yeah. I’ve programmed my number in there, along with Walker’s, Creed’s, Ryder’s, Callum’s, and Decker’s new one. If you need anything or if anything just feels off, holler. We’ve got your backs.”

Teagan believed her, and the offer meant more than Ivy could know. “Thank you.”

“Anytime. So.” She raised her eyebrows, a little smile tugging at her mouth. “You and Decker. Spill.”

In spite of herself, Teagan felt her cheeks flush. “There’s nothing to spill.” Technically, that was true. Their time together had been a one-off, over a long time ago. And she was starting to realize what a complete idiot she’d been in believing she could just walk away unaffected and move on from him.

“Yeah, I don’t believe you,” Ivy said, chuckling. “But fine, be that way. I’ll weasel it out of you later.” She winked. “Have a good night.”

Teagan used the next few minutes to unpack her bag and get her thoughts in order. When the voices down the hall stopped and the door shut, a mix of excitement and nerves took hold. She’d pretended this whole time that her and Decker’s relationship was strictly professional. But it had never been only that, and tonight had shifted things again, in a way she couldn’t ignore or suppress.

Without Decker, she would have died. And here they were, holed up alone in this tiny cottage together for the foreseeable future.

She’d tried so hard to keep her strengthening feelings for him locked down and her heart out of the equation. Now she had to face the cold, hard truth.

It was too late for that. And there was no way she could hold back from him indefinitely.

Chapter Twelve

After an hour of restless tossing in the king-size bed, Decker gave up trying to sleep. He rolled to his back, staring at the faint patterns of moonlight on the ceiling seeping through the edges of the blinds on the window to his right. He was way too amped up to sleep after everything that had happened, even though it was almost one in the morning.

He kept thinking about the bomb. How he'd almost missed it. And how the shooter had been there to ensure he finished them off. Odds were, he probably thought they were both dead. There's no way he would have stuck around long to confirm it, though. Not with how quickly the crowd had gathered on the dock.

And that young guy in the office, Donny. Decker doubted he had the balls or the skills to pull off something like that on his own. But he could have alerted someone about Teagan asking about the *Destiny*.

Security footage showed that he'd taken off before the bomb had detonated, so he'd known about it and was now either on the run or in hiding. He was definitely involved somehow. The FBI were already searching his phone records.

Right now that seemed their best chance of finding a link to the man behind the attack. But there was also the other possibility, and it was a big reason why Decker wasn't getting to sleep anytime soon.

If someone within the DEA had leaked that Teagan was going to the marina... Whole other story. It didn't seem likely, and Decker didn't think Clive was dirty, but the FBI were looking into it anyway as SOP to narrow down the suspect field.

Water began running through the pipes on the other side of the wall as Teagan started the shower. Obviously she couldn't sleep either, whether because she was upset, or still cold, or

both. He imagined her standing in it with the water sluicing over her naked skin. Him stepping in with her.

Crowding her against the wall from behind, his mouth finding the sensitive spot at the crook of her neck while his hands explored her smooth, slick skin. Stroking. Teasing. Finding all the right spots until she was wet and ready for him, and he could grip her hips tight and push into her from behind.

His muscles bunched as desire coiled low in his gut, fists gripping the edges of his pillow. Shit, he'd just about kill to be in there with her right now. To stop the thoughts spinning through his mind and lose himself in her, reassure each other they were still alive in the most ancient, primal way possible.

You're here to protect her, not fuck her, he reminded himself sternly.

He should never have let her go to the marina. Period. He should have left her at the safe house with Creed and gone ahead to check things out more thoroughly himself first. Made her stay put until he was sure the *Destiny* and marina were secure.

She was the most frustrating woman he'd ever met. They'd just survived two back-to-back deadly attacks against them, and he still knew next to nothing about her. Not her past and not her personal life.

He had so many damn questions about what had led up to this and was tired of being shut out. They'd almost died tonight, and now they were stuck hiding out here until the threat was over. They were in this together for better or worse, and he was sick to fucking death of the need-to-know bullshit.

The guest room door opened down the hall. He pushed up on one elbow as Teagan's quiet footsteps moved toward his room, his heart rate jumping when she paused outside his door.

But then she continued down the hall toward the kitchen.

His patience snapped. That pause at his door told him she'd been thinking about waking him. It was way past time they talked.

He got up, pulled on jeans and a T-shirt and followed her.

She spun around to face him at the kitchen counter, a mug in one hand as she pressed the other to her chest. “Oh, you startled me.”

He leaned a shoulder against the edge of the wall, watching her. Trying not to stare. She wore a pair of yoga pants that hugged her hips and thighs, and a light sweater open over a snug sports bra that left her flat midriff bare and hugged her breasts. The points of her nipples were visible through the fabric.

He went rock hard in his jeans, the punch of lust almost making his brain short circuit. But he’d come out here to talk, dammit. Finally get some answers. “Can’t sleep?”

“No.” She drew the edges of the sweater closed over the bra, folded her arms in an almost protective move. It bothered him. He was the last person she needed to protect herself from. “Did I wake you?”

“No, I couldn’t sleep either.” He took a seat on a stool at the tiny island, putting it between them as a physical barrier because it hid his erection, and right now, he didn’t completely trust himself to keep his hands off her.

“I was just going to make some tea. Want a cup?”

“No thanks.” He waited until she’d filled the electric kettle in the sink before asking the question that was burning brightest in his brain. “I want to know why you were aboard the *Destiny* in October.”

She paused, her back to him. “Okay. That’s fair.” She turned to face him, wrapped the sweater more snugly around her body before continuing. “My cousin was murdered in her home in San Francisco, but the police refused to believe it.”

He absorbed that in silence, surprised. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected her to say, but it wasn’t that. “What do you mean?”

“The killer broke into her place and made it look like an accidental overdose. But Lily never touched a drug stronger than an over-the-counter painkiller in her life. And she was way more than my cousin. She was my best friend.”

The pain in her eyes hit him like a blow. She looked so damn vulnerable in that moment it was all he could do to stay where he was and not go to her and pull her into his arms. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

She nodded in acknowledgment, exhaled. “We were supposed to meet up after she got off work at the marina that night. She did part-time work on a research vessel just south of San Fran. I’d heard talk about drug smuggling in and out of the area and asked her to keep her ears and eyes open for anything suspicious.”

The electric kettle clicked, steam pouring from its spout. She stopped, busied herself pouring a stream of boiling water into the mug and dropped in a teabag. “She called to tell me she’d overheard something suspicious. Two guys talking aboard the *Destiny*. They saw her and knew she’d heard them. She was spooked. I went to her place to meet her right after that and found her unconscious on her bedroom floor with a bag of pills in her hand.”

“You think whoever she overheard killed her.”

“I know they did. I just can’t prove it yet. But I’m not giving up until I bring whoever killed her to justice.” She blew on the surface of the tea, took a little sip. “The police refused to believe it was more than an accidental overdose. No one was going to help me, and I was in between contracts. So, I tracked the *Destiny* up the coast here in Oregon and stole aboard before it left port one night. One of the men onboard spotted me. I tried to fight him off but...he slashed me and threw me overboard.”

Fuuuuck. He’d known her motivation must have been powerful. He’d never imagined anything like this. “So you really did have short-term amnesia when we first met?” That day at the hotel. She’d been battered and bruised and wary as hell.

“Yes, from a head injury and shock. It was terrifying. And you were so kind to me.”

“I thought you were escaping an abusive relationship or something.”

“No. But I can see why you’d think that. It wasn’t until I finally accessed what was on my phone that I regained my memory and started putting the pieces together. I found a string of messages from the guy who’d hired me to go after Warwick.”

“Yates.” A corrupt-as-shit MI6 officer looking to cover his ass. He’d hired Teagan and an assassin to do his dirty work for him.

“Yep. I didn’t know what he wanted to interrogate Warwick about, and I was already torn about bringing him in because he’d saved my life and paid for a few nights’ stay at the hotel. I also didn’t realize Yates thought I was missing or dead and had hired someone else in the meantime. Something felt off about it all, so I started following him and tailed him to that spot in the woods that day. And when I realized he was going to kill Warwick instead of bringing him in, and probably your sister too, I intervened.”

Hell yeah, she had. Put a fucking round through his shoulder, handcuffed him, and hand-delivered him to the Feds. “I’m thankful for that.”

“Me too.” She smiled a little, but it dimmed quickly. “I was pissed that Yates had tried to use me for something so wrong. I was tied up with all the legal protocol afterward, and that’s when I initially approached the DEA about the smuggling in this area. I told them about Lily, about how whoever was on the *Destiny* was linked to her death, thinking I could entice them to open an investigation if I agreed to assist—for free, I might add.”

“Then they signed you on for this job.”

She nodded. “But now I realize it’s not as straightforward anymore. They don’t really give a shit about what happened to Lily. Or me. I’m a tool they can use, a means to an end to help them with what they want, dangling the carrot in front of me that they might give me what I want once I serve my purpose. Meanwhile the asshole who killed my cousin is still out there, and I can’t—” She stopped abruptly, put a hand to her mouth

as she struggled for composure. “I can’t *live* with that,” she finished in a choked whisper.

At the start of this, Decker had resolved to keep his distance for professional and personal reasons. But seeing her suffering after all she’d already been through... All his resistance crumbled in the face of her devastation.

He was up and moving toward her before he could stop himself. She shook her head to ward him off, dragged in a ragged breath as she fought for control. He stepped up close, wrapped his arms around her and drew her to his chest. One hand cradled the back of her head, keeping her face tucked into his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, rubbing his cheek against her hair. She smelled so good, felt even better. And the truth was, he’d fucking missed her after she’d suddenly up and left town. He’d wanted so much more from her, wanted a chance, and she’d taken it with her when she’d left Crimson Point. “Sorry you’ve been put through all this.”

“It’s...just been...a really shitty day,” she said between hitching breaths.

He huffed out a low laugh at her understatement. “Yeah, it sure as hell has.” It was a miracle they were both still here. He’d come closer to dying tonight than he had during any of the base attacks on his various deployments.

It made him think about his family. About how he’d only just started to repair his relationship with his sister in the past few months, and that he needed to do the same with the twins too. He’d left them behind in Kentucky when he’d enlisted and checked out emotionally from everything back home because it had been easier that way.

Easier for him. But not for the others. That’s what he needed to make amends for.

Tonight had given him an even bigger kick in the ass to reprioritize his life and the people who were important to him. And the woman he was holding right now was becoming more important to him every day.

Teagan shuddered lightly, then the stiffness drained out of her, and she melted into him.

Fuck. An ache started beneath his sternum and spread outward. She was so strong and independent, this rare show of vulnerability from her was destroying him. He wanted to take her pain away. Make this all better somehow. “We’ll find him,” he told her. “We’ll get justice for Lily and for you.”

She stilled, lifted her head to look up at him. He felt himself falling into those deep, dark eyes. “You believe me about Lily?”

He stroked a lock of damp hair away from her cheek, wanting to do a whole lot more and holding himself firmly in check. “Yes.” Without a doubt, especially after last night. Whoever was behind all this was desperate to silence her.

She stared up at him for a long moment, then her gaze dipped to his mouth. A rush of heat flooded his gut. His fingers tightened in her hair, the leap of raw hunger making his pulse skip as the moment stretched out.

Her lips were inches from his. Soft and inviting, tormenting him. He remembered the feel of them on his skin. The heart-stopping moment when they had closed around his cock, pushing him to the edge of his control. And the look on her face right now told him she was remembering it too. And that she wanted more.

He locked his arm around her waist and angled her head to kiss her. Teagan gave a soft moan and plastered her body to his, the feel of her lean curves setting him on fire. He kissed her top lip. The fuller bottom one. Sucked it gently before flicking his tongue across it.

She opened for him, straining to get closer as her tongue twined with his. It went straight to his head. Wiped out everything but this moment. He wanted inside her. Wanted to feel her clench around him, her lithe body bowing beneath him as she came, and damn the consequences from it afterward.

Feeling himself teetering on the brink of giving in, he abruptly ended the kiss and released her, stepping back while

his heart hammered in his ears.

Teagan stared at him with heavy-lidded eyes, breathing fast as she licked her lips. “Why’d you stop?”

Because she was like a drug, potent and addictive. And he couldn’t afford to get more hooked than he already was. He shook his head, stunned at how close he’d come to crossing the point of no return with her again. “I can’t. I’m still partly responsible for your protection, and I take that seriously.”

“You’re not my bodyguard anymore. They’re not even paying you now.”

“I don’t care about the money. I just want you safe.”

They stared at each other, only a few feet separating them while her words wound their way inside him. He’d never met a woman who pushed his buttons like she did. Challenging him, bringing out a dominant, possessive side he’d never realized he had.

He wanted her with an intensity that shook him. Wanted to strip her right here, lay her out on the kitchen island and feast on her until she was begging and totally out of control, then fuck her slow and easy, drinking in every single cry and whimper, every nuance and shift in her expression while he made her shatter.

He wanted to rock her to her core and make it impossible for her to walk away from him without a backward glance ever again.

Tension thrummed through him in the taut silence while they stared at each other, hunger clawing at the surface. A devilish voice whispered in the back of his mind. Telling him that she was right.

Technically, he wasn’t bound by the original contract anymore. And they’d already slept together. Once more wouldn’t change anything. Nobody would ever find out.

But instinct warned him that if he gave in now, he’d be even more fucked with her than he already was. That it would rip him open when she walked away again. Something he’d never worried about until her.

“You should get some sleep,” he said, his voice sounding rough to his own ears.

“I’d sleep better with you beside me.” The look in her eyes made it plain that sleep was the last thing on her mind.

It was the last thing on his too. “There’s no way I could keep my hands off you.”

“I’m counting on it.”

He huffed out a strained laugh at her boldness, made himself take another step back. She wasn’t going to make this easy. He had to be the one to maintain a clear head. Things were too uncertain between them, surrounding them. Taking her to bed wasn’t going to make any of this better, and it would only complicate things further in a situation that was already way past complicated.

There was that tiny flicker of vulnerability in her expression again, so he softened his tone. “Go to bed, sugar. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He turned around and walked away before she could say anything else to tempt him or try to persuade him to change his mind. But it didn’t make the wanting go away.

In his room, he shut the door and collapsed on the bed with a groan, his dick hard as hell and aching for her. Tired as he was, sleep wasn’t happening anytime soon.

To take his mind off everything, he grabbed his new phone and shot off a text to Marley. Crimson Point was a small place, and Marley was part of a tightly knit inner circle there. The story would be all over the news by tomorrow. He didn’t want his sister to hear anything from someone else and get worried.

It’s Deck. Sorry to text so late. Just wanted to let you know there was an incident on the job earlier but I’m okay.

Not eight seconds after he’d sent it, the phone rang in his hand. He’d expected it, felt bad for worrying her. “Did I wake you?” he asked.

“Yes, but I don’t care about that—what’s going on?”

“I can’t tell you everything, but I was assigned as part of a security detail to Teagan.”

“Teagan? Are you serious?”

“Yeah. Someone’s targeting her. We had a near escape tonight, and now we’re at a safe house down the coast. Ivy and Walker brought us.”

“Warwick and I’ll come down there right now.”

“No. I appreciate the offer, but it’s late and we’re both done in. Maybe you could swing by my place in the morning though and pack me a bag. You can ask Ivy to bring you down with her. She’s going to drop some things off for Teagan.”

“Okay, I will. Can you tell me what happened?”

“Tomorrow.”

She made a frustrated sound. “Are you *really* both okay?”

“We’re fine. It was close though, not gonna lie. And this has all been really tough on her, even though she tries hard to make people think otherwise. She’s dealing with a lot of shit.”

“It sounded like she was already dealing with a lot before this.”

“She was.” More than he’d imagined, and it made him want to shield her from all of it.

Marley sighed. “Thanks for telling me. I’m glad you’re okay, and I’ll be there with Ivy in the morning. Warwick says hi and to let him know if he can do anything.”

“Thanks, will do.” He would be glad to see her. “And thank you as well.”

“You don’t have to thank me, dumbass. And Deck?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

A sharp twinge hit him. Marley had always made the effort to tell him and the twins that, tell them all straight up that she loved them and would always be there for them. Even through all the emotional trauma they’d gone through as kids and all

the responsibilities that had been heaped on her after he'd joined the Corps.

He wasn't sure he deserved that kind of unconditional love after the way he'd distanced himself from her and the twins. But he was trying to be deserving of it now. Be the person she'd always seen him as. The protective older brother/father figure he'd become at too young an age. "Love you too." It was getting easier to say it back now. "See you in the mornin'."

He ended the call, then texted Creed to let him know he was turning in.

A thumbs up appeared in reply. *Sleep well in your comfy king-size bed, sweetie. Dream of me while I sit out here in the truck.*

He smirked and typed back a response. *No thanks. Had enough nightmares for one day.*

He set his phone aside and got under the covers. Sprawled out on his stomach and tried to ignore his erection trapped against the mattress, unable to stop thinking about Teagan in the next room.

They had unfinished business to settle. And the longer they were alone together under this roof, the harder it was going to be not to cross the line he'd drawn between them.

Chapter Thirteen

Teagan peeled her heavy eyelids open the next morning when she heard sounds coming from the kitchen. Decker was already up. She rolled to her side, squinted to shield her eyes from the light of her phone screen as she checked it. It was only a little after six.

She lay there a minute, debating whether or not to roll over and go back to sleep, then detected the scent of coffee and dragged herself out of bed and into the bathroom to start the shower. She was tired as hell and sore all over from last night compounding the effects of the accident, not to mention grumpy from lack of sleep and sexual frustration.

Decker had shut things down hard last night, and she didn't buy the excuse about him being responsible for her safety. No one was going to find them here, and Creed had been posted out there all night keeping watch even if someone had. So why had Decker *really* walked away?

She knew he still wanted her. There was no faking the way he'd watched her in the kitchen, like he wanted to eat her up, then the hunger in his kiss and the feel of his erection trapped between them.

An erection she'd unfortunately been reduced to fantasizing about instead of getting acquainted with firsthand.

The hot shower only helped so much. After getting dressed and brushing her teeth, she left her hair down to dry around her shoulders and went to put on some makeup, grimacing at her reflection. Her eyes were swollen and puffy, making it look like she'd been crying. She hadn't been, and didn't want Decker to think she'd been crying over him.

“Teagan?”

She jumped a little at hearing his voice coming from the bedroom. “Yes?”

“Just letting you know my sister and Ivy are on their way over.”

Now? “Oh, okay. Thanks for the heads-up.” Damn, they weren’t wasting any time. But Teagan would be glad to see them. She was desperate for some sense of normalcy and friendship. Their visit would also give her a reprieve from the building tension at being cooped up in this cottage with the only man she wanted and apparently couldn’t have.

The delectable scent of the coffee grew stronger on the way to the kitchen. Decker stood next to the pot, pouring himself a mug, his broad back to her, wearing dark snug jeans and a black Henley. He glanced over his shoulder at her, and the sight of him was like a velvet punch to her insides. “Morning. Want a cup?”

He was a ruggedly gorgeous man. A man who had treated her better than anyone else she’d been with. If she wasn’t so commitment phobic and preoccupied by the hunt for Lily’s killer, she would want far more than sex with him. But that was only a fantasy she allowed herself to indulge in. “Love one.”

“How do you take it?”

“Just cream if there is any.”

“Yep. Ivy brought some last night.” He turned away again, giving her the perfect opportunity to admire the flex and play of the muscles across his broad back and shoulders under the fabric of his shirt.

If she thought he’d be receptive, she would walk up to him and plaster herself to that muscular frame, let her hands wander over the sculpted planes of his chest and stomach and down to the crotch of his jeans to see if she could entice him.

But she didn’t feel like being rejected again this morning on top of everything else she was dealing with, so she stayed put, taking a stool on the other side of the island while he slid a mug over to her. “Thanks.”

“Welcome.” He leaned back against the counter, watched her over the rim of his cup as he took a sip, hazel eyes

studying her. No doubt taking in her puffy eyes and thinking she'd been crying. "Sleep okay?"

She didn't see the point in pretending. "No, not really. You?"

"I've had worse."

Silence descended on them as they sipped their coffee, loaded with sexual tension that had heat curling in her belly and all her nerve endings buzzing. Then Decker's phone beeped. He picked it up to look at it. "It's Creed giving us a heads-up. Incoming. I'm gonna tell him to take off and crash for a while if that's okay with you."

"Yeah, that's fine." It was probably overkill for him to be here anyway, and she felt bad that he was stuck outside in a cold vehicle while they were warm and comfy in here.

"I can keep watch outside until he comes back."

"No need." Moments later, she heard the sound of an approaching engine and then two vehicle doors shutting.

Decker went to let his sister and Ivy in. "Mornin'."

Marley rushed up, dropped the bags she was carrying at his feet and threw her arms around him, holding on tight. "I'm so glad you're okay," she whispered, her long auburn hair spilling down her back.

"I'm all right," he told her, but he didn't let go, and the sight of them like that made Teagan's heart roll over in her chest. Decker was so distant and controlled all the time, kept his feelings to himself, but no one witnessing the sight in front of her could deny the deep bond the siblings shared.

"Let the man breathe, Marley," Ivy said with a chuckle as she stepped past them into the foyer and aimed a smile at Teagan. "Didn't get much sleep last night, huh?" she asked, bouncing her eyebrows.

"No, and for all the wrong reasons."

"Well, that's a damn shame." She breezed in and set some grocery bags on the counter, the holstered pistol on her hip visible. "CPS paid for everything."

“That was nice of them.” She set down her mug. “You guys want coffee?”

“Sure,” Ivy said.

Marley skirted the island and held out her arms as she approached Teagan. “Hey.”

“Hi.” She returned the hug, aware of a bittersweet ache spreading under her ribs. This made her miss Lily even more. Marley was exactly the kind of person anyone would be lucky to have as a friend, and God knew Teagan could use one now. “Good to see you.”

Marley eased back to smile down at her. She was a good six inches taller than Teagan. “How about next time we meet up without any drama involved?”

Teagan laughed softly. “That’s a great idea. You guys sit down, and I’ll get you a cup. Just tell me how you want it.”

Ivy and Marley both sat next to each other at the island while she doctored the coffees for them and passed them over. Decker moved in beside her, leaning back against the counter with his arms folded across his chest, making it hard to concentrate and impossible to ignore him. He revved her up just by being nearby.

“So, you gonna tell me what happened now that I’m here?” Marley asked, looking back and forth between them.

“It was my fault,” Teagan said, earning a sharp look from Decker.

“No, it wasn’t,” he said.

It one hundred percent was, but she wasn’t going to bother arguing the point with him right now. “It’s a bit of a long story.”

Ivy raised her mug. “We’ve got nowhere to be. Do we?” she asked Marley.

“Nowhere,” Marley agreed, brown eyes riveted on Teagan. “So start spilling.”

“Okay, I’ll keep it as short as I can.” She started at the beginning with Lily and took them right up through the shooting—leaving out the torrid one-night stand with Decker in between, of course, along with any bits of intel that could potentially endanger either of them. She didn’t want to put anyone else in harm’s way over this, especially after what Marley had already been through in the fall.

“Oh, holy shit,” Marley muttered when she finished, her gaze flicking to her brother. Teagan felt another sharp stab of guilt that she’d nearly gotten Decker killed. Marley would have been utterly devastated if anything had happened to him. Didn’t matter that Decker was trained and could handle himself, or that he knew the risks of his profession. She had put them in added danger by forcing the issue of going to check out the *Destiny* in person.

“Don’t tell the twins anything,” Decker said to her. “Not yet. I’ll tell them later once everything’s over.”

“Twins?” Teagan asked, hungry for every morsel of knowledge about Decker and his family. He didn’t talk about his personal life, and this was the perfect opportunity for her to find out more.

“Our younger twin brothers,” Marley answered with a smile. “They look more like me than Decker. They’re just finishing up their contracts with the Corps and might be heading out this way after. I’ll introduce you if you’re still around.”

She felt a twinge of sadness because she wasn’t sure what she was going to do once this was over. She hadn’t let herself think that far ahead. Right now, she was focused on justice. “Are they going to apply at CPS too?”

“They might, depending on what openings come up.”

She had a hundred more questions about their family but held them back, not wanting to seem like she was prying or overly curious.

“I’m gonna grab a shower and change,” Decker said, setting his empty mug in the sink. “Back in a bit.”

“Good, we wanted to talk to Teagan without you here anyway,” Ivy said, earning a slight grin over his shoulder.

Teagan tensed a little, praying that Ivy wasn't going to start in about her and Decker again, especially in front of Marley. But the question that came out of Ivy's mouth surprised her.

“Tell me more about your background.”

She blinked. Ivy knew all this already. “Naval intelligence.”

“Yeah, I know that part, but how did you get into contracting? What kind of training did you do?”

“I was an analyst at first, then when I got out of the military, I wanted to keep using my skill set and contracting was flexible with good money. I did small jobs to start, took courses to keep my shooting sharp.” She shrugged. “I guess I earned a reputation for being reliable and discreet, and word got around. I started getting more important jobs and clients doing surveillance, investigative work, a few captures. Right up until Yates hired me to bring Warwick in.”

“So you'd never worked for Yates before? Or anyone else at MI6?”

“No. He must have either pulled me from a database or found out about me through word of mouth.”

“Bet he regrets that,” Ivy said with a snicker, her eyes gleaming over the rim of her mug.

Teagan smiled, fully at ease with these women. But yes, the bullet she'd put through Yates's shoulder meant he would never forget her. “I bet he does too.” It felt so good to relax and let her guard down. The closest she'd felt to normal in months. “Anyway, enough about me, I want to know about you.” She raised her eyebrows at Ivy.

Ivy blinked. “Me? What about me?”

Marley snorted. “Oh, come off it. You know exactly what she means. And I wanna know too, so just tell us already.”

A mischievous grin curved Ivy's mouth. "How bad do you wanna know?"

"Desperately," Marley said, and Teagan nodded in agreement.

"Hmm. I could tell you, but then I might not be able to let you live."

She and Marley both stared at her. "I kinda think she isn't completely joking," Marley murmured.

Ivy laughed. "Oh, come on, I would never hurt you guys. I only take out people who deserve it. And a lot of them do."

Teagan kept staring, flat-out fascinated. She already idolized Ivy, wanted to be like her when she grew up, except she knew she could never be that badass. "Like, how many? Can you give us a ballpark idea?"

Ivy looked up at the ceiling, considering it for a moment. "Thirty-four."

Teagan's mouth fell open. Whoa.

"I don't think she's joking now either," Marley said, eyes wide.

"No, I don't think so either." Thirty-four kills! Holy shitballs. They were in the presence of a goddamn legend, and Teagan was glad they were allies.

Ivy shrugged good-naturedly. "Had to be done. And if you think that total's impressive, you should meet my sisters."

"Your sisters do...that kind of work too?" Teagan asked, astounded.

"Yep. All of 'em."

"How many do you have?"

"Eight."

Teagan's eyebrows shot up. "*Eight?*"

Ivy nodded once, pure admiration on her face. "They're all something else, I'll tell you that much."

“You have eight sisters,” Marley repeated, looking as stunned as Teagan felt. “And you were all in the same line of, ah, work.”

“We were all...adopted by the same people.”

The way she said the last part struck Teagan as odd. She was dying of curiosity now. Who had they worked for? Had to be a government agency. CIA? DEA? DIA? Something big.

“I’ll introduce you when they come into town. You’ll like them. You too, Teagan. They’d love both you guys.”

“I’m in,” Teagan said. If they were anything like Ivy, she absolutely wanted to meet them all. “When?”

Ivy laughed. “Whenever. Let’s say as soon as this situation is dealt with, how’s that? I’ll call a reunion. It’ll be epic.” Her secretive smile sort of scared Teagan a little.

“Has Walker met them?” she asked.

“Oh yeah.” Another smile, this one wistful and not scary at all. “Poor guy. Didn’t have a clue what he was getting into back then. It was like trial by fire. Warwick’s met one of them, by the way.”

“Chloe,” Marley said.

“That’s right. She’s a live wire. You can say what you want about her, but she’s definitely the most fun of all of us,” she said to Teagan.

“Yeah, she’s a real blast,” Marley deadpanned.

Ivy burst out laughing. “Good one.”

Teagan was pretty sure she’d just missed out on an inside joke.

Marley cocked her head at Ivy and narrowed her eyes. “Are you ever gonna tell Teagan and me exactly what it is you did and who you worked for?”

“Maybe,” Ivy said thoughtfully. “I’d need to check with the others first and see if they’re cool with it, so maybe at the reunion. We’ll bring you into the fold and make you both unofficial members,” she added with a wink.

“Does this have anything to do with why you wanted to look at my hip?” Teagan asked, thinking back to how odd that had been.

Ivy picked up her mug again. “Maybe.”

“Why would you want to see her hip?” Marley asked with a puzzled look.

Another shrug. “You’ll find out at—”

“The reunion,” she and Teagan said at the same time and grinned at each other.

“What are y’all laughing at?” Decker asked as he appeared in the doorway, looking freshly showered and even sexier than before, if that was possible. The thought of having him all over her again, inside her, was enough to make her light-headed.

Ivy waved him away. “Never you mind. We’re having a girl talk, and you’re not invited.”

“What, so you’re sending me to my room or something?”

“Good idea.” Ivy flicked her hand again in a teasing manner, shooing him away. “Go.”

Decker stood there a moment, then realized she was serious and rolled his eyes before retreating back down the hall muttering under his breath. Part of Teagan was sad to see him go, but she was enjoying the visit too much to miss him for long.

“Your turn,” she said to Marley, loving the girl talk. Especially with these two powerhouse women. “I wanna know all about the story behind you and Warwick.”

“Oh, this is a good one,” Ivy murmured, propping her chin in her hands and watching Marley expectantly.

The next hour flew by as the conversation kept flowing. Teagan laughed more than she’d laughed in what felt like years, her flagging spirit renewed. These kinds of moments were precious and what made life worth living. She would be sad to leave Marley and Ivy behind when this was done.

And Decker. She was going to miss him like crazy.

“I really want to see you after all this is over with,” Marley said, pulling her from her thoughts. “I know it’s not your style to stick around after a job, but I hope you will this time. Unless there’s someone waiting for you back in San Fran?”

She could feel Ivy watching her closely. “No. Just my parents.”

That wistful ache started up again. She’d come to love Crimson Point and the people she’d met here. Felt comfortable with these women and enjoyed their company. But it all depended on what happened. On how this panned out, whether Lily’s killer was caught...and what the situation was with her and Decker when all was said and done.

If things were too awkward between them at that point, she couldn’t stay. “I’ll think about it,” was all she said.

“You’d better,” Ivy chimed in, sliding off her stool. “If I’m calling all my sisters into town for a reunion, you better be here too.” She and Marley both hugged her goodbye.

“Decker?” Ivy called out. “We’re leaving. You can come out of your room now.”

He came down the hall looking slightly disgruntled but hot as hell, even with the scowl. “Great visit,” he muttered, making Marley and Teagan grin. “Thanks for stopping by.”

“You’re welcome.” Ivy hugged him too. “See you guys soon. Call if you need anything.”

“Yes, anything,” Marley stressed, reaching out to hug Decker. “And you better take care of yourself—and her.”

He squeezed her and patted her back, meeting Teagan’s gaze over her shoulder. “I will. Tell Warwick I said hey.”

“Will do.” She released him and stepped back to look between the two of them, face serious. “Y’all both be careful, okay? I mean it.”

Teagan opened her mouth to respond but Decker beat her to it. “Don’t worry, I’m on it. I’ll make sure nothing happens to her.” He looked right at her as he said it.

She felt like the breath had been knocked from her lungs. He was being protective, yes, but there was also a raw possessiveness in his tone and eyes that stunned her. And he wasn't even trying to hide it. Not even from his sister. What did that mean?

Marley blinked, cleared her throat. "Ah...yeah, good. Okay. Love you." She patted his shoulder, shot Teagan a smile on the way by and walked out into the January gloom after Ivy.

Decker locked the door behind them and turned to face Teagan. He frowned when he caught her staring at him. "What?"

"I..." She didn't know what to say. Couldn't even form the words with him standing less than twenty feet away and this insane heat rolling through her body.

She wanted him so badly she could hardly breathe. Wanted him to walk up to her and take over like he had last time. Pin her to the wall or the floor or the bed and make her forget her own name. Even if it was only for a little while.

A ringtone sliced through the quiet, and it took a moment for her to realize it was coming from her phone. Only a handful of people had the new number, and she couldn't ignore any of them, so she rushed to her room to answer it without recognizing the caller. "Hello."

"It's Clive. How are you?"

"Fine." She didn't like him, and they weren't going to be friends. But she was ninety-nine-percent certain he wasn't a threat to her, and she was also a professional. She would continue to work with him through this investigation to ensure the people responsible for the marina attack were caught, and that her cousin's killer was locked up for life. In spite of their personal differences, at the moment Clive was still her best means of making those things happen. "Any updates?"

"A few, but I would prefer to talk to you in person."

"Just me?"

"No, both of you."

Good, because she would just have told Decker everything later anyway. “Did forensics find anything?”

“No, the fire was too hot apparently.”

Her chest hitched, the last seed of hope she’d tucked away deep inside shriveling up and dying. Shit. The whole point of getting onto the *Destiny* again was to search for evidence. How the hell were they going to get anything concrete about Lily’s killer now?

“Does thirty minutes from now work?” Clive asked.

Like she had someplace else to be? “Yeah, that’s fine,” she said dully, then named a rest stop up the highway for the meeting point and ended the call. She didn’t think Clive was a threat to her, but she still wasn’t giving him their location.

She texted Decker to explain they had a meeting to go to, then set her phone in her lap. Her sigh seemed to echo in the empty room. Dammit!

“Now what,” she muttered into the empty room as a heavy weight of disappointment settled over her.

She couldn’t seem to shake it. Or the bone-deep longing for the man down the hall.

But she knew damn well she couldn’t have Decker. He wasn’t emotionally available, and with her commitment issues, she was no good for him anyway.

On top of that, she’d let her cousin down. Terribly.

Because any evidence she might have found aboard the *Destiny* was now nothing but a pile of ash.

Chapter Fourteen

The moment Decker lowered himself onto the bench next to her at the table in the tiny rest stop building, something eased deep inside Teagan. She was thankful to have him beside her for this, even though there was an unresolved tension between them, and he was in this mess because of her.

He made her feel things. Stirred the deepest yearnings of her heart. And it scared her.

She didn't dare hope he would want anything to do with her when this was all over. Couldn't let herself dream about the future yet. Couldn't think about anything else but getting justice.

Clive set his phone face down on the surface and regarded them. He'd come alone. Creed was outside keeping watch, so it was just the three of them in this small, deserted place. "Still no sign of Donny, but we expect he'll be found soon and taken in for questioning immediately. Our team has reviewed the security footage and interviewed all witnesses. Either Donny or the attacker disabled the security cameras prior to your arrival. The only other witness who saw the suspect gave the same description as you. Too big to be Donny, wearing a balaclava and hat. We're working on tracking his phone now."

"What about the truck from the other night?" Teagan asked.

"Nothing yet. The driver's likely either ditched or hidden it somewhere. No solid tips yet, and there are lots of places around here to hide something."

"Is there any good news?" She was getting angry now. This wasn't just her searching for answers on her own anymore. Decker's life had been in danger last night too. She wished Clive would just get to the point. With all the DEA's and FBI's resources, surely they could at least find Donny and bring him in to find out what he knew.

“Yes. We got something from the device you planted. Confirmation that there was a good-sized smuggling operation run through the bar that involved the owner, one employee, and at least one patron.”

“By employee, you mean the head bouncer,” Decker said, saying exactly what she was thinking.

“Correct. We’ve had them on surveillance, and the takedown happened last night after the incident at the marina. We have the owner in custody along with the rest of his crew. We’re currently interrogating them all. It’s highly unlikely they would be released on bail, and we believe either the bouncer or the patron was the driver who ran you off the road. Which brings me to my next bit of business.”

“Which is?” she said.

He paused, almost seemed uncomfortable before continuing. “Last night’s operation officially concludes your assistance with our case. As such, your protective detail has been terminated—”

“Like hell,” Decker growled before Teagan could respond. “She was almost killed twice last night, and the attacker is still out there. This isn’t over. You know he’ll likely target her again.”

“I understand.” He paused again, shook his head slightly, frustration etched into his face. “Off the record, I want to tell you I don’t like this any better than you do. But the decision has been made, and it’s out of my hands. The DEA is terminating its contract with you.”

The anger that had been building for the past few minutes burst free. They were cutting her loose? Now? Without any answers? Or protection? “You promised to help me find whoever tried to kill me and murdered my cousin. That was the deal when I approached you. The deal you and I made before I signed on,” she choked out, her heart thundering in her ears.

He nodded once, jaw tight. “I know, and I stressed that to my superiors. I’m still trying to make it work on my end, but

the FBI is still conducting its own investigation into last night's attack, and the DEA feels that—”

“Your word means shit,” she spat, shoving to her feet. “Got it.”

The look in his eyes changed. Cooled. Resentment maybe. But there was a definite chill in his gaze now as he looked at her. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry,” she said with a humorless laugh and started to pace the length of the room. It was either that or explode. “So not only am I suddenly on my own with a killer after me and no answers after the promises you made to bring me on board—the DEA isn’t going to help put a stop to any of this.”

“Like hell they aren’t,” Decker said, taking out his phone to call someone.

“The FBI will find whoever was responsible for last night, and they will follow up the other angles from there. In the meantime, you’re safe in your new location,” Clive said to her in a quieter tone while Decker started talking in the background. “You wouldn’t even give me the address. Whoever targeted you last night certainly isn’t going to find you.”

She stopped, nailed him with a hard stare. “No? You can’t promise that either. And this timing is even more suspicious when we factor in that *you* were the only person I told about Decker and me going to the marina yesterday.”

He blinked in shock. “Surely you’re not suggesting—”

“I’m not saying you’re dirty, but someone in your office could be. And even if you’re not dirty, you still used me.” Her voice shook. She was so goddamn angry she could hardly choke the words out. “You used me, got what you wanted from me, and now that your little operation is over, you’re cutting me loose because honoring the agreement—*that you made*—doesn’t directly benefit the DEA. *That’s* the truth.” The feeling of betrayal was brutal. Of being lost and alone.

The DEA didn’t give a shit about her. Never had. She’d been an idiot to trust them.

Clive's jaw flexed, regret and resentment clear in his expression. "Not at this time, no."

Decker slapped his phone on the table and hit a button, his stare boring into Clive. "You're on speaker. Go ahead."

"This is Ryder Locke," the deep voice said through the phone. "Teagan, I'm aware of what's happening and just want to reassure you that we're on this. If the DEA won't help see this through, we'll use our connections with the FBI to make it happen. And you'll still have protection. Decker's made it clear he wants to stay with you until the threat against you is neutralized, and given what I know about Creed, I'm betting he'll stay too."

"He'll stay," Decker said. "But even if he didn't, I've got this." He looked right at her as he said it, and his unspoken words were clear in his eyes. *I've got you.*

It was so unexpected, she sucked in a shaky breath, the threat of tears rising to the surface. The DEA had abandoned her, but he was staying.

Decker nailed Clive with a hard stare. "I think we're done here. But I'm warning you now, this isn't over. After what she's done for you and everything she'd been through, the DEA owes it to her to help end this and make sure she's safe." He stood, towered over Clive until the other man rose, giving Teagan a guilty look.

"I really am sorry," he said, and in that moment, she believed he meant it. Not that it changed anything.

"Save your bullshit apology. No one here's buying it. Just go," she bit out, part of her wanting to fly at him. Not just him. Every fucking DEA agent involved in this shit show and the mess they'd dumped her in.

Decker escorted her out to the SUV, paused a moment after getting in before shifting to face her. "You okay?"

No. Not even close. How could she be? "I'm not giving up," she whispered, holding onto her composure by a thread. "I can't. I can't abandon Lily that way."

His gaze was steady. Resolved. "I know."

“And it was really kind of you to put yourself out there for me like that, but you’ve been through more than enough because of me. You don’t need to stay.” She didn’t want him to get hurt because of her. But facing this on her own scared her. Getting knifed and thrown overboard had proven she was no match against an assailant physically.

His expression darkened. “I’m not going anywhere until this is done. Screw the DEA. We’ll work with the FBI and the local police.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “We?”

He nodded once. “You’re not alone anymore. I’ll help you any way I can.”

The tears she’d been fighting suddenly flooded her eyes. She drew in a breath, blinked fast, but they overflowed anyway, spilling down her cheeks. She’d always had to fight on her own. Always had to prove herself every step of the way. Show that she could handle it. Show that she was worthy of others’ respect.

Decker understood it somehow. Understood it all and was standing by her now. Putting his own life at risk to help her.

She covered her face in her hands and turned away. But Decker refused to let her shut him out.

His heavy arms closed around her, drawing her close to his body. He held her tight, his breath warm against her temple. “It’s gonna be okay, sugar.”

No, it wasn’t. Because even if they got out of this alive and found the killer, Lily was already dead. And that meant it could never be okay again.

Jayden’s eyes burned from fatigue as he drove down the winding road to his townhouse complex up on the hill above Crimson Point. He’d been forced to attend a training thing all day he couldn’t get out of, making it impossible to find out what was going on or if he’d missed anything.

There'd been lots of talk about last night's explosion and shooting at the marina. But nobody seemed to know whether the two people involved were dead or not. Right now they were still listed as just missing.

Missing wasn't dead. And that was a huge fucking problem for him.

There'd been no word from Donny since he'd last seen him at the marina. He'd been afraid to call him in case the cops or FBI had brought him in, didn't want to show up on the phone log again and draw suspicion.

A commercial came on the radio. He punched a button to change the channel. Paused when the DJ started talking about the marina attack. "The police are being tight-lipped about what exactly happened last night, but they have confirmed that both people involved survived the attack."

"Fuck!" His vision went hazy for a moment as shock and fear sliced through him, the centerlines blurring in front of him.

The blare of a horn made him jump, jerk the wheel just in time to avoid hitting the car coming at him. Oh, Christ, what the hell was he supposed to do now? He'd risked everything yesterday, not only by planting and detonating the bomb, but then standing out there in plain fucking view of anyone watching to try and finish them off with his sidearm. All for nothing, and now every law enforcement agency and cop on the coast would be looking for him.

His stomach rolled. He swallowed, pressed down harder on the accelerator, racing through the rain. He wanted to get home, lock the door, and get wasted. Sleep for twelve hours and then hopefully figure out what the fuck to do next when he woke up. He couldn't think clearly right now. He was too tired, too freaked out.

Half-expecting to see cop cars parked out front of his place, relief washed through him when the curb was empty. There was no one waiting inside either. No FBI agents in their windbreakers waiting to arrest him.

There was no security footage from the marina cameras. It was possible one of the boat owners had a private one on their vessel, but he'd been careful to cover his entire face and head, had worn gloves.

No, the only real threat he was facing right now was if Donny talked.

He walked upstairs in a daze, went straight to his dresser and yanked the middle drawer open, shoved aside the clothes inside to reveal the last of his stash. Three pills left. That was it.

He stared at them longingly. He was so fucking tired. Desperate. Almost out of money, his life a steaming pile of shit, and the biggest threat he'd ever faced hanging over his head like an anvil waiting to drop.

His phone rang, cutting through his thoughts. The familiar ringtone sent a shaft of pain through him. He closed his eyes. Pressed his lips together for a long moment before answering. The lawyer had informed him not to take the custody battle to court.

You're not going to get what you want, and I'm advising you to let this go.

How the hell was he supposed to let go of his kids?

But that was the least of his problems at the moment. He'd landed himself in a hole he couldn't climb out of alone. And the people he needed to reach out to posed a threat to him.

"Hey, sweetheart. I was just thinking about you."

"Hi, Daddy," Sarah said in her sweet little voice. "Did you just get home from work?"

"I did. I miss you."

"I miss you too. Are you still coming to take us to the movie after school tomorrow?"

Oh, shit, he'd completely forgotten it was already Friday tomorrow. "Yeah, of course I am. You excited?"

“Yes! We can’t wait. Can we have a big popcorn this time and a chocolate bar?”

“You can have whatever you want,” he said, throat tight. “Daddy’s gotta go get some sleep now, sweetheart, but I’ll see you tomorrow. Love you.”

“Love you too. Bye.”

He collapsed onto the edge of the bed, set his phone aside and buried his face in his hands, pulling in deep breaths that did nothing to calm the fear clawing at his insides. Then he looked down at his phone. Set his jaw. Much as he dreaded making the call, he had no choice.

Craig picked up right away. “I just heard on the radio. You good?”

“No, and you’re the only one I trust.”

“Is there any way either of them can ID you?”

“No.”

“What about Donny?”

“He’s gone. I don’t know where. Listen, I need another run. Needed it like yesterday.”

“Because you’re broke.”

He scrubbed a hand over his hair. “Yeah. I know I fucked up, but I didn’t know what else to do, and you know you can trust me, and I’m begging you—”

“Calm down.”

He stopped, exhaled. Holy shit, he’d never felt this frantic before. Wasn’t sure whether it was everything going on, or coming off the drugs. He wanted to take them so badly but couldn’t. He had to save them. Had to hold off and battle through this on his own, so he could use them if another emergency came up.

“There’s plenty of work to go around. I’ve got another run coming up in the next few days if you want.”

He almost groaned out loud. “Thank you. I mean it.”

Craig grunted. “You’re good at what you do, Jay. Don’t make me regret giving you another chance. And stop doing stupid shit.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I will. And I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

“I’ll send you the details when I have ’em. Meantime, check the schedule to pick your spot.”

Chapter Fifteen

“You’ll let us know if you need anything?” Ryder asked.

“I will,” Decker answered, phone to his ear as he stared out the darkened kitchen window into the rain. Beyond the shadowy line of trees out front, the light at the edge of the cliff reflected onto the water below.

“How’s Teagan holding up?”

“She’s holding her own.” Though she had to feel abandoned and betrayed by the DEA. They and the FBI were conducting their own separate investigations, and discovering who had blown up the boat would be a deeper dive into the smuggling ring. There was still a chance either agency might discover who had killed Lily and assaulted Teagan, but it would probably be by default.

It had been a long, frustrating day. Both he and Teagan had been working their contacts all afternoon, from local law enforcement to the FBI and DEA. Ryder and Callum had been reaching out to other people as well, trying to find someone willing to help investigate Lily’s death and find whoever had tried to kill Teagan. “But she’s not giving up,” he finished.

“No, she wouldn’t. I appreciate you sticking this out, Deck.”

I’m not doing this because it’s my job. But he couldn’t say that without arousing suspicion about him and Teagan. “No problem.” He wanted to keep her safe, and hell, yeah, he wanted to see the guy who’d attacked them brought down too.

“I’ve been talking with Clive again. He’s not happy about the way things have gone. He’s trying to find a way to reopen the investigation into the marina attack, and Teagan’s cousin’s death.”

Decker grunted. “Teagan doesn’t trust the DEA not to screw her over again. And at this point, we still don’t know whether someone on their team could be connected to all of

this. Until the FBI rules it out officially, we can't know for sure."

"Yeah, noted. I was surprised when he called though. He legit sounds like he believes Teagan and wants to help. We'll know more by tomorrow. Any update from the Feds yet?"

"Nothing good. Young guy from the marina's still in the wind, and we don't have anything new on the suspect. Our best bet is finding the truck involved in the collision and tracing him that way."

"Something will turn up. It's only a matter of time."

Yeah, well, it couldn't be soon enough.

"Anyway, it's late, and both of you have to be running on fumes. Get some sleep and I'll check in with you in the morning."

"Roger that. Have a good night." He ended the call, closed his laptop, and set it next to the notepad where he'd scrawled a few pages of notes throughout the day. Most of them crossed off because the ideas he'd come up with had gone nowhere.

The quiet settled around him, the patter of rain on the roof filling the room. He and Teagan had eaten a quick dinner together while comparing notes about an hour ago. She'd been on another call when she'd disappeared into her room, and he hadn't seen her since.

He left the range hood light on in the kitchen, made sure all the doors and windows were secure before heading down the hall, only to pause at the rear doors leading out to the small patio and garden when he saw a light flicker briefly then go out. He opened one side and looked out, startled to see Teagan sitting on a bench set against the back of the house. He could barely make out her silhouette in the darkness.

"You okay?" he asked. It was safe enough for her to be out here, hidden away where no one could see her. Still, he would prefer they go back inside.

"Yeah." She lifted her hands, quickly wiped her face and cleared her throat.

His chest tightened at the thought that she'd been out here alone, crying. "What are you doing out here? It's wet and freezing."

"Just wanted some air. I called my parents to let them know I'm okay."

He shut the door and moved closer, unsure of his welcome. When she didn't protest or get up and leave, he sat next to her, his eyes adjusting to the little bit of light coming through the doors he'd just stepped out of. And yep, she'd definitely been crying.

He wasn't good at this, but for her, he wanted to try. "Did they say something that upset you?"

She snorted. "No more than usual. No, I mean, I can't really tell them what's going on, but I said there'd been an incident. Or two, and that I'm all right. They made it clear that they don't approve of my decision to go through with this and asked me again to stop and come home. They don't get it."

"Is that why you were crying?" He reached out to skim his fingertips across her cheek. It was still damp, and not from the rain because they were sheltered here under the roofline.

She looked up at him but didn't pull away. He wanted to hold her. Wipe the sadness from her dark eyes. "No, I was just looking at some pictures of Lily I uploaded to the Cloud a while back. I made an album for her funeral and saved my favorites."

She had to be exhausted, because he sure as hell was. "You're freezing," he said, in a low voice. "Come inside."

A pause. "All right." She got up, reluctantly went back inside with him. She bypassed the kitchen. Went into the living room and sat on the couch without turning any lights on, the range hood light filtering softly into the room.

He sat next to her. "Can I see some of the pictures?"

Surprise flashed across her face. "Sure." She pulled up the pictures on her phone, scrolled through until she came to one near the end. "This was the last one of us together, a few weeks before she died."

The picture showed Teagan and Lily standing in front of a giant outdoor Halloween light display, arms around each other's shoulders, huge grins on their faces. Teagan was taller by a few inches, more slender. They were both stunning women and looked so happy. "Where was this taken?"

"San Francisco. We were out having dinner and shopping together."

"Who's older?"

"Me, by two weeks. Our moms are sisters." She flipped through some more pictures, showing him snapshots of her private life he'd been so curious about this entire time.

Lily had a bright, almost contagious smile. And from what he was seeing in the photos, it was obvious she and Teagan had adored each other. He could see how close they'd been. A loss like that changed a person forever. "She looks like she was a lot of fun."

"She was *so* fun. Easy company, liked to get up to stuff. We hung out all the time when our work schedules allowed it, even if it was just to run errands together or whatever." She stared down at the screen, her expression full of longing and heartache. "I miss her so damn much. And now I feel like I've let her down all over again."

"What? Why?"

"She shouldn't have died. I asked her to keep watch for anything suspicious, to help me out with what I was working on. So she did, and if I'd gotten to her place just a few minutes earlier that night, I could have saved her. Either by scaring off or fighting whoever broke into her place and drugged her, or by calling 911 and doing CPR until help showed up."

She shook her head, her frustration palpable. "I went to the DEA specifically because I thought I was offering enough incentive for them to work the connection between her murder and what happened to me on the *Destiny*. I was so stupid."

"Not stupid. You were looking for help and thought they were your best shot. Because they looked like your best shot. Right up until today."

She bent her head, wiped at her cheeks again. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to move on from here.” She hunched down and wrapped her arms around herself.

She sounded so sad and lost, he couldn’t stand it. And he hated that she was blaming herself for all of this. She’d been through hell these past few days, was clearly still grieving for Lily. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Tugged her into him.

She froze for an instant, but then turned fully toward him. Before he even had a chance to steel himself, she curled into his body, tucking her face into the side of his neck. Seeking comfort.

He closed his eyes, wound his other arm around her to pull her close, the glimpse of vulnerability from a woman that strong shredding him. She shivered, burrowed in tighter, and all the protectiveness he felt for her ripped through him like a lightning bolt.

He tightened his grip, his heart beating faster. She was so small and soft in his arms. So brave and determined and capable, seeing her this way wrenched his heart.

They sat there in silence as the rain dripped from the edge of the eave outside, fat drops pattering on the roof. He hugged her tighter. Wishing he never had to let her go. “We’re going to find him,” he murmured, wanting to give her hope. Needing to.

She lifted her head, and the instant their eyes met, he felt everything shift. His promise to guard her in a professional capacity, all the reasons why he’d made up his mind to keep his distance, everything disappeared as he stared into those dark eyes and felt an echo resonate somewhere deep inside.

Then Teagan leaned in and gently touched her lips to his. Slowly. Almost hesitant, as if unsure whether he still wanted her.

He wanted her so much he could hardly fucking breathe.

His hands tightened on her back, every muscle in his body contracting as pure hunger poured into his gut. His cock

swelled, went instantly hard as he tugged her onto his lap, his fingers sliding into her hair to drag her down into a slow, hot kiss.

Teagan made a murmuring sound and straddled him, her core pressed firmly against the aching bulge in his jeans. Just a few layers of material separating him from being inside her.

He slanted his lips across hers to open them, delved his tongue inside to touch and tease. She sucked in a sharp breath and flattened herself to him, hands plunging into the back of his hair.

The heat between them went from scorching to inferno in the space of a single heartbeat. He locked his arms around her and shoved to his feet, carrying her from the room while she wound her legs around his waist.

He strode straight for his room at the end of the hall. The instant he laid her on the bed, they attacked each other's clothes, peeling them off and dumping them on the floor until they were both naked. Teagan lay there sprawled on her back, breathing fast as she gazed up at him with heavy-lidded dark eyes.

Decker held her in place with a hand in the center of her chest, a low growl coming from him as he stared at the perfection he'd revealed. She was all lean lines and slender curves, the light from the hallway spilling over her smooth golden skin. He came down on top of her, hips settling between her legs, and took her mouth in another long, scorching kiss, reveling in the feel of her beneath him.

Teagan nipped at his jaw. "Oh God, I'd forgotten how good you feel."

He was about to make her feel even better. But the frantic energy between them was all wrong. This had to be different than the last night they'd spent together. It needed to mean something more than getting each other off.

And he needed to be the one to drive the point home.

He shifted his weight onto his knees and cupped her breast in his palm, dipped down to pull a tight brown nipple into his

mouth. Slowly. Flicking his tongue as he sucked.

She whispered his name and arched, her fingers digging into his back. He teased one nipple, then the other, drawing it out. Waited until she was moving restlessly to try and get more of the pressure and friction she needed between her thighs.

His cock throbbed in time with his frantic heartbeat, hard and ready. But not yet. Not until he'd shown her that this thing between them was more than physical.

He held her by the hips and moved downward, pausing to flick his tongue into her navel, along the crease of her thigh. She made an impatient sound, fingers digging into his head. "Don't tease," she whispered.

"Not teasing." He fully intended to give her what she needed. Eventually.

He wedged his shoulders between her thighs and stared down at the slick, tender folds he'd revealed. She was so damn sexy, all flushed and swollen with arousal, waiting for his mouth.

When she made an incoherent sound, he brushed his lips against the sensitive flesh, his primal side glorying in the way she dug her fingers into his scalp and lifted her hips, silently demanding more.

Yeah, sugar, hang on tight.

He feathered his tongue across her clit, earning a gasp and a whimper. Then he eased his tongue along one side of her folds, dipped down to plunge inside her, won another desperate sound before licking back up the other side.

"Decker," she whispered, nails digging into his scalp.

He loved seeing her this way. Loved making her crazy, getting her worked up and anticipating the moment he gave her what she needed.

His hands kept a solid grip on her hips as he settled in and fluttered his tongue against the side of her clit. Teagan whimpered and opened her thighs wider, hands pulling at his head.

He refused to be rushed. Took his time licking and caressing the swollen bud. Sucking gently as he slid a finger into her. Then two. Rubbing that spot just inside her that had her plaintive cry filling his ears. Pushing her to the edge of her control before he made her come.

Within minutes she was writhing under his mouth, her breathing shallow, thighs tightening around his shoulders, her inner walls quivering. So close.

He pulled his fingers free and softened the pressure of his tongue, easing her back from the edge while he shifted to grab for the condom in his wallet. Rolling it down his length, he levered up and came down on top of her, capturing her mouth with his as he guided his cock into place. He waited a heartbeat, savoring the tension in her, letting the anticipation build again. Then thrust deep.

Her cry was smothered by their kiss, but she wasn't the only one drowning in pleasure now. She was tight and hot and wet, clenching around him with every stroke of his cock. He shifted his weight, caught her hand and brought it between them to rub her clit, his tongue twining with hers. She felt so goddamn incredible, the raw, sensual sounds she made setting him on fire.

Ecstasy spiraled up his spine, pulling his whole body taut as he rode her. He reached up, captured a tight nipple between his thumb and finger to squeeze and roll it.

Teagan turned her head to the side. "Oh, God, Decker," she gasped out, then went rigid, and on his next thrust, a long, liquid moan rolled from her throat. She shuddered, writhed under him in her release.

He growled in triumph and approval and drove deeper. Faster. Fighting for breath, his heart pounding out of control.

When release finally slammed into him, he threw his head back, groaned like a dying man as the orgasm rolled through his whole body in wave after wave of blinding pleasure. There was nothing but this. The two of them fused together, him buried deep inside her.

The tension flowed out of him. He sank down on her, tucking his face into her neck while his heart slowed and his breathing returned to normal. Teagan wound her arms around his back, dragging the sole of her foot up and down the back of his calf and thigh.

She nuzzled his temple. Kissed him while he pinned her to the bed, unable to move. Not wanting to. “I think we both really needed that,” she whispered.

He made a sound of agreement and summoned the will to roll off her, taking her with him onto their sides. She cuddled into him immediately, throwing her leg over his thigh, her hand drifting lazily up and down his back.

In the sudden quiet, he could hear the rain on the roof. He tugged the covers over them and wrapped her up tight in his arms, content on a level he’d never experienced before. If it had taken everything leading up to now to make this happen, it was more than worth it. “You’re not going to take off before I wake up this time, right?”

She chuckled. “No.” Her fingers were so gentle along his spine. So soothing, the way she held him healing something deep inside him he didn’t want to examine. He wanted to burrow into her and never move again. “I had no idea you were so cuddly.”

“I’m not. Only with you.”

She made a humming sound of pure satisfaction and slid her hand into his hair, fingers working their magic along his scalp and turning him into putty.

Several minutes passed, and he was nearly asleep when she spoke next. “I was glad to see Marley today. I really like her.”

He grunted in reply, floating on a cloud of contentment. Feeling closer to her than he had with anyone else he’d been with.

“You guys don’t look alike that much, but there’s a slight resemblance in your faces.”

“We’re half-siblings.”

Her fingers stilled for an instant, then resumed their hypnotic caress. “Really? You never told me that. I can tell you’re close. Did you grow up together?”

“Mmhmm.” He squeezed the round rise of her ass, enjoying being able to explore her at a more leisurely place. This felt like stolen time, and he intended to make the most of it.

“You’re the eldest?”

“By three years.” She was a lot more curious about him than he’d imagined. “Things were tough between us for a long time. All of us.”

“In what way?”

He sighed. This wasn’t easy for him to talk about, but he felt so close to her right now he didn’t mind telling her. “Our dad died when we were pretty young. Then my stepmom slowly drank herself to death afterward.”

“Oh no.”

He never thought about it anymore. Or tried not to. “I’d already stepped into the role of man of the family by that time. But even before Mom died, Marley and I had both essentially become parents to the twins. I did my best to provide for us all with whatever money I earned. But at some point, I stopped being a brother altogether.”

“Is that why you joined the Marines? To provide for them?” Her fingers slid through his hair. Calming. Soothing.

“Yeah. And to be honest, part of me was glad to be gone.”

“I can understand that. You were forced into a situation at a young age that was really unfair. It makes sense that you would have resented it.”

Her words resonated deep inside. He *had* resented it. Bitterly. But he’d had no choice. No choice unless he was willing to see his siblings split up. And as angry as he’d been, Marley, Tristan, and Gavin had been struggling with their own pain at the same time. “I regret it now.”

“Why? You were just a kid yourself.”

“After I enlisted, I rarely went home, just sent money back every month and told myself I was still doing my part to support them.” He wasn’t proud of it, how he’d distanced himself from them.

Teagan made a soft sound of understanding. “You pulled away because you wanted to be free of the weight you’d been carrying.”

She got it. “Hell of a thing to think of your family as a burden. And while I was gone, Marley was back home left to do all the heavy lifting by herself.” He still felt guilty about that.

“I think you need to give yourself a break. You were young and did the best you could in a really shitty situation.”

“It was shitty for them too.”

“For all of you. When did Marley enlist?”

“Soon as the twins were through school and able to fend for themselves.” He sighed, her touch soothing away the jagged edges of the memories. “They joined up not long after her.”

“Is that why you moved out here to the West Coast? To try and fix things with her?”

He nodded, kissed the top of her head. “Marley’s amazing, and so are my brothers. I’ve got a lot to make up for, and I don’t want to miss out on any more time together.”

She was silent for a long moment, fingers stroking the back of his neck now. “That must have been really hard on all of you, what happened with your parents and everything after. Makes a lot of sense now that you give off that aloof and untouchable vibe.”

He eased his head back to look at her, lifting an eyebrow. “Do I feel aloof and untouchable to you right now?”

Her grin flashed in the dimness. “No, not at the moment, and I’m enjoying this glimpse into a different side of you immensely. But I get why you come off that way. And I’m betting you let very few people past your walls.”

He broke eye contact and pulled her face into his throat again, unable to look at her. Because her observation had just hit a direct bull's-eye deep in his chest. *I let you in.*

It wasn't a comfortable thought. Not with so much uncertainty between them, but he'd had no choice. She'd snuck past his defenses no matter how hard he'd tried to keep his distance. Something about her wouldn't let him, and now he wanted her to trust him fully, let him in, in return. "Guess not," he said. "But neither do you."

"Nope, and it's intentional. Can't disappoint people that way."

He stilled, sensing the sudden tension in her. "Who could possibly be disappointed in you?" That was crazy. She was amazing. Smart and motivated, determined and brave. Not to mention loyal to the people she cared about.

"My parents."

He frowned, reached up to run his fingers through the cool silk of her hair. "Why do you say that?"

She groaned and snuggled closer, stealing another little piece of his heart. Every time she opened up to him, she burrowed deeper under his skin. "Do we have to talk about this?"

"After what I just admitted to you? Hell yes."

She snickered lightly, then sighed. "They love me, I know that. That's not our issue. But they hate what I do. Hated that I joined the military. They think I'm wasting my life. They always wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer or whatever, and constantly remind me that they sacrificed everything when they emigrated from Korea to give me the life they never had. The chance to follow my dreams."

"And are you doing that?"

She thought about it for a moment. "Yes. And up until recently, I thought I was pretty damn good at what I do."

"Trust me, no 'until recently' about it, you *are* damn good at your job." She amazed him.

“Thank you.” She kissed his chest, making his heart squeeze even as he warned himself not to slide any deeper with her. “But I have to get Lily’s killer. That’s the only way I can move forward.”

Decker tightened his hold on her, a sudden ripple of alarm creeping up his spine. She wasn’t going to let this go no matter what it took. Even if it got her killed in the process. All he could do was make every effort to keep that from happening.

“Then we’ll find him,” he murmured into the quiet, trying to hold on to this moment because he knew deep down she would inevitably pull away.

Just as something warned him that when this was all over, he would find himself having to pick up the pieces and move forward without her.

Chapter Sixteen

Jayden jerked awake when his phone went off close to his head. He threw out a hand, fumbled around to grab it from the bedside table, his brain slow to kick into gear.

“Hello.” It was dark out. What time was it? He’d only gotten home a couple hours ago, out all night on the water running another shipment to a safe harbor he’d picked out, and then spending time with his daughters after school.

“It’s me,” his hacker contact said. “Got the last payment.”

He grunted. He’d sent it the moment his cut from last night’s shipment had hit his account, desperate for news on Teagan. “Got anything for me?”

“Yeah, actually. Tracked her phone.”

He sat up, the fatigue vanishing under a surge of hope. “Is she still here?”

“Yes, so far, but this is the phone from the other night. The one that wound up in the water with her.”

“But it’s still working.”

“It was switched back on temporarily,” he confirmed. “The signal shows it’s at the sheriff’s office, to be specific, so the cops or Feds or whoever must have taken it there as evidence.”

He sagged, his heart sinking like a rock. Shit, what the hell good did that do him? Was he supposed to go there and wait to see if she came to get it? The place was crawling with cops, and if she did go there, she would probably have more security with her. “Is that all you can tell me?”

“It was last switched on about twenty minutes ago, then it shut off again. She might go back to get it, but I doubt it.”

“So that’s it. I’m fucked.”

“Not necessarily.”

His head came up. “What’s that mean?”

A sigh. “Look, I don’t advertise this kind of shit, but I know someone who might be able to get us some answers.”

“On Teagan’s location?”

“Dunno. Won’t hurt for me to try. But it’ll—”

“Cost me. Yeah, I’m aware.”

“Are you ready to roll right now?”

“I can be.”

“Good. Send me two-kay and I’ll make some calls.”

The guy could charge anything he wanted. Jayden had no choice but to pay it and roll the dice. “Fine.”

“Get moving. I’ll call you as soon as I’ve got something.”

“Just find her. I need to know where she is.” He ended the call, transferred the money, and then phoned into work to tell them he was too sick to come in for his shift tonight.

It was partly true. He was way too wound up to focus on his job, and in his line of work, that meant someone could get seriously hurt or even die.

He didn’t bother with a shower, just threw on some clothes and grabbed his sidearm on the way out to the car he was still driving. His truck was currently hidden under a tarp in an abandoned lot full of junk a few miles out of town. Hopefully no one would find it until after he had enough money to pay under the table for repairs to the front end. He had a few friends who would help him out with it.

He checked the time on his phone when he got in the driver’s seat. Almost six now, and he’d just spent the last of his latest cut. There was nothing left to show for the risks he’d taken last night. He literally couldn’t afford for this not to work out.

A million nerves buzzed in his stomach as he strapped his seatbelt on, an endless barrage of thoughts bombarding his brain. He grabbed his head, squeezed his eyes shut. Christ, he couldn’t fucking think. He was beyond exhausted, and that

cryptic message from Craig this morning after running the shipment filled him with an ominous foreboding.

Clean up your mess or else.

He understood the underlying threat in the words. The people above them in the organization had to know about Teagan. Had probably found out soon after he'd bombed the *Destiny*.

For so long he'd wanted to get their attention. For them to see his worth and usefulness and move him up the ranks. He made as much doing one run as he did a month's salary serving his country.

He shoved down the twinge of guilt. Life had taken a drastic U-turn this past year. Without the extra income stream he would be completely fucked. And now he was on the organization's radar, but not in a good way.

They had eyes and ears everywhere. Could be watching him right now.

He darted a sweeping glance around him, fear curling in the pit of his stomach. The message from Craig was clear. They wanted him to get rid of Teagan and make all this go away once and for all before it put too much attention and heat on the operations here.

In desperation, he opened the center armrest. Stared down at the three remaining pills sitting in the mostly empty plastic bag.

He swallowed, craving them with every cell in his body.

God, he hated that he needed them. Loathed what he'd become and that he craved them all the time now and that he was well on his way to becoming the same as the junkies who bought the product he helped smuggle.

But he was up to his neck in shit now. So, yeah, he needed all the help he could get, chemical or otherwise.

He took out two of the pills, needing the added confidence boost their magic gave him—a feeling of near invincibility—and downed them fast.

Already he felt a bit steadier as he turned the engine over and drove toward town. In a few minutes they would kick in fully and give him the lift he needed to see this through. They had to.

Because if he didn't find a way to isolate Teagan and kill her tonight without getting caught, he was a dead man walking.

“Deck?”

“Yeah?” Decker got up from where he'd been working on his laptop at the kitchen table and paused in the hallway outside Teagan's open door. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, messaging someone. “What's up?”

She looked up at him. The first time they'd looked at each other at all today. Because even after the incredible night they'd shared, he'd woken up alone in his bed yet again, and she'd done her best to avoid him until now. “It's Clive.”

He bristled. “What's he want?”

“To meet with me.”

“About what?” And why was she even considering it? He'd thought she was done with the DEA after what they'd pulled.

“He wants to talk to me about reopening the investigation. Just us, apparently.”

“Why alone?” And why would he want to reopen it now when he'd made it clear last night that he and the DEA were done with her and to hell with what happened to her or Lily? “That's a red flag.”

“He doesn't want anyone else from the DEA involved with this, for whatever reason. Maybe he's trying to pull strings over there on his own without anyone else knowing. Maybe he's concerned there's a leak somewhere in his chain, or maybe it's just alpha male posturing bullshit. I don't know. Anyway, I want to go and hear what he has to say.”

He stared at her, not liking this. He didn't want to see her get used and discarded again.

She shrugged. "Can't hurt at this point, and if he does make some kind of offer I like the sound of, I want to talk it over with you before I give him an answer."

It felt good to know that she trusted him with something like that, and that she valued his opinion. "Where would the meeting be?"

"Crimson Point Sheriff's Office."

He frowned. "Why there?"

"The FBI is using that as a temp field office, as there's no satellite office anywhere near here, and the DEA is coordinating with them on some things, so they're all setting up shop there at the moment."

"Crimson Point Security would be more secure."

"It would, but no way the DEA would operate out of there now that they've terminated the contract with them. Way too awkward for Clive."

He didn't like the idea of being excluded from this. Not being able to be there with her, for support and because he cared about her too much. "What about security inside?"

"It's the sheriff's office," she said in amusement. "There'll be cops and at least a few DEA and FBI agents there. Can't find a much safer place for me in all of Crimson Point."

Crimson Point Security would be safer. Or staying right here with him. "Why can't he tell you everything over the phone?"

"I want to do this face to face, and so does he."

"The DEA screwed you over once already. And we still haven't ruled out whether someone over there might be involved in this somehow."

"Yeah, about that." She paused, sighed. "The FBI SAC of the investigation called me just before Clive texted. He said as far as the Bureau's concerned, they're satisfied that Clive and

his team are all clean and had nothing to do with the marina attack. But no, of course I don't trust him after what happened. That's why I want to talk to him one-on-one, in person, to gauge him."

"What time?"

"I haven't answered him yet. I wanted to run it past you first."

"It's your call. If you want to go, I'll take you." Even if he didn't like it.

She nodded, picked up her phone and sent a text. "I'll tell him that I'll head up there now and meet him in about twenty-five minutes. That work?"

He'd rather keep her here, find out exactly what Clive had to offer first to make sure this wasn't a waste of time. "Sure."

She got up and stood in front of the mirror hanging on the wall to run a brush through her hair. "If he can help me finish this, then I have to at least hear him out." She met his gaze in the mirror. "You understand, right?"

He gave a grudging nod, a bit surprised that she cared what he thought. He understood why she would be curious, maybe even hopeful. He just didn't like the possibility of her being hurt and let down again.

Neither of them spoke while she finished doing her hair, but all he could think about as he texted Creed and Ryder about their plans was how he'd run his fingers through those silky strands for the better part of an hour last night. Well, technically early this morning, after spending the rest of the night tangled up together in his bed.

She'd woken him at just after four with her lips tracing a burning path down his abs. She'd teased him, tormented him. Sucking on him until he was on the verge of losing control before stopping and climbing on top and sinking down on him, burying him to the hilt inside her. Then she'd ridden him like a goddess until he'd forgotten his own name. They'd both come almost at the same time and fallen asleep next to each other again.

But when he'd woken up, everything had changed. She'd stayed in work mode all day, taking calls and doing research, keeping him at a frustrating distance he was respecting for now, only because she had so much going on.

"You ready?" he asked when she set the brush down.

She turned to face him, and he felt a little twinge of dread at the shuttered expression on her face. They'd been so close last night. Well, he'd *thought* they had been. Now she was back to being a virtual stranger again. Walls built up high when he wanted to level them and be with the woman she'd shown him last night.

"Almost." She picked up an eyeliner, drew some on her upper lids and then swept on some mascara. "You hear anything else from the office?"

"Creed's over there meeting with Ryder right now."

"You going to go there after?"

"No."

"Maybe you should. They're not gonna let you sit in on the meeting with me. You might as well go over to CPS and fill them in on what's happening while I'm at the Sheriff's Office. I'll call you as soon as I'm done and you can come get me."

"I'm not leaving you there alone."

"I won't be alone," she said on a laugh. "I'll be surrounded by police officers and Feds." She swept past him out into the hall.

He followed her to the front door, battling the turbulent mix of emotions churning inside him. Did she really not want anything from him beyond sex? And he didn't want her to go into that meeting without him.

When she opened the door and went to step out without so much as glancing at him, his patience snapped.

He shot a hand out, yanked the door shut in her face.

She spun around, frowning at him. "Problem?"

“Yeah.” He stood right in front of her, hands on hips. Itching to touch her. Plunge his hands into her perfect hair and kiss her until her icy veneer melted away. “Is this how we’re leaving things between us?”

She gave him a confused look that he didn’t buy. “What do you mean?”

He wasn’t playing. “Really?”

Her expression shifted. Tightened, a shadow moving behind her eyes. “Can we not do this right now?”

“When do you suggest we do it? Because I’m thinking you’d prefer never.”

She sighed. Broke eye contact. “Look, I’ve got a lot on my plate right now. And a lot at stake in this meeting. So I’d really appreciate it if you’d give me a break and not pressure me into having this conversation right now. I’m not ready.”

He absorbed that in silence. Waited until she looked up at him again before responding. “Okay,” he said, and reached past her to push the door open again, annoyance burning like a hot coal under his ribs.

He could tell she was deep in her head as he drove, so they didn’t talk on the way back to Crimson Point. Twice he had to stem the urge to reach for her hand. She was right next to him, but miles away from him mentally and emotionally, and he wanted the exact opposite.

Mentally he shook his head at himself. This might have been funny if it wasn’t so fucking ironic. He couldn’t believe he was in this situation. Him, who’d made it a point to never rely on anyone and learned to close himself off from others as a kid—even from his own siblings, whom he loved to death.

Because it was safer that way. No one could disappoint, hurt or abandon him if he never let them in in the first place.

It’s too late. You already let her in.

That only made her sudden shift all the more frustrating. He hadn’t wanted to feel anything for her. Didn’t want to feel exposed and raw now. Hated this feeling of uncertainty.

She might have fooled everyone else in the room with her act. But not him.

He saw straight through her now. Because he'd seen behind the front she showed the rest of the world. He knew the projection of seeming not to need or rely on anyone else was just a cover. Because he was an expert at it himself. And so he knew exactly how full of shit she was.

She did need someone. Someone willing to stand in her corner with her through this. And at her core, she was desperate to prove herself. To herself just as much as the rest of the world.

He was an expert at that too. "When we get there I'm taking you inside and telling them I'll be in on the meeting."

"If that's what you want, fine with me." She looked out her window again.

Decker tightened his grip on the wheel. She was tying him in knots, the ropes she'd ensnared him with pulling tighter and tighter. The independence and strength she projected only tugged harder at his protective instincts. And somehow when they got to Crimson Point in a few minutes, he had to maintain the image that there was no personal involvement between them.

Pretend nothing had happened. That this was just another job for him, when in reality it was anything but.

Didn't matter that he'd tried to stay emotionally distant from the outset. She'd snuck past every one of his defenses anyway. Now he was the one falling for her. Or maybe he'd already fallen.

All he knew was, he wasn't ready for this to end. He wanted more. More of her. More time with her. More of the connection they'd shared last night. But she'd made it clear she didn't want to get involved beyond that.

He pulled up to the front entrance, parked, and escorted her inside to the reception area. The two male DEA agents he'd met before were there to take over.

“I just need to run to the bathroom. Back in a minute,” she told them, and walked away.

Decker stared after her, wondering if she was having second thoughts about the meeting. Because he sure as hell was.

Jayden huddled in the front seat of his car and bounced his knee in an anxious rhythm, trying to calm his racing mind and stay warm without turning the car back on. It was after seven now, and he was parked on a hill overlooking the Crimson Point waterfront.

From here he could see the heart of the town, all the little shops and businesses lining the streets. He'd been out here for over an hour already, freezing his ass off without a word from his contact. He hadn't known where the hell to go, so he'd parked up here to wait.

Meanwhile, Teagan could be anywhere.

He stared at all the lights spread out below him down the hill. Why hadn't his contact called yet? This could be a complete waste of his time, and he would have to start his search for her all over again.

The good news was, he wasn't remotely tired anymore.

The bad news was, he was fucking *amped*. Bursting with pent-up energy to the point that he couldn't sit still. He shifted in his seat again, hands tapping a fast tempo on the steering wheel. His brain wouldn't stop spinning, his pulse drumming a dull beat in his ears.

He had to get her. Tonight. Somehow.

Craig had checked in on him again. Jayden got the feeling Craig no longer trusted him.

Did you take care of the problem?

No, because he didn't know where the fuck she was, and—

His phone rang. His heart jumped when he saw his contact's number. “You got something?” he said and held his

breath.

“Where are you?”

“Crimson Point. Why?”

The guy laughed. “You’re one lucky son of a bitch.”

He sucked in a breath. “You found her?”

“She’s on her way there right now.”

Jayden blinked, not trusting that he’d heard right. “Where? To Crimson Point?”

“Little birdie just told me she’s going to the sheriff’s office for a meeting.”

He frowned, suspicion settling in his gut. “You called someone, and they just told you that.” It smelled like a set up. And the sheriff’s office? No way he could get to her there.

“If you know the right people and how to work the system... Anyway, I got what you wanted. She’s probably on her way over there right now.”

Jayden swallowed, blood rushing in his ears. Was this real? Could he trust it? “Are you *sure* she’s—”

“Whatever, man, do what you want with it. I don’t give a shit because I already got paid.”

Jayden hung up, cursing. He rubbed his damp palms up and down the thighs of his jeans. The sheriff’s office? Was this real? Could it be a trick? Or just a lie?

Dammit, he couldn’t risk leaving it. He had to at least check it out.

Forcing himself to take deep, slow breaths to try and calm his nervous system, he doubled back the way he’d come and took the turn onto the road the sheriff’s station was located on at the outskirts of the town. He parked across the street from the side of it, giving him a view of the building and lot.

He ducked down in the seat when a vehicle turned up the road toward him, then swung into the lot and stopped near the front doors. A dark-painted SUV. Two people got out. It was

dark out, but the light over the entrance gave him the perfect view of a large man escorting someone.

A slender woman with straight black hair.

The man shifted to open the door for her, and Jayden saw her face.

Teagan.

Adrenaline tore through him in a dizzying rush, mixing with the drugs already pumping through his bloodstream. He pulled the brim of the ball cap lower on his forehead and did a quick U-turn into the back entrance of the lot and parked near the rear exit.

This was it. He had to pull this off.

He wouldn't get another chance to end this nightmare. He had to figure this out carefully, make sure he took her out without getting caught. But how? And fuck, she *would* be at the damn sheriff's office of all places, with a bodyguard. He'd have to catch them and everyone else inside off guard.

"Don't overthink it," he muttered to himself. If he got caught up in his head, he was screwed. "Just make it happen." He was out of time. Out of options. He had to get inside without arousing alarm or suspicion. To do that, he needed to blend in.

He needed a uniform.

He studied the back of the building as he got out of the car, a welcome sense of numbness creeping over him. As if he were sleepwalking, or someone else was controlling his movements.

There were only a handful of vehicles back here. With any luck, only a few cops would be inside right now. He needed one of them to come outside alone and get the jump on them.

Gripping the stun gun in his pocket, he kept to the shadows and walked along the side of the parking lot, his sidearm holstered under the back of his jacket. He shoved back the fear, embraced the rush of endorphins pumping through his bloodstream.

Almost over. Then he could move past this whole shit storm.

Just as he neared the front of the building, he spotted movement to his right. A deputy leaving his patrol vehicle near the back of the side lot.

A lone deputy.

Jayden cast a quick glance around. Confirmed they were alone, at least for the moment, and went with it. He approached the deputy, put on an uncertain smile. “Hi.”

“Everything okay?” the cop asked.

He reached his left hand up to rub the back of his neck, pretending to hesitate. “No, I—I need some help.”

“What’s wrong?” the cop asked, taking another step toward him. Unknowingly stepping into range.

Jayden whipped the stun gun from his pocket and fired. Both probes hit the cop in the thigh. He let out a strangled cry and hit the ground, jerking spasmodically.

Jayden grabbed him, dragged him around the back of a dumpster before stripping off his uniform and leaving him unconscious, gagged, and bound to the metal container with zip ties from his own duty belt.

Breathing hard, his heart racing so fast his hands shook, he changed into his costume and then straightened to face the building. Ready to go after Teagan and end this now.

Chapter Seventeen

Someone knocked on the bathroom door. “Ms. Kim, you ready?”

Teagan paused in drying her hands on a paper towel. “Is Clive here?” That was fast.

“No, but he’s on his way, and I’m to escort you to a room to wait.”

“Okay, I’ll be right out. Meet you at the front desk.”

Footsteps walked away down the hall. She took a minute to gather herself and gear up for what was coming. Maybe Clive was about to offer her an olive branch. Maybe he really did want to help her get to the bottom of everything. If so, he probably had an ulterior motive, but she didn’t care about that as long as she got what she wanted.

Being separated from Decker through all of this made her feel a little on edge, but the space was necessary. For both of them. It wasn’t his job to help solve this situation, and he’d been through more than enough already as her bodyguard. Meeting up with Creed for a little while would be good for him. He deserved some down time, and they would see each other later tonight.

Although she was dreading that a little, too, because she didn’t know what to say to him about them.

She left the bathroom, heading for the front desk while fighting the sadness creeping in. Dammit, she missed Decker already, and it bothered her because no man had ever gotten this deep inside her before.

Woman up. You’ve got shit to take care of. You can think about him later.

What was she going to say when she did see him? They’d made no promises to each other. Hadn’t talked about the future or what each of them wanted or was looking for, but he’d

called her out on pulling back from him emotionally and made it clear he wasn't going to let it go.

She shook her head at herself as she walked down the hallway. This was crazy. They honestly barely knew each other. How could she feel this much for him so soon?

A hand shot out to grab her arm. She whirled, ready to attack, but stopped when she saw Decker. He drew her into a small storage room on the opposite side of the hallway without a word, shutting them inside together. A light switched on overhead.

She stared up at him in confusion, her heart tripping from the shock and being shut in the small space with him. She'd thought he'd left. There was no way she could ignore him now. "What are y—"

He took her head in his hands and brought his mouth down on hers, silencing her and wiping her mind of whatever it was she had been about to say. She could feel the tension thrumming in his big body. His hold was urgent, but his lips were slow and tender on hers, drawing it out until her knees were weak and she was clinging to his shoulders for balance.

The raging possessiveness in his eyes when he lifted his head to look down at her made her heart thud. "Are you sure you're okay with this?"

It took her a moment to snap her brain back into gear and realize he meant the meeting with Clive. "Yes."

"You don't owe the DEA shit. So, if you don't want to do this, just say the word, and we'll leave right now."

His words hit a tender raw spot deep inside her. No one had ever had her back with something like this before. Not once. But Decker was telling her now that he did. And she didn't know what to do with it. "Thank you. Really. But I have to do this. Have to try again and see where this goes."

He nodded, searching her eyes. "Okay. But if you want me to go in there with you, I will. I don't give a shit what protocol BS they try and throw in the way, I'll make it happen."

Dammit, now there was a lump stuck in her throat. “Thanks. I appreciate the offer.” He was still holding her head, and she belatedly realized she’d curled her fingers around one of his wrists. Unconsciously needing to touch him in return.

Decker shifted his hands, cupped her face and dipped down to kiss her again. Firm. Lingering. Infusing it with so many emotions it made her chest burn. Easing back, he traced his thumbs across her cheekbones as he stared down at her. “Yes or no?”

His tone made it clear he didn’t want to leave. And she was okay with that. More than okay with it, secretly thrilled that he cared so much. “Sure.”

Before she could overthink it, she pulled him down for another kiss. Felt the instant of surprise in the sudden stiffening of his muscles, then his hands slid into her hair, and he slanted his mouth across hers for an all-too-fleeting moment before releasing her.

“You’d better go. They’re waiting for you at the desk,” he murmured, his fingers stroking through her hair, the longing in his expression telling her that he wished they could both stay right here.

She wished they could too, but she had to see this through, one way or another. Once Lily’s killer was behind bars, maybe then she could allow herself to think about the future and whether she was ready to risk giving this thing with Decker a real shot.

She nodded, turned for the door. He opened it for her. Hung back as she stepped out, and she realized it was to make sure no one here saw them together and made assumptions that she was hooking up with her bodyguard.

She forced herself not to look back and walked to the desk, but a keen ache built with each step. He made her feel things she’d never felt before. Made her want things that in some ways scared her more than the man she was trying to hunt down.

The older DEA agent nodded at her, his gaze cutting to Decker.

“I’m her security,” Decker said to him. “I’ll be going into the meeting with her.”

“You don’t have clearance.”

“Then make an exception.”

“That’s not how this works.” He eyed Decker. “You’re on leave at the moment, right? So you’re not her security anymore. You have no reason to be here.”

“The hell I don’t,” Decker growled.

The agent shook his head, looking equally annoyed. “From what I hear, you couldn’t keep her safe before. We’ll take it from here.”

Teagan cringed as Decker seemed to grow three inches. “You’re really not going to let me in there?” he demanded, looking ready to throw a punch at him.

“No.”

Teagan stepped between them before things could take a turn and put a hand on Decker’s chest. “It’s fine. I’ll be fine.” She pressed her palm to his sternum, waited for his eyes to shift to her. “It’s okay, really. Go see Creed and I’ll message you as soon as I’m done.” She didn’t need this added tension on top of everything else.

Decker shifted his focus back to the agent, who was still staring at him.

“Fine,” Decker muttered finally, the muscles in his jaw bunching. “I’ll be waiting.” He spun around and strode for the door.

“What’s Clive’s ETA?” she asked, trying to ignore Decker as he walked out the front doors.

And failed.

It had stopped raining, but the ground outside was still wet, the pavement shimmering with the reflections of the streetlamps. Through a gap in the buildings across the street,

she could just make out the shops along Front Street. Even in the middle of winter, Crimson Point was beautiful.

She'd come to love it here. The town was lovely, and the people she'd met were even lovelier. And one person in particular made her not want to leave when this was all over.

"Should be just another few minutes," the agent said.

She nodded, still staring after Decker, his broad shoulders catching the light as he walked to the SUV and got in.

Maybe they weren't destined to stay together after this, but she'd made up her mind to make the most of the time they had left together. She would regret it forever if she didn't. And if that meant leaving with an aching heart when she left later on, so be it.

The agent cleared his throat, drawing her attention back to him. "This way." He nodded to her right, escorted her down a hallway past some offices to what looked like an interrogation room.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Seriously?"

He gave an apologetic grimace. "I know. But it's private, and we had the cameras turned off in here." He checked his phone. "Clive says he's just finishing up something. He'll be here as soon as he can."

"How long are we talking?"

"Hopefully no more than fifteen, twenty minutes."

That was fifteen or twenty more minutes she could have spent in that storage room with Decker.

Once she was alone, she looked around the empty room, wondering what kinds of criminals had been brought in over the years. She'd heard the story about Sheriff Buchanan's now wife, Poppy. A monstrous psychopath serial killer had kidnapped her and actually buried her alive in his garden. Luckily Noah had found her in time, but Jesus, if these walls could talk...

She crossed her arms, warding off a shiver. Being dumped in the dark ocean had felt too much like being buried alive.

The clock on the wall ticked off the passing minutes. She shifted, growing restless, and she started to second-guess herself about taking Decker up on his offer to come with her. He made her feel stronger just by being next to her.

She turned when the door opened, surprised to see a male deputy step in. Around thirty or so, trimmed brown beard, his uniform looking slightly too small. “Ms. Kim?” he asked.

“That’s me.”

“I’m to escort you to a different room.”

She frowned. “Where are the agents I was just with?”

“They’re both on a call and asked me to move you. They need this one for a case they’re bringing in right now.”

That was a little odd, but okay. “Sure.” She got up, started toward him.

Partway there, she noticed the intent way he was watching her. The flush in his cheeks. Dilated pupils and the perspiration on his forehead.

She faltered, but the internal warning kicked in a fraction of a second too late.

His arm snaked out and coiled around her throat, hauling her back against him. She shoved up at it with both hands, a shout rising in her throat, but it died when she felt something hard jab into her lower back.

“Not a sound,” he hissed in her ear. “Hear me?”

Teagan swallowed, forced a nod, shoving back the mix of rage and fear tearing through her. What the hell was going on? His grip was rock solid, his forearm perfectly positioned across her throat with just enough pressure to let her know he meant business and could cut off her air at any moment.

He shoved her forward. “Move.”

The muzzle of the pistol kept her from lashing out. For now. A bullet there would pulverize her kidney and make her bleed out within minutes. And no cameras in here meant no

one would know what was going on until they got into the hallway.

“We’re leaving now,” he said in a low, deadly voice. “And if you don’t go quietly without alerting anyone, I’ll shoot you and leave you to bleed out right here on the floor.”

JAYDEN HELD THE gun tight to Teagan’s lower back as they exited the room and stepped into the hallway. Sweat slicked his spine, his pulse thundering in his ears. But the added hit of the extra pill had done exactly what he’d been hoping, giving him a sort of euphoric detachment, making him feel invincible.

The hallway was deserted as they stepped out, and so far, everything was going to plan. Teagan wasn’t trying to fight him or scream for help.

He would kill her, but not here. He’d chosen the perfect place for that, planned his getaway carefully. All he needed was to get out those far doors at the end of the hallway and to his vehicle before anyone stopped them or tried to intervene.

The distance to the doors wasn’t more than thirty yards but it felt more like a mile, his breathing rapid and shallow as he marched her to the exit. They were within a few steps of it when a voice called out from behind them.

“Teagan? What’s going on?”

Fuck, no!

He whipped around, arm locked across her throat, weapon in place against her back. A fucking DEA agent stood there in the hallway. The guy gaped in surprise for a split second, then his hand flashed down to the holster at his side.

“*Don’t.*” Jayden yanked his weapon up and shoved the barrel against the side of her head, edging backward toward the door the whole time. She was stiff and unyielding, but he forced her to move with him. “You move, and I’ll fucking kill her right here,” he half-whispered, praying they didn’t draw any more attention.

The guy stopped, his jaw tensing.

“Ditch your weapon.”

He bent slowly, slid the pistol away from him across the floor.

He flicked the gun at him, fear eating through the chemical euphoria, crawling up his spine. “On the floor facedown. Now.”

The agent complied, watching him the whole time.

Jayden was out of time. He gripped Teagan harder, crushed her to the front of his body in case anyone came out and tried to take a shot, and lurched for the exit. A wave of terror and elation rolled over him when they burst through the doors and into the parking lot.

Teagan started to struggle, wrenching her head to the side to try and sink her teeth into his shoulder. “Get your fucking hands *off* me!”

“Shut up,” he snarled, and pistol-whipped her across the back of the head. She cried out, went limp for an instant, and it was all he needed to snatch her up and run for the car.

He shoved her into the driver’s seat, held the gun on her as he ran around and got in the passenger side. “Drive, *now*.” He’d intended to take her to the secluded spot way out in the middle of nowhere, then kill her and dump her in the woods, but that wasn’t an option now with everyone in that building about to come after him like angry hornets.

No, the only way he survived this now was if he kept her as a hostage.

“Move, goddamn it!” he shouted.

Teagan reluctantly started the car and put it into gear. No sooner had she hit the gas than the back door of the building opened and both DEA agents who’d been inside came barreling out, weapons drawn.

“Go,” he snapped.

“Go where?” she demanded, turning onto the darkened street at the back of the lot.

“Toward the highway.” He turned in his seat, craning his neck to see if anyone was following them. Didn’t see anyone yet, but it would only be another minute, tops. “Step on it.”

She did, but he knew it was only because he had his weapon trained on her the entire time. And that if he took his focus off her again even for an instant, she would attack.

His gut churned, the panic clawing at him now. Dammit, he needed more time. Needed to think! He risked a glance in the side mirror, spotted a vehicle roaring up the hill toward them.

“Turn left at the next road,” he said. He didn’t know what the fuck to do now or where else to go. He needed help, fast. That was all he could think about. And there was only one person who would be able to help him. “Left again, then first right.”

They wound up on a winding road that led up into the hills south of town. Craig’s house was on a corner lot overlooking a heavily forested ridge above the water. “Pull over here, and shut off the engine.” The instant she did, he snatched the keys from the ignition and kept the weapon trained at her. “Don’t move until I come around to get you.”

He moved fast, watching her like his life depended on it, and he was pretty sure it did. Their gazes connected through the windshield as he rounded the hood, and for one awful moment he saw the determination to flee in her eyes.

Don’t you fucking dare—

He lunged forward to grab the door handle just as she shot out a hand to lock it. Wrenched it open and seized her by the hair, a snarl of rage and fear rolling from him as he dragged her out. She reached up to grab his wrist, used it as leverage to jump up and drive the soles of her shoes at his knee.

Jayden bit back a howl of pain and stumbled, taking her crashing to the ground with him. They hit hard enough that his grip on the pistol loosened. She instantly tried to snatch it. He managed to wrench it away at the last moment, caught hold of

the back of her jacket as she was scrambling to her hands and knees and yanked her flat on her face once more.

They both froze when a door opened nearby. “What the hell is going on?”

He looked up to find Craig staring at them from his doorstep with a scowl on his face. “We’ve got a situation,” he bit out, struggling to hold her in place. She was fucking strong, and she fought dirty. Twice now she’d almost gotten him in the balls.

Craig glanced at Teagan, then back to him, his mouth pressing into a tight line as he shook his head in utter disgust. “What the *fuck* is wrong with you? Are you insane? And you fucking brought her here, to my *house*?”

Craig’s rage and disgust took him off guard. “I didn’t know what else to...” Suddenly he felt stupid and confused. And about three inches tall under that withering glare. He respected Craig. Wanted to earn his respect in return. “I had to take her as a hostage. They saw me. Were coming after us.”

“So you decided to lead them here?” Craig dragged a hand down his face, then slammed his door shut and hurried toward them. “Get up. Get in my truck.” He seized Teagan by the arm, wrenched her to her feet, barely managed to avoid an elbow to the side of the head and gave her a wary look as he struggled to subdue her, his hand across her mouth to muffle her screams. “Shit. Get some zip-ties from the back and a rag to gag her with. Hurry!”

Jayden shot to his feet and took off toward the big pickup parked in front of the house. He unlatched the tailgate, fumbled around inside to locate the zip-ties. When he turned around, Craig was running toward him with Teagan clamped in front of him, fighting like hell to keep her there, his face red with exertion.

“Let. Me. Go!” Her enraged scream was muffled behind Craig’s palm, but it made the hair on the back of Jayden’s neck stand up. It took both of them to wrestle her into submission long enough to secure her hands behind her, then bind her feet

together and get the gag in place before they loaded her into the backseat.

“Get in,” Craig snapped at him, panting and sweating.

Jayden clambered into the backseat next to Teagan and half sat on her to keep her still, breathing hard. His whole body was quivering from a toxic mix of adrenaline, exhilaration and gut-deep dread.

“Fuck,” Craig snarled, firing up the engine.

His heart stopped. “What?” He looked around frantically. Oh, shit, had the cops found them already?

“I just saw my neighbor staring at us through her back window. She’s definitely calling the cops right now,” he said as he shot down the sloping driveway and turned sharply onto the road. “I can’t fucking *believe* this!”

Jayden knew better than to bother apologizing. He’d fucked up. Big time. But Craig would know what to do. He had to. “Where are we going?”

“The marina,” he growled back, tires squealing as he took the curve in the road too fast. “We need to get the fuck out of the area before they catch up to us.”

Chapter Eighteen

Decker called Creed as soon as he got in the SUV. “I just dropped Teagan off.” And he was still chafing from having to leave her at the sheriff’s office without him.

“She meeting with him now?” Creed asked.

“No, but soon.” He was going back to get her the *moment* she contacted him. “She made it clear she didn’t want me hanging around, and there were cops and agents inside.”

“I know it sucks. The DEA treated her like shit, and they’ll probably do it again.”

“Thanks for the pep talk. You still at the office?”

“Yep, but everyone’s gone home and I’m starving. Wanna grab a beer and a bite to eat while you wait?”

No. He wanted to go back to the sheriff’s office, sit there in the parking lot, and wait until Teagan contacted him. Just in case she needed him.

And that’s exactly why he needed to take up Creed on his offer. “Sure.”

“Sea Hag okay?”

“Yeah. I’m meet you there.”

“Okay. I’ll grab us a table. You want a bottle or on tap?”

“Bottle.”

Decker steered out of the lot and onto the street, glancing at the sheriff’s office in the rearview mirror. Whatever Clive wanted to talk to her about, it better be damn good. And if Teagan accepted whatever offer was on the table and they didn’t follow through this time? There would be hell to pay. He would see to it personally.

The rain had stopped, but the air remained cold and damp as he drove down the hill to Front Street. Most of the shops

were closed for the day, the restaurants half-empty except for Whale's Tale. That place always seemed to be busy.

He parked in a spot along the curb and started walking south along the sidewalk. The vet clinic was still open. Ryder's wife, Danae, was at the front desk when he passed, saw him through the window and waved. He waved back, pulled up the collar of his jacket, and kept going.

The Sea Hag was at the southern end of the strip right on the beach. There was no one else walking out here tonight, and barely any cars on the road. The only sound was his footsteps on the damp pavement and the muted roar of the waves rolling onto the shore in the background.

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get Teagan off his mind. He wondered what was happening and tried to figure out what the DEA was going to offer this time. And what they wanted in return for it.

Part of him hoped she told them to shove their offer where the sun didn't shine, but he understood why she was hearing Clive out. This wasn't something she could handle on her own, and unfortunately, Decker couldn't help get her the answers she needed. No matter how much he wished he could.

He passed another restaurant, a quaint Italian place he hadn't gotten around to trying yet. A few couples were eating together at the tables scattered around the small, cozy space, candles flickering invitingly. It struck him that he and Teagan had never been out on an actual date. They'd slept together twice, he'd shared things with her that he had never told anyone else, and yet they hadn't even done something as simple as go out to dinner together.

That was something he wanted to fix too. He might not be the most romantic guy, but he wanted to take Teagan out. Spend time together doing something enjoyable, find out what kinds of things she liked to do in her spare time and do some of those too. Maybe then she'd stop pulling away and give him a real chance.

His phone buzzed with an incoming message. Pulling it out, he saw it was his sister, not Teagan.

Just checking in. You both okay? Need anything?

Truth was he could use some relationship advice, but no one could know he and Teagan had crossed the line. Not even Marley.

All good, thanks, he replied. How are things there?

Good. Just chilling with dinner in front of the fire.

Gotta go. Talk to you soon.

Okay. xo

He tucked his phone away, glanced to the right when the Sea Hag came into view, and the restless, rolling waves beyond it.

Out of nowhere, a picture formed in his mind. Him and Teagan sitting out there on a blanket when the weather cleared up. Her stretched out between his legs with her back against his chest, her head resting on his shoulder while they watched the waves and talked. Maybe after a picnic or dessert and a bottle of wine. Just the two of them relaxing and *being* together.

But he was getting way the hell ahead of himself. She had to be willing to meet him halfway first, and that clearly wasn't happening until she'd done everything in her power to find Lily's killer.

The scent of beer and cooking burgers hit him when he opened the Sea Hag's door. It was busy as usual. He spotted Creed at a table over in the corner. Decker joined him, murmured a thanks for the beer sitting there waiting for him.

Creed lifted his own bottle. "Cheers, brother."

They tapped the necks together, and each took a pull. Decker tried to force Teagan from his mind. He needed to get out of his head for a while. He'd find out soon enough what was going on, and there was no point worrying about it yet. "They got a special tonight?"

"Yeah, beef fillet with peppercorn sauce, veggies, and mashed potatoes. Think I'm gonna go for it."

Decker would go for the BBQ cheeseburger and fries. Go big or go home.

“Can I ask you something?”

He tensed slightly, looked up to meet Creed’s smoke-gray gaze. In his experience, that question never meant anything good. “Sure.”

“You and Teagan.”

Yeah, no, he already didn’t like where this was headed. “What about us?”

“Just curious how long you guys’ve been together.”

The question was asked in a mild tone, and Creed’s expression was completely nonjudgmental. Decker’s face flushed anyway, his body tensing. “We’re not together.” Not officially. Did he want to be? Hell yes, but he wasn’t sure what she would say if he brought it up again. If he pushed too hard, she might insist on being moved and having Creed guard her.

Not happening.

Creed raised his eyebrows and took another sip of beer, clearly not buying it.

Fine. “I don’t know what we are,” he finally said.

“Okay, fair enough.”

Damn, now he was squirming inside. “Did Ryder or Callum say anything to you?”

“No.”

“Does anyone else know?”

“Doubt it.”

“Are you gonna say anything?”

Creed set his bottle down and gave him a look of pure disgust. “For real?”

He gave a defensive shrug. “I just—”

“I’m not gonna fucking rat you out, asshole. But I can tell she means a lot to you. And even though I wanna punch you

right now for thinking I'd narc on you, for the record, I've still got your back if and when it does come out."

He lost the prickly attitude, already feeling like a shit for doubting him. "Thanks."

Creed picked up his beer and took a long sip, looking straight ahead. "Not that we're best pals or anything, but I get the feeling not too many people have had your back."

For a moment, he didn't answer. Then he said, "No. You'd be right about that." Maybe that's why he'd become a protector. And what he wanted more than anything right now was to protect Teagan from the threat hanging over her.

"Well, I hope it works out for you guys. For real."

Decker eyed him, unsure how to respond to that. Much as he liked the guy, they hadn't known each other long, and they'd never talked about personal shit. It wasn't something he was remotely comfortable with, but now that all this had come up with Creed, he felt okay with it for some reason.

"I...thanks." He hoped so too. Now he wanted to shift the focus off him. "Since we're apparently sharing shit, what about you? You seeing anyone?" He wasn't married as far as Decker knew.

Creed's expression tightened ever so slightly. He glanced away, taking another pull from his beer. "No."

End of conversation. *Got it.*

"Was engaged until last year," Creed said after a long pause.

Decker nodded. Okay, he sucked at this kind of thing. But he sensed Creed either wanted or needed to talk about it. And he'd just said out loud that he'd have his back if anyone found out about him and Teagan, so Decker pushed past his internal squirming and lobbed the ball back to him. "What happened?"

"She left."

"Oh. Shit, sorry." He cleared his throat, shifted in his seat. His gut was stupid, apparently, and not to be trusted with this

shit. Although he knew exactly what it felt like to be left behind. And he didn't want to think about that either.

"Came home one day and found a note on the counter. She was gone, took all her stuff with her. No explanation."

Ouch. Damn. "Wanna change the subject?"

"Fuck, yes."

"Thank Christ." Creed huffed out a laugh and Decker grinned, then got serious. Creed was a solid dude. It was impossible not to like him. He had a good work ethic, crazy skills and was dependable. Decker could do way worse in a new friend. "Hey, I know I'm not...great at interpersonal stuff."

Creed gave him a considering look. "Really? I hadn't noticed that about you."

He couldn't help but smirk. He could admit he was a work in progress, but at least he was trying to open up a bit. A little bit. "That's fair. But just so you know, I'm cool with it if you ever wanna talk. Probably won't have any great advice, but I'll listen."

"I appreciate that." Creed signaled the server for another round. "Now let's order."

They changed the subject to military stuff while they waited for their meals. Creed was in the middle of telling him about a hilarious story about his Q Course when both their phones started ringing at the same time.

Creed glanced down at his. "It's Callum."

Decker's stomach clenched when he saw the name on his display, knew with both calls being simultaneous it couldn't be good news. "It's Ryder." He answered immediately. "Abrams."

"DEA just called," Ryder said in a clipped voice. "Someone kidnapped Teagan at gunpoint and dragged her out the back door."

The blood drained from his face. "*What?*"

“Guy dressed in a deputy uniform dragged her from the sheriff’s office into a black car and drove north.”

He stood up so fast he knocked his chair over, adrenaline roaring through his bloodstream. Creed rose with him, still on his call, and ran for the door with him, hitting the unlock button on his vehicle remote.

“Where are they now?” Decker demanded, yanking the passenger door open and hopping in.

“I don’t know but we’re trying to trace her phone. Details are sketchy. The sheriff’s department is responding, and they’re doing a trace on the plate number right now. I’ll alert you as *soon* as I know something more.”

Fuck. If it was the guy from the marina, he would kill Teagan. “Creed and I are en route to the sheriff’s station now. We’ll find out what we can and see if we can get a possible location to start with.”

“Got it. Stand by.”

He wasn’t standing by. He was going to fucking find her before it was too late. He had to.

Creed raced them up the hill toward the highway, engine roaring. “Anything?”

“No.” Every muscle in his body was clamped tight, a silent scream echoing in his head. He couldn’t accept that this was happening. That he might lose her. Refused to.

And yet he was realistic enough to know the situation was fucking dire. “If we don’t find her in time, he’ll kill her.” If he hadn’t already. Christ, he couldn’t even *think* about that, or he’d lose his mind.

Speeding along the damp road, Creed took a moment to respond. “We’ll find her.”

There was nothing more to say.

Decker clenched his hands into fists, his heart hammering. He thought of Teagan, how she must be feeling right now, alone and scared no matter how tough and resourceful she was, and wanted to scream in agony.

His phone started ringing. He snatched it up and answered instantly. “Abrams.”

“Cops just got a tip that they’re in a new model white F-150. Two male suspects.” He gave the plate number. “It was spotted heading toward the water a few minutes ago.”

“Is she alive?” It killed him to ask.

“Witness said she was restrained but alive in the backseat.”

Oh, fuck. He gripped the phone so tight his hand went numb.

“We’re currently tracking her phone. It matches the route of the truck.”

“Give us the location,” he said tightly. As soon as Ryder did, Decker knew. “Head to the marina,” he said to Creed.

“You sure?”

At least one of the suspects knew his way around boats. With every cop in the area and a half dozen federal agents after them, they wouldn’t risk trying to escape by road. They would want to be on the water. “Do it.”

Creed hit the brakes and wheeled the vehicle around, then shot off in the direction they’d just come.

“We’re heading for the marina,” Decker told Ryder, his heart hammering so hard it felt bruised. “And we’re gonna need a boat.”

“On it. I’ll alert them now. Callum and I are on the way.”

Decker ended the call and readied his weapon, counting down the minutes until they got to the marina. Praying Teagan would still be alive when they arrived.

Please be okay, he told her silently. Please hold on. Fight them with everything you have, and don’t give up.

He wasn’t giving up. He would do whatever it took to get her back alive.

Rage pulsed through Craig as he brought the truck to a sudden stop at the end of the walkway that led down to the marina dock. “Grab her, and let’s go,” he snapped at Jayden, fuming. This fucking idiot had not only pried the lid open on the dumpster fire he’d started, he’d just dropped a barrel of fucking gasoline on it.

Now Craig was being forced to leave his entire life behind because Jayden had brought his fucked-up shit to his doorstep. He couldn’t even think about that or he’d explode. Couldn’t think about what was going to happen now, losing everything and having to start over somewhere else.

He slammed his door shut behind him, wrenched the back door open to help Jayden drag their hostage out. She fought them like hell. Managed to get in a few solid kicks and head butts before Craig subdued her in a crushing hold and then turned and ran for the dock. “Tell me you disabled and ditched her phone,” he said.

Jayden shot him a blank look. Fucking high as a kite, Craig could tell from one look at him, pupils blown and probably on their own product. “I…”

“Jesus Christ,” he snarled, forced to pause and set her down. He should have fucking checked before they’d left his place. “If it’s still on, someone could be tracking her, asshole!”

She bucked and twisted in his hold, forcing him to wrestle her to the ground and pin her there so he could locate her phone in her pocket. Her screams were muted behind the gag, but they would still draw attention they couldn’t afford.

“Hold her,” he bit out, then stood. He dropped the phone on the ground, smashed the screen with his heel until it broke and then bent and hurled it into the water. It was dark and cold, and he didn’t see anyone around. There was still a chance they could get away without being spotted.

He felt marginally better. Someone might have tracked her as far as here, but no farther. Now they had to make the most of their tight lead-time and get as far away from Crimson Point as possible.

“Let’s go.” He’d called a contact on the way here. A larger vessel out to sea owned by the organization was moving in to pick them up about fifteen minutes off the coast.

He grabbed Teagan again, clamped her across his shoulders, and ran down the gangplank to the main dock. The sleek boat he’d earned with his profits from the side business was in the second slip.

He jumped in, punched Teagan in the face to stun her before tossing her into the back with a thud. She didn’t get up, moving slowly on the floor, a groan coming from her as Craig wheeled around and turned the key in the ignition. The inboard engine roared to life.

“Where are we going?” Jayden asked from the edge of the dock, glancing around fearfully.

Craig cut a look at him, disgusted. Jayden was out of control and a total liability now. He was also a dead man walking, though he probably didn’t realize it yet. Once the organization heard about this, they would come for him—and to protect himself, Craig had to make sure he distanced himself from Jayden right now to avoid the same fate.

He reached back and drew his sidearm, leveling it at Jayden.

Jayden froze with one foot on the gunwale, his expression full of stunned horror as he met Craig’s gaze. He raised his hands. Gave a panicky smile. “Come on, man—”

Craig fired two bullets into his head. Jayden toppled back into the water, already dead as Craig holstered the weapon and reversed out of the slip. He glanced over his shoulder to find three people standing on the main dock, watching in horror.

And beyond them, a vehicle racing up behind his truck. Two men jumped out, spotted him and sprinted down the gangplank.

“Shit,” he muttered, throwing the engine into drive and gunning the boat away from the dock. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Teagan struggling to her feet in the back.

He took a lunging step and threw an elbow at her. Caught her across the side of her head and sent her crashing to the floor again. Unfortunately, he couldn't shoot her yet.

The freezing wind whipped at his face as he sped out of the harbor, racing against time. He needed Teagan alive for now to use as a shield. But as soon as he reached the incoming vessel, he was going to dump her back into the ocean where she should have died back in October.

Chapter Nineteen

Get up, Teagan. You have to get up.

Pain radiated through her body as she lay on the bottom of the boat. She steeled herself, gritted her teeth around the gag and struggled to roll slowly from her back to her side. The second kidnapper had just knocked her senseless and thrown her into the stern of the low boat like a bag of trash.

She'd never seen him before. Had no clue who he was. But she had to get ready to fight him with everything she had, immobilized as she was, the moment he slowed the boat. Because if she didn't, she was dead. He'd killed his partner. She had no chance of him sparing her.

The icy wind raced over her, cutting through her thin coat and making hair whip against her face. She shivered harder, squinted into the cold wind that filled her eyes with tears.

Fear coiled tight in her belly, rising up to close off her throat. She didn't want to die. With her hands behind her and her feet bound, she was nearly helpless. Jumping overboard would be suicide without being able to swim, and the water temp would kill her even if she managed not to drown. Her only chance was to disable or knock out her kidnapper long enough for help to arrive.

The man stood at the helm, a pistol tucked into the back of his waistband.

A pistol she'd just watched him kill his buddy with a few minutes ago. Two head shots at almost point-blank range in a public area, within plain view of any witnesses who might have been at the marina.

She shuddered as she got to her knees, struggling to find her balance. The bow of the boat hit a wave, pitching it upward. They went airborne for a split second, then crashed down with a hard bang.

The impact knocked her sideways and threw her into the back of the seats with a thud. She bit back a cry as pain lanced through her already bruised side, but somehow the gag had come loose on one side. She managed to drag it out of her mouth using her shoulder.

The man glanced back at her, his face lit slightly by the glow of the instrument panel. Scowled. “Stay put, or you’ll regret it.” He shook his head, jaw tight. “Goddamn, I wish Jayden had killed you the first time.”

She filed the name away for later, her mind working frantically, racing along with her heart. “Did he kill my cousin?”

He shot her an annoyed look. “What?”

She couldn’t stop now. He was going to try to kill her anyway. She had to know. The words burst from her in an unstoppable stream. “Lily Jung. She overheard two guys aboard the *Destiny* in San Fran. They followed her home and forced fentanyl down her throat to make it look like an overdose.”

“Lily, huh?” He chuckled, the low, evil sound making her skin prickle. “Yeah, I remember her. But that wasn’t Jayden. It was me.”

Shock and grief speared her. Rendering her immobile for several seconds as his callous, flippant words penetrated. The pain of it was staggering.

He stepped around the seat, seized her by the front of her jacket with one hand and yanked the gag back up with the other. Teagan thrashed her head back and forth, tried to bite him, but it did no good. The gag was shoved back into place. Then his head snapped around to stare behind them.

She followed his gaze, a surge of hope rocketing through her when she saw the faint outline of a boat coming after them. It was too far away and too dark for her to make out more than the vague shape against the water, but it was clearly chasing after them.

If she could catch this asshole off guard, attack him and slow the boat, maybe they could catch up and help her.

The man muttered a curse, faced forward and turned them to port slightly. "You should have stayed out of this." He shook his head, jaw set. "And you're still breathing right now only because you're insurance for me. But as soon as we get to the ship, you're dead."

What ship? Where was he taking her?

The radio squawked to life. "Attention unknown vessel. This is the US Coast Guard. Return to port immediately and turn yourself in or you will be pursued."

"Goddamn it," he spat, looking behind and above them.

She looked up too but didn't see anything. She couldn't hear the sound of the chasing boat over the wind and the noise of their own engine, but she could still make out the shape against the water. Was it getting closer? She couldn't tell.

The man reached down and took a black balaclava from somewhere, pulled it down over his face. She didn't understand why he'd bother now when he'd just committed murder out in the open, but it must have to do with the Coast Guard being involved. Were they close?

She twisted to look around, her hair flying in her face, a new fear taking hold. This man was clearly desperate, and now even more so. Maybe so much that he might try and kill her right here and now.

A frigid wave broke over the side. She gasped as it slapped her in the face, knocking her back and drenching her with freezing seawater. She shook her head, her hair now plastered against her face, in her eyes, preventing her from seeing what was happening. The man kept speeding along, didn't slow or change course again. Barreling toward whatever ship he'd been talking about.

Over the sound of the engine and thud of the waves hitting the hull, she heard a telltale rhythmic thumping noise.

Instantly knowing what it was, she looked up. Caught her breath when through the wet strands of her hair, a searchlight

punched through the gloom above and glided over the waves. Seconds later it landed on them and stayed dead center, so bright it hurt her eyes.

The driver wrenched the boat hard to starboard. Unprepared for the abrupt move and having no way to brace herself, Teagan flew backward, crashing into the port wall with enough force to knock the air from her lungs. She curled on her side, fighting to suck in air, a roaring sound filling her ears, aware that the darkness had returned.

Moments later the spotlight was back. Blinding her. She squeezed her eyes shut, turned her face away from the harsh glare. The helo was almost right over top of them now, she could feel the rotor wash beating down on her in pulses, the blast of icy downwash making her teeth chatter.

“I repeat, this is the US Coast Guard,” the voice said through the radio again. “Stop your engine immediately, and put your hands up.”

He didn't, cutting the sleek vessel back and forth in a useless effort to try and escape the daylight-bright beam shining down on them.

Teagan glanced behind them. Saw the other boat more clearly, but it was still too far away to help her, and now it looked like it might be slowly falling behind, its engine less powerful than the one on this boat.

He killed Lily. And he's going to kill you the moment he doesn't need you anymore.

She dragged herself to her knees once more, her stare locking on the driver's back. A deep, burning hatred suffused her, the rush of adrenaline blocking the pain even as it made her heart race.

Resolve hardened like steel deep inside her gut. The helicopter was tracking them but couldn't stop him. He wasn't going to stop until he reached that ship. She didn't know how much time she had left. Didn't know if a Coast Guard vessel had been dispatched to intercept them and couldn't risk

waiting to find out. She had to do something. Stopping him now was the only way to end this and save herself.

The wind sliced through her drenched clothes, cutting into her like a blade. Shivering violently, she tottered to her feet. Braced her hip against the back of the right-hand seat, staring at her target. She had to knock him away from the controls. Would have to use her bound feet to strike him once he fell and try to make sure he didn't get up.

If she was lucky, and he hit his head hard enough, she might have a few seconds to kick the throttle and stop the boat. Maybe even wriggle around and get his weapon with her bound hands. But if she attacked him and failed to bring him down...

You have to do this. You know it.

She did. But a huge wave of fear rose up anyway. This would either save her or seal her fate.

Her breath shuddered in and out as she bent her knees, muscles tensing in preparation to launch herself at his back. Waiting for just the right moment to spring.

She thought of how this monster had killed Lily. Left her to die on her bedroom floor and then walked away without a qualm.

She thought of her parents. How much they loved her in spite of their difference of opinion. Wished she'd made more of an effort to work things out between them. Her pride seemed so stupid and petty now.

And she pictured Decker's face in her mind. Remembered his belief in her.

You can do this, Teagan. Fight with everything you have and bring the fucker down.

The boat dropped suddenly as it hit a trough. She braced her hip against the edge of the passenger captain's chair, crouching low. Waiting for the bow to rise to act as a springboard.

It began to lift.

Now!

Using all her strength, she shoved up and dove at him. He grunted in surprise when her shoulder slammed into the middle of his back. Toppled sideways as she crashed half on the seat and half on the dash.

Seeing him trying to get up, she desperately wrenched her body around and kicked out at his head with all her might.

Her left heel caught him in the temple. His head snapped around, and he went down.

Shaking, a sob caught in her throat, she flipped over onto her back and swung her feet up at the dash. She managed to knock the throttle lever. The first time her feet glanced off it. The second time, they caught the top of it and dragged it down.

The boat slowed immediately, the bow dropping sharply. She slammed into the dash, the impact dazing her even before she hit the floor.

Get up. Hurry!

Bright light suffused her closed eyelids. Fighting through the pain and fear, she forced her eyes open and lifted her throbbing head. The searchlight was dead center on them again. They were still moving but slowly. But her kidnapper wasn't unconscious.

Far from it.

Her heart lurched as he shoved upward and spun to face her with a look of murderous rage that made her blood run cold. She only had time to pull her knees into her body, her only defense to try and kick him back.

But he was trained and expecting it. He knocked her feet aside with terrifying ease and spun to grab her lower legs, wrenching them at an angle that had her crying out and writhing to escape his hold. The pain in both knees unbearable, ligaments and cartilage ready to pop.

“You stupid *bitch!*” He dropped her legs and grabbed a fistful of hair instead. Yanked so hard it made her vision go

white as he hauled her upright. A second later his fist connected with her jaw.

Her head snapped back, stars exploding in front of her eyes. She sagged, hung there in his grip, disoriented and dizzy with pain. She was barely aware of the helo above them now. Of the sound of the other boat's engine getting closer.

Fight!

She threw her head at his. Managed to bash the edge of his jaw and bucked with all her might, trying to break his grip. With a guttural growl, he spun her around and pulled her back tight to his chest, one arm coming up to lock around the front of her throat.

She choked. Thrashed, fighting to relieve the pressure on her windpipe. But there was nowhere to go. Nothing to fight with, the gag preventing her from even using her teeth. Black spots began to dance before her eyes.

With his other hand, he reached out and wrenched the wheel sideways. The sudden shift in momentum threw her harder into him, momentarily removing the pressure of his arm across her throat.

The blinding glare of the searchlight above disappeared suddenly, plunging them into darkness. Teagan gasped, eyes watering as she remained plastered against him, afraid to move. Either he was turning them in a circle, or she was just dizzy. For a moment she thought fuzzily that he must be holding her in front of him to use her as a shield. But his next words told her exactly how wrong she was.

“Now you're gonna fucking drown,” he snarled.

Before she could even process the threat, his arm shifted from her throat to clamp around her sore ribs. With a sudden move, he yanked her off her feet and hurled her sideways into the air.

Her eyes shot wide in horror, fear paralyzing her. She barely made out the tops of the dark waves churning in front of her as she hurtled toward them.

There was one fleeting moment of blinding terror. A shrill scream ripped from her throat right before she hit the surface and plunged into the icy tomb waiting to claim her.

DECKER CLUNG TO the bow of the light Zodiac and squinted to see through the wind, poised on the edge of the front of the tubes as they raced toward the boat carrying Teagan. Creed had the throttle wide open, and the Coast Guard helo had the target lit up under the searchlight. But there was no shooter onboard the aircraft.

God, what Decker would have given to see a sniper positioned in its doorway.

Their vessel was too slow. Couldn't get close enough to stop the other boat or shoot the driver. A Coast Guard vessel had been dispatched to their position to assist, but they didn't have an ETA yet, and it wouldn't arrive on scene soon enough anyway.

Teagan needed help *now*.

The bastard had already killed his accomplice. He wouldn't hesitate to kill Teagan once she was no longer of use to him, and he had a bad feeling that was coming soon.

His insides clamped tight when Teagan suddenly appeared, staggering to her feet behind the driver. The fucker had gagged her and bound her hands together, and from the awkward way she was moving, he was guessing her feet too. What was she...

"No," he breathed, silently begging her to stay down, stay still. He and Creed were so close. The Coast Guard was right above them. She just had to hold on another few minutes and — "Don't do it," he pleaded under his breath.

She jumped at the driver.

Decker's heart lurched. A heartbeat later the two of them dropped out of sight. He saw her legs flail out. Then the other boat suddenly slowed.

"Go, go!" he yelled at Creed, the tension inside him wound so tight he was ready to snap.

But they were still too far away. And when the bastard hauled Teagan upright and locked his arm across her throat in a chokehold, the bottom of his stomach dropped out. “Shit, he’s gonna—” The boat veered sideways away from the searchlight and disappeared into the darkness. “Fuck!”

Creed veered hard to port. Decker held on, strained to scan through the darkness, looking for the other boat. The helo banked above them, circling around to come about again. Leaving them in darkness for agonizing seconds.

It was so dark where the other boat had gone. He couldn’t see anything. The other vessel was a mere shadow in front of them. He thought he could see the driver at the helm. But no sign of Teagan from Decker’s position.

Christ. Had the bastard choked her out and thrown her in the back again? Had he *killed* her?

He shook the thought away, refusing to let it take hold. His heart was pounding so hard it was deafening, the blood roaring in his ears. He wanted to kill that motherfucker. Wanted to tear him apart. His whole body was rigid, his breathing labored as pure rage flowed through him.

They were almost to the other boat now. Seconds away from Decker being able to board it and find out what had happened to Teagan. If only he could *see*, dammit.

“Ready?” Creed called out.

Yeah. More than fucking ready.

He gathered himself, crouching at the bow. Ready to leap and vent all this fear and rage on the asshole responsible.

Creed cut hard to port. Decker shifted his grip to maintain his balance. And suddenly the faint edge of the helo’s searchlight lit up the other vessel.

He still didn’t see any sign of Teagan. Prayed she was in the back, still alive.

The instant he was close enough, he launched his body forward with all his strength, leaping for the other boat. He

landed just inside the stern, crashed to his knees and quickly steadied himself.

Teagan wasn't there.

The driver whipped around but Decker was already on him. He took the bastard down to the deck, seized the front of his jacket and drove his other fist into his face. He felt the crunch of bone, but the sound was muted under the scream, the rotor wash beating at them, spraying freezing water on them.

Decker hit him again, fury exploding inside him. "Where's Teagan?" he shouted, struggling to battle the urge to snap the bastard's neck right here and now.

The searchlight focused over them, revealing the other man's face. His head was lolling, his eyes half-closed, blood flowing from his nose and mouth. Barely conscious.

"What the fuck did you do to her?" he yelled, jumping up to frantically scan the water. The bastard had killed her.

Rage and grief suffocated him as he searched the churning waves without any sign of her. Decker wanted to rip the murderer apart. Break every bone in his body. Make him bleed and suffer as much as he was suffering right now, the pain unbearable.

"Over there!" Creed yelled.

Decker whipped around to see Creed maneuvering the boat around the stern, his heart stopping.

Creed pointed urgently past the bow. "There!"

He followed Creed's outstretched hand. A strangled sound came out of him when her head appeared briefly above the crest of a wave and then disappeared under again.

His lungs seized. *Teagan...*

He ran to the other side, used the edge of the gunwale as a platform and dove, slicing headfirst into the freezing water.

Chapter Twenty

The shock of the icy water hit Teagan, driving the air from her lungs. The cold and dark disoriented her, wiping all thought from her mind.

There was nothing but fear. Pure terror engulfing her as the water closed over her head, the darkness pulling her down, down...

No, please, God!

Primal instinct kicked in. She bucked and fought against the ocean's cold, deadly grip, fighting with everything she had to get to the surface. Her whole chest burned, her lungs aching like they were about to burst.

In desperation she looked up, panic clawing at her. She could see the searchlight above her, the surface shimmering just out of reach.

Time seemed to stop. The cold was so intense, biting deep. Numbing her limbs and sapping the strength from her muscles. The need to breathe was a constant scream in her head, panic tearing through her.

She couldn't hold back. Had only seconds left before she inhaled a mouthful of seawater and drowned.

With the last of her strength, she gave one final desperate kick. Just when she was on the verge of losing the battle to keep holding her breath, her head broke through the surface.

She threw it back, struggled to stay above the waterline, and sucked in a ragged breath. The soaked gag wedged tight in her mouth stuck in place, making it feel as though she was being waterboarded.

An animal sound tore from her throat, part scream, part sob, the sensation of being slowly suffocated terrifying. Somehow, she managed to get a partial breath, spray hitting

her face the entire time, the thud of the rotors above them muted under the roar in her ears.

Then a wave hit her. Shoving her down.

She jerked, thrashed around, and managed to get her head clear again, spluttering, trying to rip the smothering gag free with her shoulder. The cold continued to spread, moving deeper into her bones.

Her chest jerked with her rapid breaths, her heart hammering wildly. She couldn't die like this. Refused to accept that she was going to drown out here after surviving everything else.

She started to sink again.

Just before she went under, strong arms closed around her. Pulling her to a hard chest and lifting her, holding her head above water.

Decker. She knew it without even seeing him.

A strangled sob ripped free, her whole chest burning, everything else aching or numb. The terror was too much, shutting her brain down. Cold and exhaustion paralyzed her, her limbs leaden and uncooperative.

"I've got you," he shouted in her ear, turning her face into his shoulder to shield her from the waves and spray. He grabbed the gag. Wrenched it from between her teeth and yanked it down over her chin, allowing her to get her first full breath since she'd been dumped overboard.

She couldn't answer, shaking violently, her entire body rigid.

He was holding her up still, somehow keeping them both afloat while the waves pitched them around. "It's okay now. I'm gonna get you out. Creed's coming about now, everything's gonna be okay."

She clung to his words, eyes closed. Couldn't respond, crying in earnest now, the shock and fear and cold taking over. She'd endured everything with as much strength as she could

muster. Now it was gone. Being thrown into the freezing ocean again in the dark had broken her.

She kept her eyes clamped shut and just endured, shaking in his hold. Hard, jarring shudders that made her bones ache and her teeth clack together. Uncontrollable. She could still hear the helo's rotors above them. Felt the strong downdraft blowing freezing air on them, kicking up more spray in their faces.

A boat motor grew louder as it neared them. Decker turned her, his legs kicking in a hard, steady rhythm to keep them afloat. "He's here. Just lean back on me. I'm gonna get you out right now."

She was too far gone to answer. Could only lie there shaking and rigid in his grasp as he swam them to the waiting boat. Hands reached down to grab her under her arms. Pulled her upward as Decker grasped her around the hips and pushed from below.

Creed dragged her over the side and set her on the floor with a gush of water. "I'm gonna cut you loose," he said, quickly kneeling and drawing a blade from somewhere.

He grasped her bound wrists, sliced through the ties with one stroke. Her hands fell apart, flopping on the deck. An instant later he was at her ankles, slicing her feet free.

She lay there shivering violently, watched through a numb haze as Decker levered himself onto the gunwale of the boat next to her. Creed grabbed him and helped pull him aboard.

Decker immediately straddled her, cupping her face in his hands as he studied her, dripping water everywhere, his expression full of grave concern. He was shaking too. "Are you hurt anywhere?" he asked urgently.

"C-cold," she choked out.

"I know." He sat her up, his muscles vibrating with every shuddering jerk. Started pulling at her sodden jacket. "I have to g-get all this—off you, then—I'll wr-wrap you up tight in some blankets and g-get you warm."

She didn't resist, couldn't do anything but slump there while he undressed her like a doll. Didn't even care that Creed was right there. Only cared that this terrible, all-consuming cold went away.

Once she was naked, Decker quickly wrapped her up good and tight in a blanket. "G-gimme another," he said to Creed. Moments later he had a second one around her.

She huddled beneath them, still shuddering. Desperate for any semblance of warmth. She was vaguely aware of the helicopter coming closer. The sound of the boat engine changing and the vessel starting to move again. Everything else funneled out. She could feel herself being sucked into a deep fog, tried to fight it off.

Decker pulled her into his lap, tucking her close, arms locking around her back. "It's okay now," he said next to her ear, his big body shivering hard. "Everything's g-gonna be okay."

The kidnapper's face flashed in her mind.

Her eyes flew open, and she looked around frantically. The other boat. Where was it?

"It's over. He's not g-going anywhere except straight into a p-prison cell," Decker said, tightening his hold. "Do you know him?"

She tried to shake her head, struggled to find her voice. She didn't know who he was. Didn't understand what the hell had happened or how everything fit together. "H-he was h-heading f— F-for another b-boat," she managed, her tongue feeling thick and clumsy.

"Another boat?"

She nodded, couldn't get anything else out yet. The shivering was slowing down now. The cold was starting to fade, the numbness turning into something else. Filling her veins with concrete.

Her eyelids drooped, her awareness fading. Sleep pulling her down as hard as the waves had minutes ago.

She only vaguely noticed the boat engine cut out. That Decker was rubbing her back and arms, trying to warm her, his voice urgent in her ear.

He cupped her cheek in his hand. Her skin was too numb to feel his touch. “Hold on, s-sugar. Open your eyes, and I look at me.”

She tried. Couldn't. Just wanted to sleep. Retreat from all of this and let the blackness take her.

“T-Teagan,” he said sharply, giving her a shake. “They're s-sending a rescue swimmer d-down from the helo.” He shook her again. “C-come on. Open your eyes f-for me.”

She heard the words, the urgency in his tone. Couldn't make sense of them. But slowly she forced her heavy lids open. Stared blearily up into his worried face. Tired. She was so tired. Her eyes began to close again.

Then she was floating. In a place where there was no more cold. No pain. Just the sound of Decker's voice talking to her at the edge of her mind. He was right next to her. Wouldn't leave her. It was safe to let go.

Then she was being lifted. Hands held her, guiding her into a new position. Moments later, she had the hazy sensation that she was flying. Rising through the air. She frowned slightly, the intrusive noise of the rotors growing louder.

She stopped moving. More hands pulled her from the cloud she'd been floating on. Male voices spoke around her. Calm and decisive. A shaft of cold air hit her as her blankets were pulled aside. She frowned, made a sound of protest.

“I know, sorry. We'll get you warmed up in just a minute.”

She gasped at a sharp poke in the back of her forearm. Then another blanket tucked around her. She groaned in relief, let herself slide back toward sleep.

Someone was cradling her head in their hands. Stroking her wet hair back from her face. “I'm right here, sugar. And you're going to be okay, I promise.”

Decker. Decker had her. He wouldn't let anything happen to her.

She let herself slide back under.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Deck.”

Decker looked up to find Ryder striding into the ER waiting room where he'd been sitting for the past forty minutes, trying to hold it together. “Hey.”

Ryder sat down next to him, calm but somber. “How you doing?”

“Okay.” Cold as hell. Worried as fuck about Teagan. He'd showered and changed into warm sweats at the Coast Guard station after the helo had brought them in, and a nurse had given him heated blankets as they checked him out. While he'd ridden here in the ambulance beside Teagan—with Jaia's PJ boyfriend, Brandon, as their paramedic—she'd been in and out of consciousness the whole time.

He doubted she even remembered any of it. They were still trying to stabilize her. She'd been hypothermic when they'd loaded her into the helo. She'd been in the water for too long. “Any word from the cops or Feds yet?”

Tonight's incident had created a confusing nightmare of jurisdiction between the military, local law enforcement and government agencies. He wasn't in the mood to talk to any of them yet. He knew he wouldn't be able to stave them off for long, but he wasn't doing that until he knew Teagan was okay.

“No. But the DEA and FBI both want to interview you as soon as possible.”

“Fuck the DEA,” he snapped, earning a sharp, censoring look from an elderly lady sitting nearby. He was so pissed that they'd left Teagan unprotected, didn't care that the abduction had happened in the sheriff's office where they'd thought she would be safe.

If he'd been there, it never would have happened. He should have fucking been there personally. “You keep them away from her. I mean it,” he warned, his blood pressure

shooting up. “They fucked up and almost got her killed tonight.”

Ryder nodded. “I’ll do what I can.” His phone beeped. He pulled it out, sighed. “Speak of the devil.” He met Decker’s gaze. “Look, I’ll hold them off for tonight, make it clear you’re not up for being interviewed right now. Beyond that, I can’t make any promises.”

“I understand. Thanks.”

“Sure. By the way, I called your sister. She and Warwick are headed up here now.”

He nodded, pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders. He was piss-poor company right now, but having his sister and Warwick here would be good. “Has anyone ID’d the suspects?”

“Not yet but as soon as we hear who they are, I’ll let you know.”

“Mr. Abrams?” They turned to look at the nurse walking toward them. She put on a polite smile. “Ms. Kim is being moved to a private room upstairs now. You can see her shortly.”

Relief had him dragging in a slow breath. “She’s awake?”

“She’s conscious, but the doctor has ordered meds to help her sleep.”

“But she’s all right?”

“Her condition is improving. We’re monitoring her core temperature and vitals closely. Give it another five minutes or so and you can go upstairs to see her.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Ryder tucked his phone away. “I better get going. I’ll be in touch, but call me or Callum if you need anything.”

“Will do.” After Ryder left, Decker sat there counting down the minutes until he could go to Teagan. Every time he thought of her bound and helpless, struggling not to drown in the darkness...

He bent forward, put his head in his hands and closed his eyes, struggling to shove his emotions back down inside.

A hand settled on his shoulder. He jerked and looked up to find Creed standing next to him. His partner had stayed aboard the other boat with the kidnapper until the Coast Guard vessel had arrived to take him into custody and had been dealing with the police, DEA and FBI ever since.

“You finished with everything?” Decker asked him.

“Only for now. I wanted to come by and check on you.” Creed sank into the chair beside him, concern in his gray eyes. “How’s Teagan?”

“I haven’t seen her yet, but she’s stable. I’m going up to her room shortly, but my sister and Warwick are on their way. I—”

“I’ll stay here and wait for them. You go be with Teagan.”

He nodded, grateful. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” He clapped him on the back, eyed him and started rubbing his palm up and down Decker’s spine through the blanket. “Your lips are blue. Still cold?”

“A little.”

“Go on up and see her,” Creed said. “You won’t relax until you do.”

He wasn’t sure he would relax even then. Not until he knew the names of the bastards responsible and that the surviving one was going to be locked away for the rest of his days.

He stood, set a hand briefly on Creed’s shoulder in silent thanks and headed for the elevator. A nurse was inside Teagan’s room when he got there, taking her blood pressure and temperature. He looked past her, his gaze riveted on the sleeping woman lying so still in the hospital bed.

She looked so pale. So fragile, it scared him.

He went to the bedside. Pulled up a chair and reached for her hand. Her fingers were still cold. She had bruises on her

face and her lip was split, reminding him of the first time he'd seen her in the hotel. Only this time he knew exactly how she'd gotten them.

And he still wanted to kill the bastard responsible.

"She's doing much better," the nurse whispered to him.

"Good." The rough word scraped his throat on the way out.

The nurse left, the door closing softly behind her. Decker swallowed, brought Teagan's limp hand to his lips and pressed a hard kiss to the back of it, his throat closing up and his eyes stinging.

He couldn't get that image of her fighting for her life in the water out of his mind. Would never forget it as long as he lived, and it scared the shit out of him to think how close he'd come to losing her forever. Twenty, thirty seconds longer for him to grab hold of her, and it would have been too late.

Teagan's eyelids fluttered. They opened slightly. He caught his breath as she focused on him slowly.

"Hi," he whispered, his voice uneven.

Her gaze moved past him, taking in the room before settling back on him. "Are you okay?" she said, her words scratchy.

I am now. "Yes. How are you feeling?"

"Still cold. What...happened? I don't remember anything after being in the boat with you."

"The Coast Guard pulled us both out and flew us to base, then we were transported here by ambulance." He rubbed her hand between his, trying to warm it. "You were hypothermic. They gave you warmed fluids and then some sedatives."

She was silent for a long moment. Then, "I was so scared. In the water."

He clenched his jaw, his chest compressing.

"Worse than last time, because I couldn't even swim."

Fuck. Fuck, he couldn't even imagine the terror she must have felt. "But you did it." That's how strong she was. Her raw determination that was such a part of her personality may well have saved her.

Her eyebrows drew together. "My head hurts."

"You've got a big lump on the back, and a slight concussion."

She was silent a long moment, taking it all in. Her dark eyes stared up at him. "You saved me."

His throat squeezed again. He had to swallow twice to force a lump down, couldn't find his voice.

"Thank you."

There was nothing he could say to that. And she didn't have to fucking thank him for that. Christ.

"I should have brought you with me to the interview," she murmured.

"No, I shouldn't have left the parking lot," he said tightly, struggling to hold it together. "And what happened wasn't your fault." He leaned forward, slid his arms under her and pulled her to him, one hand cradling the back of her head while he buried his face in her hair, mindful of the bump there. Squeezing his stinging eyes shut, he held her and released a long, shaky breath. "All that matters is you're okay."

Her hand settled on his back. Rubbed gently as if she was trying to soothe him. He took a steadying breath. Drew in the scent of seawater.

"How long are they going to keep me here?"

He shook his head. "Not sure. Overnight at least."

"I need to call my parents. But I'm so tired."

"I'll call them for you."

"Thanks. But I want to do it myself. Just not now."

"Okay." He hugged her tighter. Goddamn it, he couldn't let her go. And not just in this moment.

He didn't want to lose her and damn sure didn't want her to walk away after everything they'd been through together. He wanted more time. Wanted to be with her. For them to get to know each other better and see where this thing went between them. Because every instinct was telling him that she was the one.

"Just sleep for now," he murmured once he had control of his voice again. "Get some rest, and we can deal with everything else tomorrow."

She turned her face into his neck. Sighed, her exhaustion clear. "But you'll stay with me?"

His heart squeezed so hard it hurt. "Yes. I'm staying right here." He wasn't going anywhere.

And whatever tomorrow brought, he would be right there with her through it all.

Noah eased the front door of the cottage shut behind him, weary and cold and soaked through from the rain. Not to mention carrying an added weight from everything that had happened tonight.

Teagan was lucky to be alive, and once again his beloved hometown of Crimson Point was the focus of a major interagency criminal investigation. Drug smuggling. Kidnapping. Murder.

He'd been there when they'd pulled the suspect's body from the water at the marina. Young guy, his face destroyed, and the back of his skull blown off from the force of the close-range bullets. The medical examiner was in the morgue right now trying to ID him. The other suspect had been arrested by the FBI and was awaiting formal charges.

He slipped his work boots off on the rug and hung up his drenched sheriff's jacket, pausing in the entryway. The cottage was still and quiet, raindrops tapping on the roof and gusts of wind sighing along the eaves and in the trees outside. Poppy had left a lamp on in the living room for him, and the air

smelled like chocolate. She had been busy prepping for a wedding order when he'd been called out earlier.

He walked into the kitchen, found dozens and dozens of chocolate Swiss meringue buttercream-frosted cupcakes topped with little sugared flowers. She had set one apart on a napkin with a note.

For you. xo

An overwhelming rush of love hit him. Poppy knew how tough it was for him to unwind after coming home from a bad call. Knew he needed time to decompress and get out of his head.

He was so goddamn lucky to have found her. She and Hudson were his whole world, and he'd been spending way too much time away from them.

He picked up the cupcake, peeled back the paper liner from the bottom and then tore the bottom off, placing it on top of the icing to make a sandwich. Poppy had shown him the proper way to eat a cupcake soon after they'd met, and he'd never eaten them any other way since.

Pushing all the ugliness from tonight out of his mind, he took his first bite. The intense chocolate flavor of the cake was amplified by the mocha frosting.

He polished it off in four bites, downed a glass of water, and then headed upstairs, walking softly so his treads wouldn't wake Poppy. She was a light sleeper, part of her always on edge at night when he was gone.

Their bedroom door was open a crack. Poppy's signal for him to come to bed when he got home. But it was almost two, and he didn't want to disturb her because she had to get up early to finish up the wedding order.

He'd just entered the guest room when he heard Hudson start to cry in the next room. He sighed and did an about-face, hurrying to his son's room just as Poppy appeared in the master bedroom doorway, blinking sleepily at him and wrapped in her robe. "I got him," he whispered. "Go back to sleep."

Hudson was standing up in his crib when he walked in, his little face streaked with tears. But it broke into a wobbly smile when he saw him. “Da.”

“Hey, little man.” He scooped Hudson up, cuddled him to his chest and turned for the rocking chair set in the corner, but stopped when he saw Poppy standing in the doorway.

“Bring him to bed with us,” she murmured.

“You sure?”

She nodded and turned to walk back to their room, was waiting under the covers when he carried Hudson in and set their son between them. Hudson had stopped crying now. The instant Noah set him down, he curled up on his side with a shuddering sigh and was pretty much asleep by the time Noah stripped down to his underwear and got in next to him.

Poppy reached out to stroke their son’s hair, her face just visible in the glow from the nightlight plugged in near the door. “How’d it go?” she whispered.

“Wild night.” He’d had his fair share while serving as sheriff.

“What happened?”

He hesitated. Poppy had been deeply—and understandably—traumatized by her own ordeal when she’d been kidnapped by a serial killer several years ago. He was careful not to tell her about cases that might trigger those dark memories for her. She’d told him long ago that she slept better with him beside her, though she would probably always sleep with a light on somewhere in the room.

“Oh. That bad,” she said.

“The victim was rescued in time. Pulled from the water. The Coast Guard assisted, and she’s going to be okay.”

“The Coast Guard?”

“Plus the FBI and DEA. And one of the perps attacked a deputy. Shot him with a stun gun and left him tied up behind a dumpster at the office.”

“You’re kidding,” she breathed. “No wonder you were gone so long.”

Yeah. The situation was a bit of a logistical nightmare for his office. Federal agencies always pulled rank, but he knew both Teagan and Decker personally and wanted to ensure he stayed involved in this and assisted wherever he could. It wasn’t clear yet how the suspects were linked to Teagan. But it must have been something personal for them to be desperate enough to kidnap her from the damn sheriff’s office.

He didn’t want to think about that right now. Just wanted to leave his job behind for the moment and focus on his family.

He reached across their sleeping son to cradle the side of Poppy’s face in his hand. “Go back to sleep, sunflower.”

A sleepy smile curved her lips. “Kay. Talk to you in the morning? Your mom and sister are coming over to take Hudson for the day.”

His mom and sister were awesome. His dad too, always willing to help them out when they needed a hand. Poppy had guessed that he would need to head into the station again early in the morning and taken care of it. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

He stroked his thumb across her cheek and removed his hand. Watched her close her eyes and settle with a soft sigh. Kept watching while her breathing slowed and deepened to match their son’s. Both her and Hudson able to fall right back to sleep now that he was beside them.

He closed his eyes, savoring the feeling of peace. The gratitude for these two incredible human beings coming into his life.

He’d been doing a lot of soul searching, but tonight had clinched it. He’d already spoken to Ryder and Callum and weighed his options. His mind was made up.

This would be his last term as sheriff. When it ended in a few months, he was going to join CPS as a consultant.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was early afternoon before the doctor finally gave the okay for Teagan to be discharged. Because it was hospital policy for patients to leave in a wheelchair, she was forced to sit in one like an invalid while Decker wheeled her out to his vehicle waiting outside the entrance.

“Ready to get the hell outta here?” he asked, stopping the chair.

“*Yes.*” She didn’t even care where he took her, as long as it was somewhere with a shower and a bed.

And as long as he was there with her.

She got in his truck, anxious to get moving. The overnight stay had been uncomfortable and mostly sleepless. She ached all over, had bruises and bumps and scrapes everywhere, and was dying for a hot shower and a nap. “Where are we going?” she asked when Decker returned from taking the chair back and got behind the wheel.

“My place. That okay?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” Better than fine.

He took her hand, raised it for a kiss and kept hold of it as he drove them to the parking lot exit.

“Thank you for staying with me last night,” she added. Every time she’d woken up, she’d seen him sprawled out in the pullout chair beside her bed, and it had calmed her. Stopped her from going into a mental and emotional spiral about what had happened.

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t have left even if you’d told me to.”

She didn’t doubt that. “And now the real fun starts,” she murmured, staring out the window. The sun was actually making brief appearances today, punching rays through the

clouds. They shimmered and sparkled on the surface of the ocean as Decker drove them back to his condo.

“We’ll just get it all over with as fast as we can, get it behind us.” He glanced over at her. “And then you’re not moving from my bed for at least a day.”

That sounded promising, though she was unfortunately too sore and out of sorts right now to even think about sex. But then again, the idea of really slow, gentle sex with him was hot. Her insides fluttered.

She entered his condo fifteen minutes later and looked around. He hadn’t done much in terms of decorating since he’d moved in, but the space was bright, clean, and tidy. Not that it mattered, she was just glad to be alone with him and be able to get some real rest.

“You can use the master shower,” he said, gesturing down the short hallway.

She nodded, paused when she saw her luggage already sitting in the living room. “Where did those come from?”

“Marley and Ivy packed up all our stuff at the safe house and dropped it off here this morning. They came to the hospital last night, but I told them you weren’t up to any more visitors yet.”

Aww. “I love them.” It was going to feel so good to put on clean clothes of her own.

He smiled. “Marley wants to come over with Warwick when you’re up to it. I told her maybe tomorrow, depending on how you feel and how things go with the Feds. And I’m sure Ivy will be wanting to see you too.”

“Tomorrow sounds perfect.” She turned to face him. Covered a wince as she reached her arms up to wrap them around his neck and pressed close. “Thank you,” she whispered, tugging him down for a kiss.

“For what?” he muttered against her lips.

“Everything.”

When she ended the kiss and eased back, he rubbed his thumb across her lower lip, hazel eyes glowing with heat. “Hold that thought, sugar.”

“Oh, I definitely will.” She took her suitcase with her into Decker’s bathroom and had a long, hot shower, letting the water wash away the salt lingering on her skin and hair. She tried not to think about what had happened. It still felt surreal, as though the memories must belong to someone else. But she had no doubt she’d be having tough moments and nightmares for a while about the icy darkness closing over her.

She spent a long time in the shower, and then took her time getting ready. When she finally walked out of the bathroom in a cloud of steam, dressed and ready to face what was coming, she heard voices coming from the living room.

Decker appeared at the end of the hallway. “They’re here.” He reached out a hand. “You ready?”

She took it, mentally gearing up for the questions she was going to have to face. “Yes. Let’s get this done.”

They sat side by side on the sofa opposite Clive and the other two DEA agents who had been at the sheriff’s office last night. “It’s good to see you,” Clive said with a little smile that looked a bit relieved. He also looked tired, no doubt having worked most if not all of last night.

“Good to still be here,” she answered.

“First, I want to stress how sorry we are about what happened. All of it.”

The male agent who had left her in the room to wait yesterday at the sheriff’s office nodded and put a hand to his heart, his expression earnest. “So sorry. I never thought—I mean, I didn’t expect—”

“It wasn’t your fault. No one expected what happened.” She wasn’t going to give them grief about it now because it would do nothing but cause her more stress, and she didn’t want to let her anger control her.

“We tried to follow you,” the other agent said. “But by the time we’d made it to the street, we’d lost sight of him.”

She really didn't want to hear any more of this. She looked at Clive. "So what do we know at this point? Who was Jayden? And who was the guy who killed him?"

"Jayden Fisher, and Craig Sandoski. Sandoski is in jail awaiting trial without bail. Both were involved in drug smuggling operations along the coast, as far south as San Fran, and north right up to Anacortes, Washington."

"Sandoski said he killed Lily."

Clive nodded. "Yes. He confessed to it this morning."

She let out a breath, pushing down a surge of anger. "Only because he's hoping for a lighter sentence," she said in disgust.

"Yes, on advice from his counsel. He was also the captain onboard the *Destiny* the night you were attacked. He's been mostly cooperative with investigators thus far. We think he'll take a plea deal in exchange for what he knows about the smuggling operations in this area, and the organization responsible for trafficking the drugs."

In the hopes that he'd serve less time. "Gross." Part of her still wished he'd died last night, but then they wouldn't get any intel from him. Much as she hated that he was still breathing, at least now she might finally get all the details about Lily's murder and the attack on the *Destiny* that she'd been missing all this time.

"Given everything we're charging him with, rest assured he'll go away for a long time. I doubt he'll ever taste freedom again."

That was something, she supposed. Still, the thought of him suffering more would be nice. An "accident" while locked up maybe. Or the other inmates meting out their own form of justice.

"Anyway, he didn't get away unscathed." Clive's eyes glinted with respect and amusement as he looked at Decker. "You broke his nose and knocked out two teeth."

Decker's right hand flexed on his leg, three of his knuckles swollen and bearing Steri-strips. "Wish I'd been able to do more."

“You saved Teagan, so I’d say you did enough. Also, it turns out you were right about a leak in the agency. Although it was unintentional.”

She braced herself for the explanation. “Go on.”

“A young clerk accidentally divulged our meeting time and location to someone over the phone posing as an agent. We think that’s how Fisher knew where to target you, but our analysts are tracking his phone calls to verify. She feels terrible and has been placed on administrative leave.”

God. That innocent mistake had nearly cost Teagan everything.

Clive cleared his throat and sat up straighter. “There’s uh...something else.”

She stiffened slightly, dread curling in the pit of her stomach at his obvious reluctance to continue. Whatever he was going to say next, it wasn’t good.

Decker wrapped an arm around her in silent comfort. “Okay, what?” she asked, bracing herself for more bad news.

“Both Fisher and Sandoski were Coastguardsmen.”

The news hit her like a blow, stunning her into silence. Decker swore under his breath. She sat there, rigid. Tried to absorb it. But it made sense in an awful kind of way.

“They worked together,” Clive continued. “Met at the Portland station shortly after Fisher was transferred there. Sandoski was his direct superior officer.”

“That’s how they knew where the checkpoints were set up along the coast,” she mused out loud. “They had insider intel. And they would also have known the schedules for various vessels and shipments along the coast.”

Clive inclined his head, anger in his eyes. “Exactly. As of yet we’re not sure when Sandoski approached him about the smuggling ops. But we’re confident that Sandoski will give us all that and more soon enough.”

Piece of shit. “Are there others involved?”

“We’re looking into that now, but it’s a safe bet that there are likely more Coasties involved. Coast Guard Investigative Services have already opened their own investigation as well. Now. I know you must be drained from all this, but the sooner we get through your statements and you answer our questions, the sooner we’ll be out of your hair.”

“I’m ready.”

The agents interviewed her and Decker separately. By the time she was done repeating her story several times and answering questions, she was ready to curl up and sleep for the rest of the day.

After they’d left, Decker locked the door behind them and turned to look at her from across the room. “You were right about Lily,” he said quietly. “You knew all along, even though they wouldn’t believe you.”

She nodded, struggled to push back the tears rising to the surface. There was nothing left to cry about. Crying wasn’t going to bring Lily back. Wasn’t going to change anything that had happened. She was completely drained. “I need to talk to my parents. But I have to call my aunt first.”

He nodded, kept watching her. “Want me to give you some privacy?”

“No.” She held out an arm. He crossed to her, and she reached for his injured hand. Brought it to her lips and gently placed a kiss on each battered knuckle. “I’d really like it if you stayed for this.”

He stroked his other hand over her hair. “Okay, then I’ll stay.”

They went into his kitchen and sat at the little dinette table set up there. Teagan dialed her aunt’s number, her stomach a buzzing mass of nerves. When her aunt answered, Teagan spoke in Korean. “Hi, Auntie, it’s me.”

“Teagan! Sweetheart, how are you? *Where* are you?”

“I’m in Oregon.”

Her aunt relayed it to someone in the background.

Teagan frowned. “Who’s there?”

“Your parents. They say hello.”

Okay. Maybe it was better this way. One and done, get it all over with. She gathered herself, reached down for calmness. Strength. “Can you put me on speaker?”

“Yes, of course. One second. Okay, we can all hear you now.”

“Hi, Mom and Dad,” she said, switching to English so Decker could follow her side of the conversation. “You’re all on speaker too, and I have a friend here with me. I’m calling to tell you all some news.”

“What news?” her father asked. Her aunt was silent, and Teagan could almost feel her holding her breath on the other end of the line.

A rush of hot tears flooded her eyes. “I found out who killed Lily. And he was arrested last night.”

After a stunned silence, loud cries erupted from her mom and aunt. “Is this real?” her aunt said.

“Yes. He confessed this morning and is in jail awaiting trial. He won’t be released on bail.”

Her aunt gave another loud cry. “Oh, Teagan! This is more than I ever hoped for, I... *Thank* you, sweet girl. *Thank* you.”

She swallowed, went to wipe at her face but Decker beat her to it. She looked up into his eyes. Pride and tenderness shone in his gaze as he brushed her tears away with his fingertips. “You don’t owe me thanks,” she whispered, her voice rough. “I’m just happy he’s going to pay for what he did.”

“What happened?” her father demanded. “Why do I feel like something else terrible happened that you’re not telling us about?”

“I’m fine. I’m with a...very special friend. He’s taking good care of me.” She smiled at Decker through her tears.

“He?” her mother said. “And why, are you hurt? Oh my God, did you get hurt again—”

“I’m okay, Mom. Just a bit banged up. I’ll tell you everything when I see you next, but not right now. I need a bit of time first. There’s a big investigation going on.”

“Oh, sweetheart, what did... All right,” her mother said grudgingly. “We don’t like it, but we understand. When are you coming home?”

“I’m not sure yet. It depends on what happens.” With the investigation, *and* with Decker. “I might have to stay here for a while yet to get everything wrapped up. Anyway, I need to go now. I just wanted to tell you the news, and that I love you all.”

God, it felt good to have the chance to say that to them.

“We love you too,” her mom and aunt chorused together.

“And me,” her father chimed in.

She smiled. Sniffed, her tears slowing, heart full. “I know. I’ll talk to you soon. Bye.” Setting the phone down, she blew out a breath and laid her head on her forearm, suddenly exhausted.

Decker shifted his chair toward her, wrapped his arms around her and slid her into his lap. He held her to him, his chin resting on the top of her head. “Bet that felt pretty damn good,” he murmured against her hair.

She nodded, eyes closed, absorbing the feel of him. And also aware of a strange emptiness forming in the center of her chest.

For the past three months, she’d had Lily’s murder to focus on. It had been all-consuming, the need for justice driving her. Now it was done. She had no idea where to go from here. “My mission’s over,” she murmured. “Now what?”

He rubbed a hand up and down her back. “Now it’s time to take care of you for a change.”

She grunted. “And then what?” She wanted to be with him. Long term. But with everything that had happened, they both

needed time to process before making any big decisions. Her feelings for Decker ran deep. She wanted to be on solid footing before she risked taking a leap.

“You could stay.”

She stilled, wondering if he meant what she thought he did. “In Crimson Point?”

“Yeah. Right here with me.”

A bit taken aback even as her heart leapt, she leaned back to look into his face. His gorgeous, unforgettable face. “You don’t want me to go? Seriously, I would understand if you did. I’ve been nothing but trouble for you since we met.”

“That’s not true. I mean, you *have* been trouble,” he said with a teasing light in his eyes. “But I like your brand of trouble, and I still don’t want you to go. Give me a chance.”

Warmth spread from her chest and out to her entire body. A tremulous smile tugged at her mouth. “Well then, maybe I’ll stay and see how it goes.”

He smiled back. “You do that.” Then he captured her lips in a slow, tender kiss that turned her inside out and had her hoping for things that had seemed impossible until this moment.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“I don’t even recognize myself anymore,” Teagan mused, lying snuggled up with him on the floor in front of his fireplace. Through the darkened window beside them, the ocean shimmered under the moonlight.

They were both naked, curled on their sides facing the flames, him tucked tight against her back. Decker was enjoying every second of it.

“Do you think this is what it’s like for normal people when they’re not working?”

He grinned. “Only if they’re really lucky,” he answered, skimming his lips down the side of her neck. After the terror during the attack and the ensuing chaos of the past five days, they’d needed this. A quiet night in. Time alone together with no outside pressures or distractions in a relaxed setting so they could decompress.

“Hmm. Do you feel lucky?”

“I just got pretty damn lucky a few minutes ago, so yeah. You?”

She laughed softly and stretched with a contented sigh. “Same. I actually think I could get used to this.”

He stilled, her tone hitting him as much as her words. They hadn’t talked about future plans or any kind of commitment yet. He was holding off a bit longer to give her time to heal more first. This past week had been a blur, working with the various agencies involved in the investigation—which the DEA was now treating with urgency—and dealing with the emotional and mental fallout.

Neither one of them had been sleeping much. But getting through everything together had made all the difference. Though he wished Teagan hadn’t been put through any of it, everything that had led up to this point had also forged a bond between them that built a completely new level of trust.

Teagan had let him in more, was no longer pulling away or trying to put up walls between them. While he knew what he wanted, and that the future he envisioned included her, he'd been careful not to push for anything more than asking her to stay for now.

She absently stroked her fingers up and down his bare arm. "What do you like to do in your downtime, anyway?"

He shrugged. "The usual stuff."

She poked him. "Elaborate."

"I dunno, movies, trips, going out to eat, watching a game. Playing a round of nine holes with some buddies and having a beer after. Sometimes I like just driving for a few hours and seeing where I wind up. You?"

"I like movies too. Action movies. Reading, mostly English classics."

"Yeah? There's a great book club here. Marley joined and loves it. I think Jaia started it." She was Ryder's executive assistant and kept CPS running like a well-oiled machine.

"Oh, I like Jaia. She gets shit done."

She definitely did. Ryder would be lost without her. "What else?" He was enjoying this glimpse into her personality.

"I like being out on the water. Or at least, I did before I came here," she said in a wry tone.

He made a low sound and hugged her. "We'll go out again sometime when you're ready and replace what happened with good memories."

"Yeah, I think I'd like that." She was quiet a few moments. "I really need to make a visit home to see my parents soon. Want to come with me?"

The question surprised him. In a good way. "You want me to?"

"Yes. I'd like them to meet you."

He'd half-expected her to backpedal, and it wasn't lost on him how big this was. Her inviting him to meet her folks was a

major step forward for them. “Then sure I will.”

“Good.” She sighed, seemed to relax more.

“You’re not nervous about it, are you?”

“A little. Not for them to meet you,” she added quickly. “It’s just...things between us have been strained for a long time now.”

“Because you feel like you can never measure up to their expectations.”

She gave a humorless chuckle. “Yup.”

“I thought things have been better since you called and gave them the news last week.”

“Better, yes. But still awkward, and if I’m honest, I’ve got a lot of resentment built up. Let’s not talk about this anymore.” She turned into him, kissed him soundly on the mouth and then rose, leaving him staring at her gorgeous body in the flickering firelight. She laughed at the look he gave her. “You’ve got a one-track mind, mister.”

“Can you blame me? Look at you.”

Her gaze softened, a warm smile curving her mouth. “I’m gonna go take a shower. Feel free to join me.”

He was up and chasing her to the bathroom in an instant, her peal of laughter trailing down the hall. It took them a long time to get to the washing part.

By the time they had recovered from another orgasm and rinsed off, the water was starting to cool. Just as they were getting dressed, his phone rang from the living room. He would have ignored it, but he jogged out to check in case it was something to do with the investigation.

It was a video call from Tristan. Decker had been playing phone tag for days with his brothers, their availability never lining up.

He accepted the call, waited until his brother’s face appeared on screen. “Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” Tristan grinned. “You don’t look any worse for wear. After what Marley told us about what happened, I thought you’d look like shit.”

“So you’re saying I look good.”

“I mean, you look okay. For an old guy. Whaddayou think, Gav?”

Gavin’s face appeared beside him at the edge of the screen. They were identical, with auburn hair and green eyes, but Decker had never had any trouble in telling them apart. The difference in their personalities was written in their eyes if you looked close enough. Tristan was the more serious, quiet one. Gav was the shit starter with a mischievous streak he’d had his entire life.

“Yeah, not bad,” Gavin said. “How’s it goin’?”

“Goin’ a lot better now.”

Right at that moment Teagan stepped out behind him into view of his camera. Both twins blinked in surprise, then Gavin smirked. “Oh yeah, a *lot* better now I bet. Gotcha. You gonna introduce us or what?”

There was no real way to avoid it now, especially with Teagan watching him expectantly. “It’s my brothers. They wanna meet you.”

“Oh.” She moved closer and put on a smile, black hair damp around her shoulders. “Hi there. I’m Teagan.”

“Hi, Teagan. I’m Tristan, the good twin. And this is the bad one—”

“Don’t let him negatively influence your opinion of me, Teagan. I’m not really that bad. I’m Gavin, by the way.”

She waved, smiling in amusement. “Hi. Nice to meet you both. I’ve heard a lot about you from Deck and Marley.”

“Oh, I’ll just bet you have,” Gavin said with a chuckle, hogging the screen now.

Tristan nudged him aside with a scowl before focusing back on the camera. “He’s so needy. So, we heard you guys

went through some things last week. Everything okay now?”

Teagan looked at Decker. “We’re both okay.”

“You gonna tell us what happened or not?” Gavin demanded.

“Marley only gave us the bare minimum,” Tristan said.

The twins were bastards, especially Gavin. Decker looked at Teagan. “You okay with it?” If not, the twins were just gonna have to wait for more intel.

She nodded. “Go ahead.”

He started explaining, then Teagan jumped in and took over. He held the phone camera aimed at them both while she finished up. When she was done, both twins were staring at them in alarm.

“Holy shit,” Gavin said into the quiet.

“Yeah, it’s been a lot,” Teagan said. “But as we said, we’re both good now. The wheels of justice are turning slowly, but at least they’re moving. And the DEA is still trying to crack the smuggling operation as a whole. They’re having trouble trying to pin down which cartel or cartels are involved in this area though. There’s apparently been a lot of overlap, and a turf war is the next big concern.”

Tristan nodded, looking taken aback. “Wow. And here I thought Crimson Point was such a dead, sleepy little town out there on the coast.”

“Not lately. But it’s still an amazing place full of great people.”

“The story has attracted more demand at CPS,” Decker said. “Companies are asking for increased security in light of all the recent criminal activity in the region. There are more openings coming up all the time, and I know Ryder and Callum are always looking for quality hires if either of you are still interested. The management is great, pay’s good, and so are the benefits. Plus it’s a small-enough company that everyone knows each other. And Marley and I are both here. Obviously that’s the most important bit. If you guys are

seriously considering applying, you should do it sooner rather than later.”

“Love the new sales pitch,” Gavin said with a grin. “We’ll think about it. But after we finish up our contracts, we’re gonna need some R&R before we make any big decisions.”

“Fair enough. Got a destination in mind?”

“Costa Rica. Gonna be epic. Wanna come down and join us? Sounds like you could use some R&R too. Oh, and by *you*, I meant you *guys*. As in you as well, Teagan.”

“Oh.” She seemed startled by the offer. “Thank you, but —”

“We’ve already got a trip planned,” Decker finished for her.

Tristan perked up. “Yeah? Where to?”

“San Fran.”

“Oh. San Fran’s nice too,” Tristan agreed diplomatically.

“I’m dragging him there with me to run interference when I visit my parents,” Teagan told him.

Both twins’ eyebrows shot up at the news. “*Reeeeeeally*,” Gavin said, aiming a sly smile at him.

Tristan elbowed him to shut him up. “Okay, that *is* more important than Costa Rica. Bravo Zulu.”

“Anything else you two knuckleheads wanna know at the moment? Or can I go now?” Decker asked.

“Wow, so crusty,” Gavin mused, shaking his head in mock disappointment. “So sad.”

“Yeah, we’ll let you go,” Tristan said. “Nice to meet you, Teagan. Have a good trip.”

“Thank you,” she answered.

“Talk to you later,” Decker said, and ended the call before Gavin could come out with a smartass remark. Smiling ruefully, he tucked Teagan under his arm. “So those were the twins.”

“They’re great. And wow, they really are identical. Think they’ll come out here and see you and Marley?”

“Hope so. We all spent a few days together at her wedding a few weeks ago, and it was great.”

“But?” She lifted her eyebrows. “I hear a but in there.”

“But there’s still more work to be done to make it the way I want with them.”

She nodded. “I get that. What are the odds they apply to CPS?”

“Decent, I think. If Tris does, Gav probably will. That’s just the way they’ve always been. Tristan leads, Gav follows him.”

“Makes sense.” She sighed. “All this talk about siblings is making me miss Lily even more. I wish you could’ve met her.”

“I do too. And you can always talk about her with me anytime.” He turned her to face him and pulled her into a hug, his hands wandering up and down the sides of her body. He would never get tired of touching her. “What about you? Have you thought any more about Ryder and Callum’s offer?” They’d approached her about doing investigative work for them on a consulting basis to start, with the possibility of a full-time position later if all parties agreed.

“I’m considering it. Have you talked to them yet? Everything okay with you and them?” They had to know by now that she and Decker were involved romantically, and it was a bit of a sticky situation for him. She didn’t want Decker to face any consequences because of her, and didn’t want any awkwardness if she decided to take the job.

“Yeah, yesterday. I explained everything, and they’re fine with it since I wasn’t technically your official protection during the times when we were together.”

“That’s good.”

“Are you leaning towards taking the job now?”

“It depends.”

“On what?”

Her gaze lifted to find his. “On us.”

His pulse jumped. He hadn’t expected to get to this conversation anytime soon. Hadn’t intended to tell her how he really felt so soon either, afraid of scaring her off. But she’d just given him the perfect opening, and given that both of them had nearly died last week, being afraid to put himself out there seemed stupid. So he wasn’t going to hold it back a moment longer.

He took her face in his hands, stared deep into her eyes. “I love you. That help your decision at all?”

She blinked. Then blinked faster, a sheen of tears filling her beautiful dark eyes. “You know what?”

“What?”

“Yes, it does. Because I love you too.”

He groaned and hugged her tighter, his entire body sighing in mingled relief and awe. He’d never thought of himself as an emotional guy, but her admission hit some secret internal pressure release button he hadn’t known existed until now. “God, you’re amazing.”

She chuckled softly. “Thanks. You’re pretty amazing yourself.”

He couldn’t believe she loved him back, especially this soon. All his life he’d been looking for a sense of belonging apart from his siblings. Fighting a deep yearning to be loved and accepted, flaws and all. The military had given him some of that. But he’d never found all of it until right now.

With Teagan.

That was huge, so huge it had him ready to go all in with her. But until Teagan was ready to do the same, he would settle for taking things one day at a time.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Hey, it’ll be okay. I’ll be right next to you the whole time.” Decker squeezed her hand as they stood next to their parked rental car in front of her parents’ house high on a hill with a view of downtown and the bay beyond. The sun was just about to set, a break in the dreary winter weather filling the sky over the horizon with glowing brushstrokes of pink, orange, and purple.

It was beautiful. But inside, she was a nervous wreck.

Staring up at the front of the house, Teagan blew out a breath, annoyed at herself for being anxious about this. She loved Decker desperately and wanted her parents to accept and eventually love him too. But if they couldn’t, it was their loss. She wasn’t giving him up for anything.

“Who’d have thought I’d ever need to bring a bodyguard home with me to visit my parents?” she mused.

He chuckled, the low, warm sound wrapping around her like another kind of hug. “Don’t worry, I’ll still protect you if the need arises.”

He was being facetious, but she knew there was a serious undertone to his words. That if things didn’t go well and she froze, he would intervene on her behalf.

Not that she thought things were going to be bad. Her parents were far too polite to cause a scene or any awkwardness in front of a guest, and things *had* been a bit better since she’d told them about finding Lily’s killer.

Still. Years of butting heads with them and feeling the weight of their disapproval wasn’t easy to shrug off.

She squared her shoulders. Gave herself a mental talking to. It would be fine. “Okay, let’s go.” Holding his hand, she strode up the front steps and rang the bell.

“It’s open!” her mom’s voice called out from deep in the house.

They stepped inside the cozy foyer of the Edwardian-era three-story, the familiar smells of Asian aromatics and spices taking her right back to childhood. As always, the place was neat as a pin, everything tidy and in its place. “Where are you guys?”

“Back here,” her dad said, hurrying from the direction of the kitchen where the scent of something savory was simmering. He was a small, slightly built man with a head of white hair and a big smile.

He wiped his hands on a dishtowel as he stopped in front of them, beaming at her and Decker. “Hi, sweetheart.” He hugged her, then held his hand out to Decker. “Hello, I’m Joseph.”

They shook hands. “Decker. Nice to meet you.”

“You as well.” He gestured behind him. “Your mother and I are just finishing up if you want to come sit in the kitchen with us. I hope you’re hungry. We made dumplings and braised short ribs.”

Oh, damn, she hadn’t had homemade Korean dumplings in way too long. Her mom was pulling out all the stops. That seemed like a good sign. “Sounds great.”

“Come, come.” He gestured for Decker and her to follow him.

Her mother was at the stove standing over the steamer basket, graying black hair pulled up in a bun, the steam curling the wisps at her temples and neck. “Sorry, sorry,” she said in her strongly accented English. “Almost done.” She turned to Teagan, reached for a hug. “Hi.”

“Hi, *Umma*. Smells good in here.”

“Yes, yes, we’re almost done.” She smiled at Decker. “Hi. I’m Annie.” She offered her hand.

He shook it gently. “Decker. Thank you for having me.”

“Oh, it’s our pleasure. Been waiting a long time for this one to bring a man home to meet us. Huh?” she said, bumping Teagan with her hip.

“Oh my God, Mom...”

She waved away Teagan’s exasperation. “Go sit. Joe will get you a beer. You like beer?” she asked Decker.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her mother looked at her and giggled. Actually giggled. “I like his accent. And he’s very handsome.” She tapped the end of Teagan’s nose. “You never told me that.”

Teagan stared at her mother, wondering what was happening. “Didn’t realize it was important.”

“It’s not,” her mother admitted, expertly using chopsticks to take some steaming dumplings out of the bamboo basket and place them on a platter. Then she shot Decker a wink over her shoulder. “But it doesn’t hurt, does it?”

Decker grinned and met Teagan’s gaze. “And you never told me how beautiful your mother was.”

She scowled at him while her mother giggled again and smacked Teagan’s shoulder. “Oh, he’s a charmer too! How lovely.” She chuckled to herself as she fished the last of the dumplings out.

Teagan wandered over to the table and sat, wondering if she was in the right house. Or whether she’d been transported to an alternate dimension. Was this all she’d needed to do all along to win her parents’ approval? Bring home a man and both of them turned into putty?

“Decker, here,” her dad said, sliding a tall glass of beer across the table to him. “I got it from the market this morning. It’s Korean. You’ll like it.”

They toasted each other from across the table and drank. Her father watched him swallow the first sip in enjoyment, his white eyebrows creeping higher and higher on his forehead. “Well? Good, right?”

“Amazing,” Decker said, slanting her a smile.

Dammit. He was handsome. Ridiculously so. And charming. No wonder her parents were so giddy. He made *her* giddy too.

“What’s new with you?” her father asked her. “Anything else happen with the investigation since we last spoke?”

“Not really. Oh, actually, I did get a call last night from an FBI agent. Apparently Craig Sandoski had an...ah, an *incident* last night with another inmate.” She smirked in satisfaction. “The guards didn’t intervene in time to stop it. Fisticuffs were involved. He spent all night in the infirmary with a concussion after getting more than fifty stitches in his face and head. And that’s after Decker here broke his nose and knocked out a few of his teeth last week.” It did her heart good to know his punishment was ongoing.

Her father blinked at her. Her mother stared. Then they both broke out laughing at the same time. “Good!” her father said, slapping the table with his palm. “And I hope they didn’t use any freezing.”

Her mother nodded, an uncharacteristically savage look on her face. “I hope he gets gangrene and dies.”

Teagan grinned, thoroughly enjoying this new bloodthirsty side of her parents she’d never seen before.

“Anything else?” her father asked in a more sober tone, looking between them with an expectant expression. “Any other...news?”

Her mother dove in with the platter of dumplings, sat down next to her husband and watched Teagan with avid curiosity. And maybe a little hope?

She shrugged. “Yeah, actually. I got a new job offer.”

Her father’s face froze. Her mother’s fell. “A job,” she said, her disappointment clear on her face and in her tone.

“Yes, with Crimson Point Security. They want me to be an investigator for them.”

“But won’t that be dangerous too?” her mother asked, a worried frown tugging her eyebrows together.

Teagan felt her spine stiffen, the automatic defensiveness kicking in. She could feel her parents' disapproval radiating at her from across the table, a thick fog creeping toward her. "Not compared to what I've been doing up until now, no."

"She's right," Decker cut in, wrapping an arm across her shoulders in silent comfort and support. "The company has one of the best reputations in the industry. Management hires only the best, most qualified candidates, and after seeing Teagan's skills and dedication firsthand, they were desperate to bring her on board. She's going to be a huge asset, and they'll be lucky to have her."

"Oh." Her mother looked at her, gave a tentative smile. "So you *won't* be in danger?"

Decker's hand squeezed her shoulder lightly. She understood what it signified, the message behind it. Don't just react. Listen. Put the defensiveness and the past behind and see what's really going on here.

Her parents weren't as much disapproving of her career as they were concerned. For her safety. She understood that better now. And it made her throat tighten a little. "It's highly unlikely that my life will be endangered in this new role," she said, wanting to reassure them both while not lying flat out. She couldn't guarantee she wouldn't face danger again.

"Well." Her father reached out and put his hand atop hers. Gave her a proud smile that turned her insides to mush. "That's good news."

"Yes," her mother agreed, then looked between her and Decker. "And there's...there's nothing else you need to tell us?"

"Not really," Teagan answered, then looked at him. "Except that I love Decker and I'm going back to Crimson Point with him."

"Ah!"

She shot a look at her mother, laughed out loud at the expression of absolute glee on her face. "What?"

“This is *wonderful* news,” she said, clapping her hands together. “Isn’t it wonderful, Joe?”

“Amazing,” he agreed, smiling from ear to ear.

So much smiling. She hadn’t seen people smile this much ever except in toothpaste commercials, and never her parents. “Glad you’re happy about that. Can we eat now?”

“Yes,” her mother announced, and began doling out dumplings and short ribs. “I made extra for you, Decker. I knew you’d be a big eater.” She piled Decker’s plate high before serving everyone else.

“He got more dumplings than me,” Teagan said.

Her mother waved the complaint away with her chopsticks. “Look at the size of him. He needs to be fed properly.”

Decker’s eyes twinkled with silent amusement as he picked up his own chopsticks. Before she could roll her eyes at him, his phone started ringing.

He pushed his chair back and stood. “Sorry, I’m expecting a call from work. Please excuse me a minute.”

A hard jab in the shoulder had her looking up at her mom. “What?”

Her mother poked her again. “Don’t ‘what’ me. He’s lovely. Is it serious between you two? You haven’t brought a young man home to meet us since your prom.”

It was kind of adorable that her mom still used the phrase “young man.” Just to prolong the suspense, she reached across the table to snatch a dumpling from Decker’s plate.

“Teagan!” her mother admonished, poking her again. Harder this time.

She snickered around the dumpling, swallowed. Noticed her dad watching her eagerly too. “Yes, it’s serious.”

“*Assa!*” her mom exclaimed, her whole face lighting up. “I knew it. I knew it when you called to tell us you were bringing

him here.” She aimed a triumphant look at her husband. “I told you, Joe.”

“Yep, you sure told me,” he agreed, methodically eating a short rib.

“And?” her mom prompted her.

“And what?”

Her mom frowned and went to poke her a fourth time, but Teagan just dodged it and smiled as she stole another dumpling. She didn’t know exactly what the future held for her and Decker yet. But she was looking forward to finding out.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Well? Did that go better than you thought?” Decker asked as he drove them away from her parents’ house.

Teagan snorted. The rest of the evening had gone far better than she could ever have hoped for, and she felt ten times lighter inside. “Please. My mother was a squishy lump of putty in your hands. But yes, it went *really* well.”

“Good. I’m glad. And I liked them both too.”

It was a relief to hear him say it, even though she could tell from his interaction with them. Her mom was probably upstairs in bed dreaming about grandchildren right now. “I get now that they’ll never understand me completely, but I know they love me and want what’s best for me. I can’t blame them for that.”

“No. And they’re also really damn proud of you. They are,” he insisted when she slanted him a skeptical look. “It’s so obvious. And for what it’s worth, *I’m* proud of you.”

She flushed, secretly eating up his praise. “Thank you. For that, and for coming with me, on the trip and here tonight. It meant a lot. I’m really glad I have you.” She was being all sappy, and she didn’t care. This was the new her. Everyone could just deal with it.

“I’m glad you have me too.”

Grinning at his teasing tone, she took in the view in front of them. The San Fran skyline lit up against the dark winter night sky, the bay sparkling under the moon beyond. “It’s pretty here, but I like Crimson Point better.” This would always be her hometown, but it no longer felt like home.

“Same.”

At their rental house, he held her hand on the way up to the door. The instant he locked it behind them he scooped her up, making her squeal in surprise, and strode for the master

bedroom. He laid her down and came down on top of her, bracing his weight on his forearms to reach up to cup her face in his hands. "I love you."

She melted inside. "I love you too, Deck." The old her would have been suspicious of her feelings, ordered herself to be cautious and wait a while before telling him. But a few near-death experiences sure had a way of clarifying what was important in life.

He toyed with her hair, his expression engrossed. "You said you were coming back to Crimson Point with me to my place, but you never specified how long you're planning to stay."

She set her hands on his shoulders, fingers sinking into the muscle there, enjoying the feel of his erection pressed between her legs. Her whole body was pulsing already, arousal and anticipation building with each second. "I dunno. How long did you want me to stay?"

"Forever."

She stilled at his instant response, the seriousness of his tone. "Really?" She hadn't expected him to lay it out there so soon, but his answer sent a thrill shooting through her. Marriage wasn't something she'd thought about much, but he had her reexamining a lot of things about her life. And just because she might not be ready to take that huge a step right now, didn't mean she wasn't open to other options in the meantime.

He nodded, stared down at her with that intent hazel gaze that made her go all weak and fluttery inside. "I've been thinking we should look for a place together when we get back."

A big, sappy smile curved her mouth. "Yeah?"

He hummed in agreement and kissed the tip of her nose. "Especially if you can make those dumplings like your mama."

A laugh burst out of her. It felt good. So incredible after all the darkness lately. Decker had been there for her through

everything, standing by her every step of the way. He was a surprise she'd never expected. "As a matter of fact, I can. And I would love to make a home with you." She arched an eyebrow. "Exactly what else have you been thinking about?"

"A lot of things. But you'll have to wait to find them out."

More flutters, and her heart squeezed. "Good thing I'm not going anywhere then."

His smile was pure love and satisfaction. "I'm glad to hear that, sugar." He lowered his mouth to hers in a long, deep kiss that made the whole world fade away.

But Teagan knew this was no ordinary kiss. They were sealing a vow.

A familiar ringtone went off. They both groaned. "Goddamn it, Creed," Decker muttered.

Teagan chuckled. "Must be about your new assignment." They had an adorable bromance forming, Decker the grumpy one and Creed the more social, sarcastic one. "Go on, answer. I wanna hear what you're doing next."

Decker grunted, fished his phone out of his pocket and answered. "Whatever you're calling about, it better be good," he growled.

She grinned and wound her arms around his waist, watching him fondly. Turned out she had quite a soft spot for tall, dark and grumpy heroes, and unbelievable as it still seemed, this one was all hers.

CREED BLINKED AT the harsh snarl coming through the phone. "Wow. Hello to you too, sunshine," he said as he drove down the dark, quiet road. "I'm on my way home from the office and thought you'd wanna hear about our latest marching orders. Ryder and Callum were both busy when I left, so I told them I'd fill you in."

"You realize I'm on vacation, right?"

Yep, for another two days. "Oh my God, I'm *so sorry*," Creed said in a fake apologetic tone. "Please forgive my inconsiderate timing."

Decker grunted. “What’s the gig?”

“Why do I get the sense I’m interrupting something?”

“Because you are.”

“Really? Can’t be interrupting anything *too* important, or you wouldn’t have picked up.”

A hard sigh. “We just left Teagan’s parents’ place.”

Creed’s eyebrows shot up. “Whoa, okay. That’s big.”

“You said you called to tell me about a job. So tell me already. There’s a giant pile of homemade dumplings and Korean short rib leftovers waiting for me right now.”

Yeah, he didn’t believe for a moment that Decker was interested in eating anything other than Teagan at the moment. “Do they like you?”

A startled beat of silence passed. “The dumplings?”

“No, dumbass, her parents.”

He grunted. “I just met them. How the hell should I know?”

“Well, just let your charming personality shine, and I’m sure they’ll be eating out of your palm in no time,” he said, all sarcasm.

“I can be charming. When it’s warranted.”

“What, so you’re saying I haven’t earned it yet?”

“Exactly. Now tell me so I can go.”

“Starts Friday.” Three days from now. “Security gig at a big conference in Seattle. Politicians, rich people, and other VIPs attending. Three days, six crews of four doing rotating shifts, ending late Sunday night once the venue is cleared. So gitcha ass back up here so we can get back to work, huh?”

Another grunt. “And I’m working with you? *Again?*”

He smirked. Decker was so fun to banter with. “Well, you were originally gonna be paired with some new guy, but I told Ryder and Callum you’d be really upset and might walk off

the job if you weren't with me, so they switched it and put us together again. You're welcome."

"God, you're a pain in my ass." But there was a hint of a laugh in his voice now.

"The sweetest pain there is. Oh! By the way, Donovan's wife Anaya had their baby last night. A girl. Both doing great, but oh, holy shit, you should *see* Callum right now." He snort-laughed. "He's wound up so tight about Nadia going into labor at any moment he's pacing around like a caged lion. Poor guy." He pulled into his driveway and shut off the vehicle, grabbed his laptop backpack from the passenger seat and got out, stretching a second. "So things are good with Teagan?"

"Yeah. She's coming back with me."

Awesome. "She's gonna take the job?" He hoped so. Teagan would be a fantastic addition to the company.

"Looks like, and since you're almost as nosy as my brothers and I wanna get this over with so I can go eat, I'll tell you that I plan to convince her to stay with me forever."

He paused, a bittersweet pang hitting him. "That's great, brother. Happy to hear that." He was glad his new buddy had found someone. It just highlighted that Creed had once had that too, and now she was gone.

"Thanks. We fly back Thursday night. I'll be in the office first thing Friday morning to go over everything."

He started for his front door. "Roger that. I'll—" He stopped dead, nearly dropped his backpack when he saw a figure rise from the swing on the front porch.

For a moment he thought he must be hallucinating. Or dreaming. Because this couldn't be real.

"Creed? Hey, you still there?"

Decker's voice sounded like it was coming from the other end of a long tunnel. "I gotta go," he blurted, and lowered the phone to his side, his heart thundering against his ribs.

The figure took a few hesitant steps toward him. Stopped at the edge of the porch where the light above illuminated her.

His whole body went rigid, his stomach going into free fall.

“Bella,” he croaked out, so stunned he could barely speak. He’d never expected to lay eyes on her ever again.

But this wasn’t the Bella he remembered. Not even close.

The woman standing in front of him now on his porch was a stranger. A mere shadow of the one he’d known. Shockingly thin, her clothes hanging off her frame. She was way too pale, with dark shadows beneath her big blue eyes.

Eyes that held such a haunted look as she stared back at him it made his guts clench. My God, what—

“Hi,” she whispered, her voice a mere wisp of a sound on the night air.

“What are you doing here?” he made himself ask, still reeling.

She wrapped her arms around herself, and when she angled her face, he could see the gleam of tears in her eyes. She swallowed hard, staring at him. “I know I shouldn’t have just shown up like this, but... I didn’t know where else to go,” she finished in a broken whisper.

—The End—

read Creed and Bella’s story next in *Guarding Bella!*

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Excerpt from

GUARDING BELLA

Crimson Point Security Series

By Kaylea Cross

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Prologue

Fourteen months ago

Multicolored Christmas lights glowed in front yards and along the eaves and windows of the houses Creed passed as he drove into his neighborhood. He was jetlagged and beat from the punishing schedule during this latest overseas contract and the long two days of travel to get home, but when he turned up his street all that vanished under a rush of anticipation and excitement.

It had been three weeks since he'd last seen Bella. They'd talked every day he had the chance, but it hadn't been enough for either of them. Missing her had been a physical ache in his chest, and in just another few minutes she would be in his arms again.

His heart kicked hard when their house came into view ahead. A little post-war cottage at the end of the street high up on a hill where they could see the mountains to the west. Her car was parked in its spot on the left side of the driveway.

The living room light was on, and he could see the Christmas tree standing front and center in front of the window. It was bare because she'd wanted to wait until he got home so they could decorate it together, and both of them were looking forward to spending the holidays together for the first time.

He picked up the bouquet of flowers he'd snagged at the airport before grabbing his gear from the back and heading for the front door. A wreath covered the small window at the top,

decorated with brightly-colored baubles and a little sign in the center that read Welcome To Our Home.

He unlocked the door and set his gear inside, excitement rushing through him as he took off his boots and picked up the roses. It was so quiet. “Bell?”

She didn’t answer.

He carried the bouquet into the kitchen. The light over the range was on, a pot of something sitting on the element. “Bella?” he called louder, turning around. The cottage was small. She would definitely have heard him come in. Unless she was on the phone or in the shower.

Or maybe she was waiting naked in their bed for him.

He started for the hallway, a grin on his face. Then something sparkly caught his attention on the island.

He stopped. Stared in confusion at her diamond engagement ring sitting there on the granite surface along with a folded note with his name on the front.

The grin faded. He picked up the note, read the two lines.

I love you, but I have to go. I’m so sorry.

Bella.

His stomach dropped, his guts clenching. What the fuck? Was this some kind of prank? It wasn’t like her, and it wasn’t fucking funny.

There’s no way she’d just up and left.

He dropped the note and bouquet on the island top and rushed for their bedroom at the end of the hall, his heart pounding sickeningly against his ribs. He flipped on the light. Their big bed was neatly made as usual. Her latest paperback was sitting on the bedside table.

He spun around and went to the closet. Wrenched the doors open.

The blood drained from his face.

Her side was completely bare. All the hangers and shelves were empty. Her suitcases were gone.

“What the fuck,” he breathed, feeling queasy and as though he’d walked into some alternate universe instead of their home.

His mind whirled frantically. Had he done something wrong that he hadn’t realized? Something to hurt her so much that she would leave like this? They hadn’t had a fight. Everything had seemed normal when he’d talked to her yesterday. She’d even told him she loved him and couldn’t wait to see him.

He whipped out his phone and called her.

The number you have dialed is no longer in service, or temporarily disconnected. This is a recording.

No. No, this couldn’t be happening.

Bella had no family. In desperation he dialed her boss. “Kim, it’s Creed. Have you seen Bella today?”

“Yes, of course, we were both in the office today. Why, is something wrong?”

Yes. Everything was fucking wrong. “I just got home, and she’s gone. All her stuff is gone. She left a note.”

“What?” Kim exclaimed in shock. “That makes no sense. She was beyond excited about seeing you tonight. She left work early to go get groceries to make you your favorite dinner, and—are you sure she’s really gone?”

Tears burned the backs of his eyes. “Yes, I’m sure.” Something seriously wrong had to have happened. Something or someone had made her do this.

“Have you called her?”

“Her phone’s already been disconnected.”

“Oh my God, I... Creed, I’m so sorry, I don’t understand any of this, I—”

“Thanks,” he choked out, his throat so tight he could barely breathe. “I gotta go.”

He ended the call. Dialed her two closest friends, praying they would have answers or at least some insight.

Neither of them had seen her today, but they both had the same reaction as Kim. Disbelief. Confusion. Saying how excited Bella had been about him coming home.

Creed lowered the phone to his side. Reeling from the shock, wanting to scream at the anguish building in his chest, he made his way back out to the kitchen.

First he went to the stove. The pot she'd been cooking with was cold, part of the dinner she'd planned for them still sitting in it.

He crossed to the island to stare at the note, trying to pick it apart. Make sense of it or find another clue. The writing was messy, contrasting sharply with her normally neat script. As if she'd scrawled it in a hurry.

The evidence in the kitchen told him she'd been in a rush, yet she'd still had time to clear out her entire closet before leaving.

None of it made any sense, and he was convinced something bad must have happened. Had she been forced? Coerced? Threatened somehow? But who in hell would ever threaten Bella?

He lifted his phone and called the police non-emergency line because his instincts were all telling him she must be in danger. Only to be told there was nothing they could do for him right now. She hadn't been gone more than a few hours yet, not even close to the twenty-four hours needed to file a missing person's report.

He hung up, feeling frantic and sick and desperate. There were no signs of forced entry in the house, no signs of a struggle or other violence. And the empty closet, ring, and note were damning. The cops would take one look at that and believe she'd left of her own free will.

He couldn't accept that. Wouldn't. So why? Why had she done this, and where had she gone?

Sick to his stomach, he picked up the ring, held it between his fingers. The diamond sparkled in the light. The symbol of his love for her. It had never left her finger from the moment he'd put it on. Until now.

The emptiness of the house surrounded him. Closing in on him until it began to suffocate him.

He sank to the floor, knees buckling. He sat there with his back against the island and buried his head in his hands, unable to breathe through the agony tearing at him. "Bella, where the hell are you?" he choked out as a rush of scalding tears blinded him.

His whole world had just ended without warning or explanation. Bella was gone, and he had to find her to at least make sure she was okay. Because he couldn't accept this. Couldn't shake the awful feeling that something horrible had happened.

And if he was wrong and she still wanted to leave him after that, she was going to have to say it to his face.

End Excerpt

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NY Times and USA Today Bestselling author Kaylea Cross writes edge-of-your-seat military romantic suspense. Her work has won many awards, including the Daphne du Maurier Award of Excellence, and has been nominated multiple times for the National Readers' Choice Awards. A Registered Massage Therapist by trade, Kaylea is also an avid gardener, artist, Civil War buff, Special Ops aficionado, belly dance enthusiast and former nationally-carded softball pitcher. She lives in Vancouver, BC, with her husband and family.

You can visit Kaylea at www.kayleacross.com. If you would like to be notified of future releases, please join her [newsletter](#).

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DEACON'S TOUCH

DILLON'S CLAIM

NO HOLDS BARRED

TOUCH ME

LET ME IN

COVERT SEDUCTION