

A BIG SKY
BODYGUARD
NOVELLA

*Inescapable
Gravity*

REINA TORRES

INESCAPABLE GRAVITY

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INESCAPABLE GRAVITY

Marius Goddard has worked hard to get where he is. Going from a small town boy to a decorated Marine and now a top-tier security operative working for the biggest stars and, when it calls for it, people at the top of the food chain of business and politics. The brighter stars seem to shine, the darker the danger surrounding them becomes.

When he's called to New York City, he doesn't know who he'll be guarding, he just knows that they're in danger. Someone wants them dead.

He won't let that happen.

When he walks into the room to meet his new protectee, he finds himself face to face with the only woman he's ever let into his hardened heart.

Heather Vincent is the name on her birth certificate, but she can count on one hand the people who know her real name. Since she was a teen, she's been known as Nix.

Name a famous stage anywhere in the world and she's performed there and brought down the house. Suddenly, instead of standing in the spotlight, she's hiding from it. A spotlight only gives her stalker another chance to end her life.

Her team has hired a guard to keep her alive, and when she finally sets eyes on him, she finds herself thrown back in time.

This was the man who'd taken her heart years ago and walked away from her. How can she spend hours and hours in his presence and not fall into his arms if he shows the least amount of interest?

Then again, what's wrong with having one last taste of pure passion if someone is determined to end her life?

Marcus is determined to keep Heather alive because he's never felt more

alive than in her presence. After he puts a stop to her stalker, he hopes that she'll give him the second chance he needs to show her that he never should have walked away in the first place because loving Heather is as inescapable as gravity.

THE LAST TIME THEY SAW EACH OTHER

The night everything changed. Life in the Hamptons was a dream if you didn't look too closely at it. Heather knew it, perhaps more than the other teens she hung out with. Sure, they all had money, but over the last few years she'd started to see beyond the shine of her family's lifestyle.

They had the huge mansion in the Hamptons and the penthouse in Manhattan, but the older she got, the more she caught snippets of conversations that her father had on the phone or in his den when his *friends* came over.

A few of the men were careless enough, or perhaps it was carefree enough to leave their coats unbuttoned and she'd see the butt of a gun sticking out of their waistband or some kind of contraption under their coats.

She'd also seen the police stop by.

Sure, they were quiet and courteous, but she could tell that they weren't there for a social call.

And her father would get cold and angry when they'd leave.

She learned not to ask questions, but she also didn't want to be around her dad.

He would snap at odd times. Even in the middle of dinner while they were enjoying themselves.

Something would happen.

She'd say something.

Or a song would come on.

And a moment later, a crystal glass would hit the wall behind her. Sometimes he'd order her from the room.

Other times, he'd storm out on his own.

Heather soon learned that it was easier to avoid her father and his business dealings alone.

That meant that she'd jump at any opportunity to leave the house.

A party? Sure.

Going to the beach? Awesome!

A bonfire? Count her in.

Whatever got her away from the oppressive feeling of 'home' had her thumbs up.

It was lucky for her that the kids her age loved to party. And chief among those kids was a guy that made her heart beat wildly and her skin tingle all over. Marius Goddard.

He was almost nineteen when they'd met and she was halfway to eighteen herself.

He was dark-haired and gorgeous. Athletic. Fun. And he treated her like one of the group from day one.

Nearly every invite came from him and those that came from others usually started with, "Marius said to call you and-"

In a word, Marius made her feel wanted.

Unlike her father who made her feel... worse than invisible. He made her feel like a target for his anger. His disappointment.

Throughout the summer, they spent crazy amounts of time together and even Marius' dad, Lars, seemed to welcome her with open arms.

There was something right about her time with Marius and she tried as hard as she could not to question it.

Looking too deeply into things hadn't helped her at all.

Marius kept her too busy for the most part and that helped her to ignore the darker parts of her life.

And being the focus of Marius' time?

It was a heady sensation.

No one asked her how she felt back then, but she knew. There was no question.

She was in love.

When the summer started to wind down, homes in the area were shuttered up as families returned to the big cities where they lived during the rest of the year. There were still some families, the diehard residents, who milked every day in their personal playgrounds while the weather held up.

And thankfully, Marius' family was one of those, because there was a dark cloud anchored above her home. Her father was drunk nearly every night and angry to boot.

So when Marius held an end of the summer celebration, she showed up determined to enjoy each and every minute.

Marius was on edge all day long.

He'd planned the party to be one to remember, because he needed it to be. His father had spoken to him earlier that week about Heather.

Contrary to the personalities of most parents in the area, Lars paid close attention to his son. And he'd noticed that Marius was serious about Heather.

Serious enough to make things official.

Official enough to pull Marius' grandmother's wedding ring out of the safe in his den.

Marius had been as shocked as he'd been confused, but his father had confessed that a long time ago... A lifetime ago, he'd been kept from the woman he loved because they were too young.

Marius felt that confession bone deep. The woman who had been his mother had been the perfect wife... for the Goddard family, and she'd left before Lars brought him home from the hospital.

So he had his father's blessing.

He just needed to ask Heather, because he knew he needed her.

The party was a smashing success as a whole, but Marius had struggled to find time alone with Heather. Even after they'd set off the fireworks that his father had arranged to cap off the evening, one of his friends kept goading the others to stay even when Marius had told everyone it was time to leave.

When that didn't work, he'd excused himself and Heather for some private time and left his friend Tate and the others behind.

He knew that Heather wasn't going to sneak into the house with him. She was worried that his father would think badly of her, so she put a hard line in the sand about that.

It was one of the many reasons that he loved her.

As they walked back toward his house, he gently tugged her into the pool

house and closed the door behind them. With everyone enjoying the bonfire and foods down at the beach, he knew he'd have the private time he needed to give her the ring.

He knew they were young, but he wanted her to know just how serious he was about their relationship.

About her.

He heard her gasp as he went around the room, closing all of the curtains until the only light he could see was the moonlight slicing through the gaps in the curtain.

"What's going on, Mars?"

He felt his heart slam against his ribs. He could hear the love and wonder in her voice.

He looked up at the track above the last doorway and saw that the curtain was stuck just a few inches from the frame.

Marius shook his head and turned around. He didn't need to waste time when he only had so much of it left with Heather before she went back to the city.

"I wanted to have some private time with you."

His words seemed so inadequate. There was so much more that he wanted to say, but he couldn't manage to remember all the words he'd practiced.

She crossed her arms and rubbed her palms against her skin as if she was trying to warm herself.

"Are you cold?"

Heather shook her head, but that didn't stop him from wrapping his arms around her and pulling her against his chest.

He felt her cheek lean against his chest, and he wanted to lift his face to the heavens and howl.

It was crazy. He'd never felt that wild and powerful before. Holding Heather was a revelation.

He'd held her before. Hundreds of times, in fact.

But in the near dark of the pool house, she felt like an ethereal creature.

She'd certainly inspired him to grow as a person. He knew she deserved a man who wanted to be the best man he could be.

"Mars?"

He loved it when she called him that. She only used the nickname when they were alone, and it made him grow another inch in metaphorical height.

"Yeah, baby?" He lifted a hand and set it on the nape of her neck to cradle

her head as he leaned away to look at her. "You're so beautiful."

Even in the mostly dark room, he swore he could see her cheeks flush with heat.

"You make me feel like I am." She let out a shuddering breath. "You make me feel like I'm never alone... if that makes any sense."

Before she could hide her face from him, he lifted a hand and grasped her chin gently.

"I understand it... I feel it."

And because he couldn't stop himself. He leaned in and kissed her.

And again.

Before he moved away, she returned the gesture over and over.

He felt his dick stir between them, stretching the khaki fabric of his slacks and nudging the ring box in his pocket.

He wanted to pull back and ask her, but her kiss turned into a bite on his lower lip.

Heather's eyes flashed open and she pulled back startled.

"I..." She blinked at him. "I didn't mean to do that."

"Are you sorry?" He knew he didn't mind it. Not one bit. She'd hardly caused him any pain. Nothing really.

Her bite had been a realization for him.

He liked the pinch. His dick did, too.

He was aching for her.

"Heather, I-"

She kissed him. Her mouth opening over his, her arms wrapping around his shoulders.

She kissed him and they staggered back.

When he felt the back of his thighs hit something hard, he tried to turn and only managed to knock something over, sending it crashing to the ground.

Heather stopped. Pulled away. Gaspd in shock. "Oh, no." She tried to lean to the side and look, but he wouldn't let her.

"Let it go," he urged her back into his arms, "I'll fix it. I'll fix anything that breaks if I get to hold you."

She didn't hesitate.

With her arms still up around his shoulders, she tugged him down and breathed him in.

He looked behind her and found the sofa, an oversized collection of large,

heavy sectionals that they'd laid on to watch movies on stormy nights.

Now, he sat down beside her and reached into his pocket.

With one hand trapped, she pressed him back against the large flat cushions and climbed up.

She pulled his hand free, almost breaking his finger in the process, to slip his hands under the loose hem of her t-shirt.

"Shit," he swore under her breath at the heat of her skin against his palms.

Heather leaned down and kissed him, trapping his thigh between her own.

The blood in his head shot down toward his feet, but made a quick stop just south of his waistband.

When Heather lowered herself against him, she cushioned his cock against her belly and he bit back a curse.

Heather pulled away. "Did I hurt you?"

"I feel like I'm going to explode and I haven't even touched you."

She laughed along with him and when he started to sit up, she helped him so he could pull her forward onto his lap.

"Right there," he groaned and felt the heat of her against him. "Yeah, baby. Right there."

Heather reached for the hem of her shirt to lift it, but he grasped her hands to stop her.

"Let me."

Her hips rocked forward and caught his dick between them. The pain hurt so damn good.

"I want to get this off you."

She lifted her arms and made quick work of her shirt before dropping it beside them on the cushions.

That brought him eye to eye with her cotton clad breasts. Pink cotton with a tiny satin bow between her breasts.

Before he could think, he leaned forward and pressed a kiss just over the bow.

He wanted to die right then and there with his face between her breasts, warming his cheeks with her natural heat, but there was so much to live for.

Like peeling the straps of her bra down off of her shoulders.

Marius didn't bother with the hook at the back, he leaned back so he could see the cotton cups fall free.

Beautiful.

Like a painting in a fucking museum.

She flinched as his breath fanned across her skin, and he watched as both of her nipples tightened in response.

Heather's mouth opened.

He heard the soft exhale of her breath and the gentle groan of sound from her throat.

His fingers touched her. Their tips circling her nipples, feeling for the subtle changes as they moved from her normal tanned skin to the warmer dark coral tips.

Heather's hands found his shoulders and her fingernails bit into his skin.

She moved restlessly against him, their hips grinding together as he wet his lips and leaned in. He tasted her skin with the flat of his tongue, enjoying the way she shuddered at the rasping texture.

His fingers plucked at her other nipple, twisting just a little bit as he worked his mouth on the other.

"Please."

He heard her plea, but he didn't know what to do with it.

All of his plans had already flown.

Nothing was going the way he planned it, but somehow it was so much better.

He swept his tongue around the tip of her breast, swearing that he would remember this moment forever.

Marius switched his attentions and felt her rise up an inch or two and fit them together like puzzle pieces.

Oh, he wasn't inside her, but she rode his erection in just the right way, and he felt her trembling against him.

Before he could get his brain to catch up to the rest of his body, he heard the unmistakable sound of Heather's name rattling the windows of the pool house.

Heather froze against him, her breath catching in her throat.

"Heather!"

"Oh god." She hissed in a breath through clenched teeth. "That's my dad!"

It killed Marius to do it, but he helped her to her feet and while she pulled the straps of her bra onto her shoulders, he found her t-shirt on the floor where it had fallen off of the seat.

"Heather!"

He saw her terrified expression when she covered his mouth with her hands.

"Don't, please."

He wanted to argue with her.

He wanted to face her father at her side, but he couldn't contend with the tears in her eyes.

"Don't."

Marius nodded and as she turned away, he reached down and felt the ring box still in his pocket.

He fought himself then. Forcing himself to stand in place as she moved toward the curtain covered doors.

She'd barely stepped outside when her father almost jerked her off of her feet and pulled her along the pathway toward the front of the house and the driveway.

Marius stepped outside, hidden by the long shadows of the trees, and watched.

If it looked like Heather's father might hurt her, he'd step in.

But all he saw as they rounded the corner of the house was the way she turned her head to look at him.

And smile.

He was sure that he'd have the opportunity to smooth things over with Heather's father and visit her in New York City to give her the ring that would promise her the world.

He was wrong.

So fucking wrong.

CHAPTER ONE

EAGLE ROCK, MONTANA
Echo Valley Ranch

LOOKING AROUND THE ROOM, Marius Goddard let his gaze lightly touch each of the other men milling about the room.

He was sure without asking that they all had military training. Mostly American. One man was either from the United Kingdom or one of its outlying lands.

Two of the men had snuck looks at their wristwatches or the wall clock.

The wait didn't bother Marius at all. He had nowhere else to be. Nothing else to do.

He'd arrived at the training camp the day before and gone for a long run in the twilight, putting his body through a long cross-country run.

He wasn't someone who liked to work out. He never had. He did because the physical activity helped him clear his mind. And his mind was always working.

Always.

There was usually one person it was centered on.

Heather Vincent.

And he hadn't seen her for half of his life.

Through the years, he'd wondered where she was, and his overworked mind had created thousands and thousands of scenarios.

Some of them were desperately happy, because that's what he wanted.

He wanted her to be happy.

Hoped she was.

Needed her to be.

"Gentlemen."

Marius' brow lifted on one side as he turned toward the voice. A man stood in the doorway.

The only doorway into the room.

"Thank you for attending this meeting."

"You made it hard to say no."

The man who Marius had pegged as a Brit had been the one who spoke. And his voice was crystal clear. He spoke like a Londoner, but there was a bit of something else in his tone.

A few more words and Marius would be able to figure it out, but it wasn't all that pressing at the moment.

The man in the doorway spoke again.

"I've done my research, which shouldn't be a surprise once you get to know me. To know each other. I'm Alex Marchand."

The name was familiar, even if the face was not.

The man had made a name for himself in the security community. He'd built a solid company.

There hadn't been a single failure.

Ever.

And that said something about the man and who he hired.

Okay.

Now Marius was really paying attention.

"You five gentleman have been invited here to become the first five members of what I'm calling Big Sky Bodyguards. The headquarters will be here in Montana, but your assignments will likely be in other locations."

"We'd go where the work is."

Marius turned to look at the Brit, pretty sure the man was from Wales.

"We'd go where the need is." Marius added and saw the others look at him with approval in their eyes.

"It looks like I've got a solid group of men here." Alex gestured to the seats and the men all found a place to sit.

He turned to Marius first. "Marius Goddard." He took a moment. "I believe I pronounced that correctly."

Marius smiled. "Yes." He had a feeling that Alex knew exactly how to

pronounced his name and a thousand other things about him. Alex Marchand didn't strike him as a man who left things to chance.

It was the reason why Marius had shown up in the first place. He'd done his research as well.

Alex turned to the next man in the circle of couches. "William Winchester."

Marius noticed that all of them had dark hair except for the man at the end of the group who had some dark gold in his hair.

Alex continued around the group. "Evander Sharpe."

Marius took note of the name. It fit the Brit well.

"Julian Tate," and then the man at the end, "Miles Upton."

The men exchanged looks in the way that men size each other up when they meet. Especially when they were brought together for their collection of skills. It was natural to want to stand out.

He was sure that Alex could almost hear the thoughts in his head.

"We have a camp in the mountains where we'll hold a training for this group."

Julian spoke up. "We'll be training as a group?"

Alex hesitated for a moment. "Will that be a problem?"

The silence in the room lasted for a split second. Everyone answered him at once.

"No."

Alex's expression eased. "Good."

William looked around the group, talking as he did. "We're all trained in groups in our military careers. We can do whatever you need."

Alex nodded, acknowledging his reassurance. "That's why I picked all of you. Still, we'll need to see if there are any holes in your tactical memories.

Marius felt everyone bristle at the idea.

"I don't think that will be a problem." Miles answered this time, sitting straighter in his chair. "But maybe I shouldn't speak for the Brit." He flashed a look of challenge at Evander. "How do we know he's up to our standards?"

Marius spoke up. "I've trained with UK Forces a number of times. They may sound more cultured than you, Miles, but they fight hard. Don't underestimate our friend from across the pond."

Evander didn't reply, but the look he sent Marius was good enough. They had made a connection and Marius was sure that Evander was worth his salt.

"All right." Alex turned his head to meet the eyes of everyone in the

group. "I've got dinner set up in the other room and while we eat, I'll give you more details about the training and the types of jobs that I expect we'll see."

Alex turned to leave and then stopped just short of the hallway. When he turned around, everyone was standing.

He did another once over around the group and smiled. "I know you gentlemen are good at soldiering. I'm glad you clean up just as well. I picked all of you for your talents as soldiers as well as your ability to fit into society."

Marius held back an instinctual grimace.

Some people thought that society meant something classy. Even upscale.

While people who had money certainly liked to show it off and pretend to have class as well. He'd been to villages that didn't even have clean water or access to medical care that had better people than he'd grown up with in 'High Society.'

Cotillion didn't mean shit when someone's life was on the line. He'd seen both sides of the world and was more than prepared to face the evil that came from having the world at someone's fingertips.

Entitlement bred evil faster than those who were grateful to wake up every morning.

For a moment, Marius wondered if he'd be able to protect someone he didn't like.

Well, he told himself, we'll just have to find that out. Won't we?

BLACKWOOD ENTERPRISES

When he went to meet with Bartholomew Blackwood, he showed up early. A little more than a half an hour early.

The lobby of Blackwood Enterprises was on the floor just under the penthouse in the Blackwood building. A moderately sized sky scraper by world standards, it was impressive in its neck of the woods, the island of New York City.

The interior was lit by the sun outside, the tinted glass brought the world inside and probably did wonders with the electricity bill.

Good for Mister Blackwood.

There was precious little information in the portfolio that Marius had

been given. Starting date, of course.

Not to mention the amount that he'd be paid as well as how much money Big Sky Bodyguards stood to earn.

Impressive.

Stupidly impressive.

He would have stayed for the meeting regardless of the wait when he was still sitting on the leather coach in the waiting area nearly an hour past the time for his appointment.

Marius kept his gaze moving easily around the room, finding that waiting in the air-conditioned comfort of the finely appointed office space was so much easier than some of the hellish places that he'd served in.

And given the discreet movement of the cameras he was able to see, he was being watched.

Evaluated.

He'd had worse before.

And didn't really care for it or about it.

He was being paid to be patient and observant and-

"Mr. Goddard?"

Ready for anything.

He was on his feet before the receptionist finished her question.

Her eyes were wider than they'd been when she stepped into the lobby. "Mister Blackwood will see you now."

He eased his casual expression into a hint of a smile as he crossed to her side, taking hold of the door as she opened it.

He saw the confusion on her face as she stood beside him, unsure of what she should do.

"Please," she looked around, at what he didn't know, "step through here."

Marius held the door in his easy grip. "I'll follow you."

His tone was even and didn't offer room for any other options.

"Sure." He heard her swallow. It was a soft sound, almost hidden under the quiet hum of the top of the line air conditioner, but he heard it and saw the pulse in her neck beat faster. "I'll take you to the office."

She stepped through the doorway with a little hop in her step and a moment later, there was a decent gap between them.

He didn't intend to make her nervous. It wasn't in his nature to menace a woman. Marius, like the others he trained with, didn't like having someone at their back whom they didn't trust with their lives.

An open back didn't bode well for survival.

They walked down a long empty hallway and he paid attention to the distance that they'd traveled. Likely the office she was taking him to took up the majority of the space on the floor.

It would be interesting to see what a man like Blackwood put in his private space.

WHEN THEY STOPPED outside of the door at the end of the hallway, the receptionist turned her shoulders so he wasn't quite at her back.

Smart woman.

She lifted her closest hand to the door and tapped her knuckles against the solid wood.

There wasn't a peephole in the door nor could he see a camera in the hall, and he'd looked.

Still, a moment after she pulled her hand away from the door, the lock disengaged.

The receptionist's shoulders eased. "Mister Blackwood will see you now."

Marius stepped to the side and gave her space to walk past him.

She was more than ten feet away when he spoke to her again.

"Thank you, Veronica."

The receptionist turned around, her lips parted in shock. "Th-thank you, sir."

A moment later, she was gone from his sight and he put his hand on the door handle and tipped it down.

THE ROOM inside was an extension of the waiting area, but a step up. The furniture had the air of contemporary design, but it looked substantial. Made like it had come from a handcrafted studio.

The tint on the windows was also a slightly different shade. Marius bet that there was a remote somewhere that could do a few interesting things with light control and maybe even prevent anyone or anything outside to see in.

There were two people in the room.

The man behind the desk and the security officer behind him.

The security guard looked like he'd seen a few too many Expendables

films.

All broad shoulders and purposeful scowls.

And given the bulky fit of the man's suit, he was carrying at least four weapons on him. Three pistols and a knife.

What he wouldn't give to pat the man down to check.

Marius stopped just short of the desk, his arms resting easily at his sides.

"Mister Blackwood."

The man tipped his chair back slightly, making the recessed lighting warm the top of his balding head. "Ares?"

If he'd been in a mood to acknowledge the other man's resourceful nature, he might have smiled or even offered him his hand to shake.

Instead, Marius dipped his chin just a hair. "Marius Goddard."

The billionaire tipped his head slightly to the side and raised a brow before he gestured at the lone seat in front of the desk.

Marius noticed that there were three other chairs just like his placed off to the sides. He expected to be the only one in the room, but apparently, Mr. Blackwood was ready to meet with groups of different sizes.

Smart really.

He'd always keep the visual appearance of being the head of the group.

Mister Blackwood wore power as well as he wore his bespoke suit.

Like he was born in it.

Before Marius was seated in the chair, Mister Blackwood started his questions.

"Age?"

"Thirty-four, sir."

"Where are your people from?"

With a touch of a smile at the corner of his mouth, Marius answered. "I don't have a profile at 23 and Me, but if you're talking about where I grew up. That would be Chicago, sir."

"Big City boy in the military. Hmm. Did you feel out of place?"

Marius shook his head. "It was an easy transition, sir."

Mister Blackwood let a long beat of time pass between them. "You're a quiet one."

Marius blinked and waited.

He knew from what Alex Marchand had told him during the briefing that other security companies had been invited to apply for the job.

Invited, sure, but Marius knew the job would be his.

He didn't need to defend himself or his personality to the billionaire.
Securing a protectee wasn't about being chatty or open with information.
It was the opposite.

Friends missed things.

Social interactions with the people you were guarding made things messy.
Distractions got people killed.

Marius waited for the next question.

Mister Blackwood didn't disappoint.

"Marine?"

"Yes, sir."

The man's eyebrows raised in an almost comical way. "I was hoping that Marchand would have a SEAL or a Delta Force operator available for this."

Marius' vision sharpened for a moment, looking at the man sitting before him. Even without the brief that he'd been given, it was easy to catalogue a few things about the man who would be hiring him.

Or rather, hiring Big Sky Bodyguards.

Either way, he was a man with money and a need he was going to spend it on.

He didn't like bullshit.

Men with that kind of money wanted to know that they would get a return on their investment.

And he would want things done. Clean or dirty didn't matter. Done was golden.

"Marine Raiders can take a SEAL or a Delta any day, but what you really want to know is whether I'll be able to protect you."

Marcus stood up and saw the security man standing behind the desk take a step forward and put his hand inside his coat.

Without lifting his gaze to the other man, Marcus felt a smile tug at his lips.

"I'm happy to give you a practical demonstration if your security guard doesn't take a step back and put his hands down at his sides."

The corner of his mouth quirked up and settled almost immediately after.
"Max? You should probably listen to the man."

To his credit, the security guard backed down immediately.

He took a step back and stood still.

Marius nodded. "Thank you."

The guard returned the gesture.

Blackwood spoke into the silence. "You should know that you're not guarding me."

Marius absorbed the news quickly. "Alright."

"It's a bit of a unique situation actually. You'll be guarding a violin."

Dipping his chin down, Marius raised his brows as he spoke to the older gentleman. "A violin, sir?"

Blackwood grinned like a mad hatter. "Not interested?"

"I didn't say that, sir. It's just a unique situation for me."

"Oh," he stood from his chair and took in a deep lung-expanding breath, "there's more to it than that."

Marius nodded. "I'm listening."

"The violin," the older man smiled, "comes with the artist who is playing the instrument."

With a nod, the security guard walked around the desk, picking up a folder as he rounded the front corner.

He placed the folder in Marius' hand and then returned to his place behind the desk.

Marius flipped open the folder and was treated to the view of the violin.

"It's the Margolis Stradivarius. It survived World War II hidden away in an attic when it's owner was sent to the camps. Once the war was over and musicians began the search for Mary Margolis, they were only able to recover her violin hidden behind a loose plank of wood. The violin itself is a miracle. The cold and the damp had damaged the wood, but a young woodworker performed magic in saving the instrument.

"I bought the violin when the family had some hard financial times and I promised them that if I ever found a musician who I felt would give proper respect to the instrument, I would give them tickets to every performance and place a picture of Mary in the lobby and programs with information on her life and talent."

Marius saw the way the older man seemed to grow an inch or two as he explained the situation.

"Who have you found to play it?"

The older man's brows rose as he smiled. "An interesting story, is it not?"

Marius had no reason to lie. "It is."

"The artist is a woman who performs as Nix."

"Nix?" Marius found his mind fixated on the name. "The name means... nothing?"

Blackwood shrugged. "Yes. She keeps to herself. I only heard about her because my nephew has heard her play. When I invited her to play the instrument and see if it might be a good fit for her, she was only too happy to come and see me. It didn't take more than a few notes played on the instrument for me to know that they were a match."

"When will I get to meet her?"

"That's where you've had a bit of luck."

Luck?

Mister Blackwood opened a drawer at the top right of his desk and withdrew a card. He leaned against his desk and reached it out toward Marius.

It was just a second before Marius had the card in his hand. The card felt like silk under his skin.

"She's staying at a home on my property. Those are the directions and gate code to get you in. The time on there will let you know when she'll be rehearsing and when dinner will be served."

Marius balked a little. "I'm not expecting dinner, sir. If I'm there to guard Miss Nix and the violin, I'll be there as a guard."

Mister Blackwood shrugged. "To each their own, Ares."

Marius tensed a little at the use of his old Military name that his unit used to call him. Still, he had the feeling that Mister Blackwood didn't mean anything by it. He seemed to think it was fun.

Let him think that.

Marius would let it roll off his back since he wasn't in the military anymore.

Now it was more of a callback to a different time in his life when things were easier.

Mister Blackwood leaned against his desk and offered his hand. "I think you'll do nicely, sir."

"I get the job done, sir. The violin and Nix will be safe with me."

He grinned and moved back from his desk. "But will you be safe from Nix?"

CHAPTER TWO

IDYLLWILD, CALIFORNIA

Blackwood Estate

She paused with her bow hovering over the strings of the violin. Heather drew in a breath through her nose and then gasped in air through her mouth.

But the bow stayed where it was.

She could hear the notes in her head. Hell, she could feel the vibrations in her hand and arm, but she couldn't make herself touch the bow to the strings.

"Do it."

She heard the wild, surging pulse in her ears.

Whoosh... whoosh.

The music in her head screamed to be heard over the blood rushing through her veins.

Still, she sat there.

Her bow vibrating with her effort to touch it to the strings.

"Just do it."

As she forced air in and out of her lungs, she felt her body rock ever-so-slightly like a metronome.

One. Two. Three. Four.

One. Two. Three. Four.

One. Two. Three. Four.

The bass notes in her head.

D A B F G D G A

Her hand lowered the bow and the vibration of the first note rolled across her skin.

F E D C

Her notes descended through the scale and while she kept the pressure on the strings the same, she felt the pressure building in her lungs.

When the notes rose up, she drew in a breath and felt her shoulders lift at the same time.

To anyone watching her, the depth with which she felt the music inside her body was not all that evident in her mien. She'd been told early on in her studies that her face remained a mask most of the time.

Heather hadn't seen that as an issue.

It mattered what sounds she could pull from the instruments.

It mattered what emotions she could draw from the audience.

What did it matter that her outside expression was nearly expressionless?

Showing her emotions had never been a good thing.

Showing her emotions had taken everything away from her.

If she could have remained out of sight, she would have, but to make a career that would pay her bills meant that she had to put herself out in the public and draw attention to herself.

That's why she chose a performance name and a persona that would entertain others, but give herself the comfort of anonymity.

Nix.

It began as an attraction for Greek mythos as a child. She could read the stories and imagine these all powerful gods and goddesses moving heaven and earth for her.

Then, when she was seventeen and facing down the real horror of her life, she needed those mythological heroes and no one was there to save her.

She found herself a member of WITSEC because of her father, plucked out of her life to save it.

And hating every minute of it.

A muscle tensed in her arm, sending the bow skidding across the strings of her violin. The atonal sound screamed into her ears and brought tears to her eyes.

The tears she dashed away and then she stood, laying the violin in its open case, the bow beside it.

Lately, her past was coming back to haunt her.

Threats had been delivered to Blackwood Enterprises and its owner, Bart Blackwood. Threats that had sent her into hiding more than she was normally.

Just that morning, she'd received a call from Bart telling her that he'd

hired a guard to protect her.

Her heart constricted in her chest at the thought of someone else in her space.

She was already having trouble playing the violin alone. Even the disguise she wore on stage wouldn't matter if she couldn't play a single piece from beginning to end. She was beginning to think that it would be better if she just disappeared.

Again.

There was just too much pressure on her.

Not enough air.

As she pulled a breath into her starving lungs, someone knocked at the door.

Knock knock.

No.

Knock knock.

She wasn't going to answer the door.

Knock knock.

She wasn't ready.

Knock knock.

She needed more time.

Knock knock.

Time she didn't have, because the lock clicked and the door swung open.

The man standing in her door was a hallucination.

No, a mirage.

There was no way that he was standing in the same room with her.

He was from the past.

Another world entirely.

Her mask.

She needed her mask. It was what kept the secret of her identity from the throngs of fans and members of her constantly growing audience.

She knew that the mask and its many sisters were in the storage room. A black domino mask created to fit perfectly over her face, from the tip of her nose to her temples.

It was too far away to do any good.

"Heather?"

Even though she knew that he'd already seen her face, she lifted her hands to cover it, struggling to hold her sanity together.

Out of sight? Out of mind?

Certainly not.

Not with Marius.

Oh god.

Hadn't she suffered enough?

She felt his hands on her wrists, trying to draw her hands away from her face.

She was stronger now.

Older.

Wiser... no.

Sadder.

An aching emptiness inside of her.

She kept her face covered as if she could shut him out and push him back into the past where he belonged.

"Go away."

"Not happening." His tone brooked no argument, but she wasn't used to the deeper timbre.

She splayed her fingers apart and looked at him. "Your voice."

His expression didn't change. Not a bit.

But his chest expanded like a bellows and she found herself mimicking him. Filling her lungs with air that she'd been struggling for just minutes ago.

"It's been forever."

Startled, she took a step back. They'd spoken the same words at the same time.

It felt like the time that had passed disappeared for just that moment and the man who stood before her had a dark shock of hair falling over his forehead and a boyish grin on his face.

"Mars."

The name echoed inside of her.

Her head.

Her heart.

His name filled her with endless memories that she'd tried to forget, but they were still there. They welled up as though she'd punctured a hole in the top of a pressurized capsule and suddenly she was drowning in them.

Drowning in the love that she'd shared with him years ago.

"I'm here." He closed his mouth, pressing his lips into a thin line that made his tanned skin almost white around his lips. "I've been hired to protect

you," his gaze swept the room and landed on the instrument case a few feet away from her, "and the violin."

And the violin.

Of course.

"I can see why Bart hired someone. It's worth more than the GDP of several small countries. And," she couldn't stop herself from trying to interject some kind of humor into the situation, "a few Birkin bags."

He didn't smile.

She was sure that was her fault.

It didn't help that she was struggling to keep herself planted in place. Having Marius so close to her after so many years? She wanted to run and jump into his arms, but she knew he wouldn't welcome it.

She could see the tension in him from where she was standing.

He was as shut off as she should be.

But her life and her emotions could be the very definition of 'complicated.'

"Mister Blackwood didn't mention the value of the violin."

She heard the confusion in his voice and knew that he was mulling over the reason for the omission. She would too if she was in his position.

"He probably wouldn't unless you asked him outright. Bart might live the life of a billionaire with ease, he's had years to grow into that, but he's also not someone who likes to brag about his wealth.

"Likely he didn't mention the value because it's not a necessary factor in his view. He's got it insured to high heaven. And likely, it's the only way that he knew I'd accept a guard if you were also here for the violin."

She could see that he was curious. She had been as well when Bart had first unveiled it as the instrument that he had picked her to play.

Heather walked over to the table and when Marius walked up beside her, she placed her hands on the tabletop.

It was too tempting to reach out and touch him.

He was only inches away and even as she felt the heat of his arm against hers, there was a distinct space dividing them.

She kept her focus on the violin. That was something solid.

Dependable.

Because her life surely wasn't.

"The Margolis Stradivarius is a piece of art. The body is made of rosewood and even the grain of the wood adds to its beauty. When it was

recovered and repaired, there were studies done with various forms of photography.

"I believe that it has more photographs taken of it than a Kardashian."

"That's something."

She smiled at his droll tone.

"The neck, scroll, fingerboard and tailpiece were likely made from the same ebony tree." She shook her head as he turned to look at her. "That's what I'm told. Bart has had studies done on the instrument and, as the person he's selected to play it, I've learned all of the mythos surrounding it."

"You were always reading mythology. I shouldn't be surprised that you've found a love for this as well. Heather, I-"

"Nix."

The denial was instantaneous.

A little too short.

A little too loud.

She forced herself to keep her gaze on the instrument in its case.

"I- I'm sorry. I just... That name. It's part of my past."

The room went silent and she felt like the barometric pressure of the air inside the guest house had shifted, making it nearly impossible to hear anything besides the low thrumming sound of blood in her veins.

She waited for one of them to say something, but there seemed to be an endless amount of silence. Or maybe they were both afraid of what they might say.

She knew she owed him answers, but she just wasn't sure that the answers she had to give would mean anything to him.

When she last saw him, she was head over heels in love with Marius Goddard. She had pie in the sky dreams of marrying him and living happily ever after.

The nightmare she'd walked into when her father dragged her home that night, years ago, felt as thin as rice paper when she thought of it now.

Would he even want to listen to her excuses?

Maybe it was better if she called Bart and explained that Marius wasn't going to work out as a bodyguard.

He was good.

Better than good.

Bart didn't hire people he thought were 'decent enough.' He didn't waste his money on adequate.

He hired the top of the line.

Was it wrong that she was proud of what he'd become? The best?

Back when they were teens, she saw him as a hero. A demigod, at the very least.

She'd fallen in love with the hero inside him, and now, she could tell that he was a hero in reality. He'd been athletic that summer. He'd been sleek muscles and a broad toothy grin.

Now he was muscular, and very likely lethal.

He'd become an Adonis and she was a woman who played for packed concert halls, but she wore a mask, hiding who she was from everyone except for Bart.

How could Marius think that she was anything but weak? A coward.

She turned to look at him, but she only let her gaze fall somewhere above his chin instead of his eyes.

She certainly wasn't ready to look in those night-dark eyes and see disappointment.

"Stop."

She leaned back when she heard his denial, but still, she couldn't meet his eyes.

"Don't push me away. Not yet, " she heard his rough indrawn breath, "not until we've had a chance to talk."

She shook her head.

Talking with Marius had always been too easy. They could fill hours and hours with easy conversation and for once, she'd found someone who listened to her, really listened.

If he was still like that, she wasn't sure she could stand pushing him away. Not when she'd missed him so much.

"I don't think that's a good idea. In fact," she fisted her hands on the tabletop and looked him right in the eye, "I know it's not. If you don't call Bart and tell him to find someone else, I will."

She didn't lower her gaze.

She kept it on his and felt the clash of their wills like a tug of war between them.

It would end, she reasoned, when he decided that she wasn't worth the fight.

He shook his head, just a fraction of an inch. Enough for her to see a muscle tick in his jaw.

Had he lost the dimple she loved so much?

Had she taken it away from him along with his smile?

No, she couldn't have that much power over a man like him.

"You need to go." She ground the words out between her clenched teeth and bit into the inside of her cheek to keep the intensity in her expression.

She couldn't weaken now.

She needed him to leave before the dam inside of her broke.

"Leave."

Something flashed in his eyes and she hoped that he was on the verge of leaving.

Please, oh please.

"Marius-"

"Ares." His voice felt like it was purring in her ears. "They call me Ares now."

It was fitting, she decided.

The fierce look in his eyes sent chills through her body. It was as if a switch had flipped and he'd gone from the Roman pantheon as Mars to the Greek as Ares.

She spoke again, feeling as if she needed to release some of the tension building up inside of her. "The god of war."

"You can fight this all you want, Nix, but I need you to know that I win the battles I fight."

She stared back at him and wondered where the teenage boy had gone.

Had she lost him forever?

That's when she saw it.

The softer warmth of emotion in his eyes pushing out the hard, cutting edge of his glare.

"I won't leave, Nix. I won't tell Blackwood that I'm leaving. You know why?"

She opened her mouth to speak, a slight parting of her lips, enough to breathe in life-giving air deep into her lungs.

Still, she couldn't speak or move her head, held in the dark glare in his eyes.

"I'm going to fight for you, Nix. I'm going to fight for us in a way that I think you've never been fought for before. Remember that."

Remember that?

How could she not?

How could she-

He grabbed her by her upper arms and pulled her tight against him from mid-thigh to their middles. Then he did what she'd been dreaming of since that summer night.

He kissed her.

CHAPTER THREE

THIS WAS NOT WHAT HE WAS HIRED FOR.

That intrusive thought was easily swept away when he felt her bite the flesh of his lower lip.

It was a quick spark of pain and then a flood of hot desire rushed through every artery in his body.

Marius felt her lean into his body, her head tipping back so he could claim more of her mouth.

And that's where he stopped it.

He drew back and earned the ire of his heart and other harder, painful parts.

Her mouth was pursed at first as if she was still searching out his kiss.

When her eyes opened and her mouth went slack he saw the confusion and disappointment in her gaze.

"Why?"

She didn't elucidate beyond that word.

Why did you kiss me?

Why did you stop?

He knew he could ask, but he didn't think he'd get an answer and honestly... he didn't deserve one.

"I'm here, Nix." He shook his head when her new 'name' crossed his tongue. "I'm here to keep you safe."

"Then find someone else to take over. I won't work with you."

She turned on her heel and walked away. Her hair had always ended at her shoulders but it was now longer, almost to the soft swell of her beautiful backside. It swished back and forth as she left the room and disappeared into

another part of the house.

Almost as if they were being watched, his phone rang.

He answered the call and wasn't all that surprised to hear Alex's voice in his ear. "Settling in?"

The wry tone of voice and the way he cleared his throat said that they were indeed being observed.

"There's a bit of a snafu."

"Oh?" Again, that knowing tone of voice. "Do tell?"

"Did you know that Heather... Nix and I have a shared past?"

"Does it make a difference?"

Marius ignored the question. It made no sense to answer it. If he didn't know he wouldn't have asked his first question the way he did.

"Do you have any information on what happened to her when she disappeared?"

The silence on the other end of the call didn't help. It also told him that Alex was holding back.

Normally Marius wouldn't really care.

Normally he didn't have a personal connection to his target.

But what he had with Heather, Nix, damn it, that wasn't just personal, it was earth shattering.

It had blown his life apart, his heart as well.

He'd feared the worst for years and years and now, she was here with him, but she obviously didn't feel the same as he did.

She didn't walk into his arms.

She didn't melt against him like she used to.

She was holding back.

She wasn't his any longer and she had a full life that he wasn't a part of.

"I can't give you the information, Ares."

"Can't? Or won't?"

Alex's tone didn't leave room for argument. "You want to know what happened? Ask her yourself? It's her secrets to share, Ares. Remember that."

The phone clicked off at that moment and Marius was sorely tempted to let it fly across the room.

Human?

Yes.

Professional?

Fuck no.

He knew enough not to press her right then. He had to give her some time to calm down. He just didn't know what to do with himself until then.

Marius turned his head and looked around the room.

His gaze landed on his bags and he sighed. Without a word, he picked up his bags and headed down the hall, trying to retrace Hea- Nix' s steps.

He passed two doors before he heard the soft tread of feet across wooden flooring.

He tilted his head toward the door to hear and when her footsteps went silent again, he retreated back to the door before that one and gave the knob a twist.

It swung open a moment later and he stepped inside.

The furniture reminded him of some old Sit Com that his grandmother used to watch. Something in black and white that changed to color over time.

It was almost as if Dick Van Dyke would step in the room and try out a new tv channel or pick up the paper to read before he sat in his chair to peruse the volumes.

One of the walls presented a wood-furnace and he hoped they wouldn't have to use the device.

He set his bag down on the foot of the bed and smiled at the wide surface it presented.

California King. As the name suggested, it was wide and laid back.

It was enough that he could sleep on a different section every night for a few days before he ran out of clean sheets to lay on.

A door closed on the other side of the wall and he felt his back teeth grind against each other.

The walls were pretty thin if he could hear her closing doors.

Thin enough that he'd have to worry that she might hear him toss and turn.

Or other activities.

A quick look about the edge of the ceiling told him nothing. If Alex wanted them watched, they would be.

Dialing his phone, he left the bedroom and crossed over to the far side of the house.

The phone didn't pick up. It went to voicemail and Alex's over-reasoned tone answered back.

"Leave me a message and I'll get right b-"

Marius spoke before the message was over. "I want to know where the

cameras are hidden. And the microphones. You'll have to give me access to them at some point so that I know what's coming. Who is coming? You can't leave me out of this."

Alex was on the line, his voice calm and reassuring. "I'm not leaving you out of it, Marius."

"Certainly seems so."

"You need to connect with Nix again. When that happens, she'll let you lead her. Until then, we could have cameras on every inch of the house and it wouldn't do any good if she argues with you or takes off in the wrong direction at the wrong time."

"You knew all of this coming into the assignment, Alex. I didn't."

"And now that you know, I hope you'll understand my reasoning."

"I'm too angry to understand." He bit out of the words before he felt his heartbeat slow and soften a bit. "Still, I'm glad to know that she's alive."

"For too long, I thought... I meant that I believed she was lost to me."

"Well, if you don't keep her safe, she will be."

The phone cut out and Marius squeezed it until he heard the plastic begin to crack.

"Who were you talking to?"

His grasp on the phone loosened as he turned around.

She was standing in one of the archways of the central living space.

Leaning against the aged, stained wood, she looked smaller than he remembered her looking even as a teen.

"That's Alex. He's the boss."

She lifted and lowered her head in a nod. "How long have you worked for him?"

"Just the last few months. Most of which we've had in training. We're all military and some of us were a bit rough around the edges. Some of us needed polish."

"Not you though."

Her voice almost made him smile.

"There were a few edges that I needed ground down. I've spent a lot of time in the military. Deployments to a number of places you might know."

Her eyes softened a little. "And what about the ones I wouldn't know?"

Marius felt a hole open up in his belly and the darkness gnawed at what was left. "I wouldn't want you to know anything about those places. You don't need the nightmares."

"Oh..."

He knew that tone of voice.

He heard the soft hiccup of sound that had always plucked at his heart.

"I guess so." She moved back to her chair and sat down, her posture impeccable. The fingers that lifted her bow, long and graceful.

When she placed the bow against the strings, he saw the faintest cloud of rosin lift from the strike. Her gaze was fixed on the music stand before the large, floor-to-ceiling windows and while he didn't see anything physical dividing them, he knew that she wasn't going to give him any more of her attention.

He crossed to the other side of the room, finding a chair nearly against the wall, and sat down in it to listen to her play.

At first, the notes seemed forced. Hard. Nearly sharp. Riding the high end of their tone.

As she went on, the energy mellowed. The notes rode the melody with deep, strong sweeps of her bow.

It was incredible to watch.

Knowing that she was the one making the sounds? That she was the one creating such beauty with the vibration and pressure of her hands put him in awe of her talent.

No, they may not have been together during the years, but she certainly hadn't wasted her time.

There were secrets between them.

On his end and hers.

Secrets that she might never disclose.

She already thought that there was too much between them to even talk about it.

He didn't.

He would wait it out, he decided.

He could focus on his job and keep her alive.

He could give it whatever time it took to end the danger threatening her life, and then he'd take the rest of the time to work things out between them.

Being in the military, seeing the things that he'd seen, he knew what he wanted.

He wanted her to give him a chance to love her.

If it only went that far, it was fine.

He wanted more. He wanted everything.

First, he had to find out what happened to Heather to give rise to Nix.
And hope that it wasn't too much of a chasm between them to get to her
on the other side.

IT WAS dusk before she knew it. The light outside of the window was deep
purple beyond the trees and dark inky night above the house.

There was just enough time for her to clean her instrument and pack it
away into the safe behind the desk.

She didn't think twice about doing it in front of Marius.

He was in charge of the violin's safety as well, he likely had the safe
combination, but she wasn't going to ask him.

The last thing she wanted was to start a conversation.

She had already fought a mighty battle to keep from telling him
everything that had gone on in her life.

It would be all too easy to cuddle against his warmth and try to forget the
years of pain she'd suffered through and take the comfort that he could
provide.

But then what?

She was a job. An obligation.

When they found the person threatening them, it would be over and
Marius would move on to another job.

She'd likely never see him again.

A soft knock on the side door turned her head and before she could cross
the room, Marius was there, pushing her behind him.

"It's Missus Fazekas. She lives next door and she brings dinner to me."

She watched as the tension in Marius' body ebbed, but he didn't step away
to let her answer the door.

Instead, he walked to the door ahead of her.

At one point, she tried to move around him, quickening her steps, but he
reached out a hand and snared her hand with his.

He didn't say a word, but his eyes widened and his chin dipped down as if
to say that she should stay there beside him.

The long-gone teen girl inside of her wanted to stomp on his foot and
open the door on her own, but one look at his face told her that if she tried it,

it wouldn't end well.

Marius was taking this seriously, which she should be grateful for.

She should be.

After all, it wasn't just about her.

She knew how valuable the instrument was and for Bart, she'd make the best out of the situation.

AT HER SIDE, Marius looked out of the window to the side of the door. She knew what he was likely seeing.

Missus Fazekas was a thin older woman, but there was no mistaking her strength.

Her calm, dark eyes didn't show much of an expression beyond understanding and kindness. They were always gentle, and she was observant beyond her years.

Beyond anyone's years.

The doorbell rang again and Marius unlocked it. When he opened it up, Missus Fazekas turned her head and then lifted her chin until she was almost looking up at the stars above her head.

She shook her head side to side, almost as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

And then with a single nod of her head, she stepped inside.

Marius had to step back to avoid her stepping on his toes and he gaped at her just as Missus Fazekas headed straight for the patio door.

Nix tried to follow the woman, but Marius held her back. "How long has she worked for you?"

"For me?" Nix tried to wiggle her hand free of his. "Never. She works for Bart. And if I don't get outside, the dish will be cold."

She moved forward and this time he went with her. When they reached the door, Missus Fazekas was just opening the door to come back inside.

The older woman held up a couple of fingers. "Two plates," she explained. "Two people. Eat!"

Nix could only hide her face from Marius. She hadn't expected this edict from the sweet, sweet lady next door, but she could see how Missus Fazekas could find the humor in this. The older woman had been trying to encourage her to date.

Now she was likely thinking that Marius was her... her... Who knows

what the older woman thought Marius was to her?

Marius gently drew Nix back toward the front door. They followed Missus Fazekas and when the older woman stepped outside, Marius thanked her for her generosity. Before Nix could say anything, the older woman gave her a smile and a not-so-surreptitious wink.

The world, it seemed, was conspiring against her.

Once he'd locked the door, Marius turned back to her and tried to hide the smile on his face. "Is she... always like that?"

She lowered her gaze to the side. "Like what?"

Now it was his turn to look at her with a quizzical stare. "You didn't use to pretend like this."

"No?" She tried to put an air of nonchalance in her voice.

"No." His tone was certain. Straightforward. "With me, you were always refreshingly open. Honest."

"Honest." She didn't expect that word on her lips. She certainly hadn't anticipated the cold bite in her voice. "How do you know that I was honest? Ever?"

She didn't know what she expected from him in an answer. She just wanted to distract him enough to get her hand freed from his grasp.

"How?"

His tone had a hard edge to it and it brought her to a standstill as she waited to see what he'd say next. She certainly didn't have an idea what he was about to say.

"Because I knew you. Because I loved you."

"Knew." The word fell limp from her lips. "Loved." She drew in a deep breath and let it out again. "Both past tense."

When she turned around, her hand pulled from his and she made her way out onto the patio.

She was in her seat before he could come around to her side of the table.

It was a miracle of its own, she pondered. If he'd pulled out her chair and played the gentleman for her, it would only be that much harder to keep him at arm's length.

He ate with her. Both of them savoring the meal.

But neither of them talked.

For the rest of the night.

CHAPTER FOUR

IT HAD TAKEN DAYS TO SETTLE INTO THE STRANGE IMPASSE BETWEEN THEM.

Nix would spend her days practicing pieces of music, working herself until she was exhausted. She would take breaks to run around the walled garden on the property or do yoga in the center of the same space.

It was all new to him.

When they were younger, she hated to run. One of her friends would say that the only time she expected to see Heather run was if she was being chased.

And yoga?

He knew the merits of the exercise. He'd even seen soldiers make a habit of the practice, but he'd never seen anyone look so graceful in its pursuit.

The supple curves of her body and the nimble transfer of weight and balance created beauty as well as displaying the fit form of her body to his hungry eyes.

He would watch and she would ignore him for hours. He was watching and waiting for the time when Bart removed her from his care and found someone new.

That's when he got the call.

"Marius?"

"Yes, sir."

"We need to move her to Seattle. We have another engagement for her to play."

He saw the tension that knotted up in her shoulders before she forced it away.

"I'll send you the details, and you'll communicate with the rest of my

people to make the transfer."

"Are you certain, sir? With the developments?"

Marius knew that Mr. Blackwood was well aware of the additional notes that had been found on or near the house.

The notes had been kept away from Nix.

She didn't need to see the vile words and 'art' that accompanied them.

No one should ever see their like.

"If you don't take her there, then I'll find someone who will."

"I'll take her to Seattle."

"That's what I thought."

For a long, dark moment, Marius pondered if Mr. Blackwood really cared about Nix or if this was all a part of some kind of show. Well, there was only one way to really find out. They'd have to go to Seattle and find out.

WHEN SHE'D HEARD the news, Nix thought that she'd taken it well. When she'd been in protective custody for years, she'd learned to take the movements and transfers with some kind of grace.

This was the first time that she was making such a move with someone she cared about.

Having a performance as part of her itinerary meant that she's have to talk to Marius. To coordinate the shows and the car rides, he'd need to know what plans were in place for various occurrences.

And what to do when the shit hit the fan.

They had only ever had to cancel one show because of 'him.' And she hoped that's where that total would stay.

"Nix?"

She set down her instrument and turned, not ready for the look in his eyes.

He was worried about her.

He cared about her. That was obvious in his eyes.

The trouble was, she wasn't sure if he cared about her or Heather.

Heather was long gone and Nix?

Well, Nix was nobody.

What was there left to care for?

THE VENUE in Seattle was a security nightmare. More than one time while they were touring the space did Marius offer a few curses to Mr. Blackwood in absentia.

Miles stopped at the edge of the stage and swept the room with his gaze. "Why do I feel like this whole thing is going to blow up in our faces?"

Marius gave him a look before going back to his clipboard with a shake of his head.

"Our job is to keep that from happening."

Stepping up beside him, Miles looked over his shoulder.

"Too many dark corners. Too many blocked sight lines. This is an old power station of some sort?"

Marius nodded. "Antiquated. The local government built a new modern building with a state-of-the-art system almost ten years ago and they left this building as is."

Miles reached out and ran his fingers over one of the metal surfaces, grimacing before he lifted his fingers to stare at the smudges across his fingertips. "I would have thought they'd do more cleaning before using it as a venue."

"It started out with kids having raves in here. After a while it turned into a drug den. When someone overdosed here, there was a public outcry for better security or to demolish the building."

"Why didn't they?" Miles didn't wait for a reply. "I know. We had something like this happen in my hometown. Some kind of historical society stepped in."

Marius nodded. "A few of the local families who could trace their beginnings back to the same era when it was built. They pooled their money to rehabilitate the building and now it's the 'cool' place to have an event if you want a... let me see if I can remember the ad copy... Unique location for any event where you want to create an experience so memorable that it will never be forgotten."

Miles nodded slowly before he spoke. "Memorable. The concept goes both ways."

"What do you mean?"

Miles shook his head. "Just talking out of my ass."

"That might be true." Shaking his head, Marius sighed. "But there's a bit

of truth in that as well. Our job is to see that it's the good kind of memorable."

Miles kept his gaze fixed on Marius' face.

Marius noticed it and he wasn't sure he liked it. "This means a lot to me."

"Nix means a lot to you. Don't bother trying to dance around the issue, Ares. The way you look at her. The way your hand's itch to touch her. Even the way you speak to her-

"That's not-

"Maybe not to most people, but I've heard your voice strong, weak, authoritative, mellow, laughing and aching in pain. What I hear in your voice is different with her. Softer. Gentler. And I don't think it's because she's a woman. We trained with women at the camp. You didn't treat them any differently than everyone else. Nix is different to you."

"I knew her before." That just wasn't enough to explain, but he wasn't sure he should. "Before I went into the military."

"Ah." It was a simple answer. And yet it wasn't. There was a depth of understanding in Miles' gaze and Marius let out a breath.

"So, I can count on you?"

Miles' smile was mostly on one side of his mouth. "You could before I knew. Now that I know how much this means to you. We won't let anything stand in the way."

Marius' smile was barely there. He wouldn't allow himself to be too confident. That had never ended well for him. Confidence didn't equal competent in his world.

"Let's keep going and find the trouble places in the seating plan too. We want to keep everyone in sight of the cameras."

Miles gave him a casual salute and went off on his way to tour the far side of the room.

Turning to look at the stage, Marius saw the red X marked in tape just shy of the center of the floor.

"Downstage of Center."

That's what Heather had said.

He walked the front row from one side to another before he started back on each row back from there.

Back and forth, he tracked the closest exit. He saw any blockage of sight lines. He looked at the angle they would have for the music stand that Heather would stand behind.

Alex had picked them all for their ability to seamlessly fit into public venues. They weren't about bulk, but they had to blend in where it was possible. That would let down the guard of anyone trying to hurt their protectee.

It made sense.

But sense wasn't really on his mind.

His phone buzzed in his pocket and Marius took it out while he continued to scan the room as he walked up the small flight of stairs to the stage.

"Alex?"

"Ares? How are things going on your end?"

"Going."

"I think you know that I'd like more information than that. How is Miles fitting in?"

"We've come to an understanding."

Alex almost chuckled on his end of the call. "Was there any bloodshed?"

Marius couldn't help but smile. "No one will find evidence of it."

That earned him a sigh. "Pity."

Smiling now, Marius spoke to their leader with a great sense of candor. "I'm not sure if I should thank you."

"Really now?" Alex drew out the question and let it fade off into the ether.

"This could have gone horribly wrong."

Marius swore he could hear Alex rolling his eyes.

"I would like to say that you were right from the beginning," Marius told him, "but I can't. At first I wasn't sure what would happen.

"I've spent years becoming a soldier, so I knew that I could protect her. I just didn't know if I could separate the man from the soldier."

"Bodyguard," Alex reminded him.

"Yeah, bodyguard." He blew out a breath. "I have more motivation now to do the job, but this assignment is certainly going to change my life."

"There'll be time to talk about that that means later." Alex's tone was level, even. "I know you've got this."

"I do." A weight fell from Marius' shoulders. "If there's nothing more, I need to finish my inspection of the venue. Will we see you tonight?"

"Physically? No. but I'll be watching through video feed. I have a keen appreciation for musical talent, and Nix has talent enough to share with the world."

The call ended and Marius found himself behind the red X on the ground and turned to look at the seating of the audience. What did she see when she stood there looking out at hundreds of people?

Did she see individual faces?

Expressions?

Or did she see rows and rows of silent silhouettes until they rose to their feet to applaud her.

Did she like to have friends in the audience when she performed?

That's where he stopped himself.

Friends?

She hadn't told him much about her life since they'd been separated, but he knew some barebones history of that time.

It was pertinent to her protection and that had been in the history that Alex had prepared for him.

It hadn't been a secret that her father had been involved in shady business dealings. It had been a tongue-in-cheek joke in the Hamptons that he was their own personal mob boss.

But he hadn't been a boss. Highly placed?

Yes.

High enough that he was the target of both enemies and the government?

Absolutely.

The night that her father dragged her away, they'd both nearly been killed.

It was the same night that the FBI took them away and put them under the protection of the U.S. Marshal Service. Witness Protection.

They'd gone into hiding so her father could testify against the men who tried to kill them and his former bosses.

They couldn't go home after that.

He understood that now.

And why she protected her identity when she performed.

A mask gave her a way to step into the spotlight but still keep herself safe.

Well, until the recent threats.

He could understand Mister Blackwood's frustration with her. She liked to keep herself apart from others.

How could he blame her?

But Blackwood hadn't been able to get close to her. She was probably

keeping him at arm's length to keep him safe.

Now she had him, Marius almost smiled.

She didn't have to push him away to keep him safe. The shoe, as his grandmother used to say, is now on the other foot.

Heather had him.

He'd be her friend. Her support.

And if she allowed it, her lover.

Miles stepped up to the edge of the stage and caught Marius' eye.

"We have a few places that need watching tonight. We can place plants and other obstacles to block access. That will turn heads if people try to move around or break through those barriers."

"Good job." Marius nodded and felt a strange need to get back to the house. He'd left Heather in the capable hands of Gunny & Badger.

Then again, he didn't want to think about their hands anywhere near her.

Yeah, he really needed to talk to Alex after they'd eliminated the threat to Heather's life.

"Let's get back to the house and I'll introduce you to Nix."

CHAPTER FIVE

SITTING IN HER DRESSING ROOM, HEATHER SMILED TO HERSELF.

Heather.

She was calling herself Heather again.

Through the years that she'd been building her career as a violinist, she'd kept that name to herself, choosing to be called Nix all the time.

Using the wide make-up brush to dust powder across her features, she closed her eyes and when she was done she laid the long-handled brush on the desktop.

Her mask was next.

The lace cut-out mask was fashioned for each performance from the same bolt of lace. Ordered from Brussels, it cost a fortune, much of an improvement from her original masks that she created from a plastic tablecloth that she'd found in a dollar store.

Using her own creativity, she'd cut and glued the corner of the tablecloth until it fit across her face hiding most of her features from her forehead to her cheeks.

The hardest part was her nose.

Trying to get the plastic to fit over the slope of her nose was a battle, but it had to be worn before she set foot on a stage, or in those early days out on the sidewalk before the general public.

A soft knock at the door turned her head. "Who is it?"

She was expecting Marius. He was going to walk her to the side of the stage and stay with her until she went on stage.

"My dear..."

She turned her gaze toward the dressing room door as she stood.

Reaching out her hand to pick up the mask from her make-up table.

"Could I come in and wish you good luck?"

Heather cringed, glad for the door between them. "Perhaps later?"

She heard the sadness in Bart's voice, and she didn't blame him. "When this is over, Bart, I'll show you who I really am."

She took a few steps, treading softly across the hard tiled floor. There was no window to see out or a peephole to peer through.

Instead, she just had to make the decision for herself.

Before too much time had passed, she lifted her mask and placed it over her eyes and nose before tying the satin ribbons through the waves of her hair.

With that done, she opened the door.

"I'm glad you came to hear me play."

His gaze was fixed on her face and his eyes shown with a melancholy light. "I guess it's my bad luck," he explained. "When we first met, I could barely see."

She drew back slightly, concerned at the strange downturn of his mood. "Bart..."

He chuckled and waved off her worry. "Back then, my eyes were failing me and I was wallowing in my own self-pity."

Heather swallowed at the lump in her throat. She remembered that time all too well.

"And I would wander in the darkness through the gardens of my home, navigating with my nose and sometimes the pain in my shins."

She smiled, but she wasn't quite sure what to make of his darker sense of humor.

"And I heard an angel in the darkness."

He reached out a hand and she took it, wondering why he'd initiated the contact now of all the times that he'd attended one of her performances.

"You're too kind," she shook her head, "back then I was playing on the secondhand violin that the Marshal's picked up for me to keep me busy."

He nodded. "But the lack of quality of the instrument did nothing to hide your talent. I heard the soul of the musician, not the instrument, and knew that you were destined to play a true treasure and delight audiences around the world."

Heather blinked back the tears that gathered on her lashes, threatening to fall down into the lace. "You took a chance on me back then, especially when

I kept trying to hide myself from you.”

His smile changed again.

Actually, it dimmed as his shoulders rose and fell.

“We all hide ourselves to some degree, my dear. I attend functions and shake hands with any number of people, but I only let a few people see who I really am.

“The towers where I have my offices? The fancy waiting rooms that people have to venture through to get to me? Those are my masks in a way. I won’t deny you the ways in which you protect yourself.”

When he put it like that, she felt a strange longing to show him her face, but her instinct was to hold back.

The conflict gnawed at her belly.

"If you want to see my face," she lifted a hand to reach for a ribbon, "I can show you."

"No. No, it's all right, my dear. Someday, if you truly feel comfortable doing it. Until then... Are you ready for tonight's performance?"

That brought a real smile to her lips. "Yes, sir. I am."

"What do you think of the venue, my dear?"

She felt the energy relax between them and she smiled, truly smiled. "It's even more lovely than the pictures you sent me." She went on to tell him about the practice she'd done the day before, ending with a reassurance. "The way that the machines change the sounds of the music makes everything feel more alive."

"Everything," he wondered. "Does that include you, too?"

She nodded and felt the mask slip a bit.

With a quick hand, she held it in place. "It does. I'm happier than I've been in... years."

"There's something about him, isn't there?"

She held herself still.

"Marius Goodard." He said the name slowly as if he was watching her reaction to each syllable. "I think the two of you knew each other."

Heather lowered her chin an inch or two. "Yes. We knew each other when I was younger."

"Funny." His voice was a bit strained in his throat. "I never came across his name in your background."

Her chin lifted so she could meet his gaze. "You looked into my background before." She'd known that. "We were both young then. I doubt

they would have considered him to be a threat or worth looking into."

"Things change, my dear. What seems simple and commonplace at one time, can mean the world later. Like a young woman who you meet who makes you decide that having glaucoma surgery was better than sulking and waiting to go blind. You change people's lives. I'm sure you'll do the same tonight for many in the audience."

His smile broadened.

"Tonight, they'll hear the beauty of your music and they'll be better for it."

The door behind him opened and they both turned to look at the person stepping in from the hall.

"Marius."

"Well, now that your well-armed shadow is here, I can go and claim my seat."

"That's a good idea, sir. I have to get Nix to the backstage area. The stage manager sent me down to call five-minutes to curtain."

Heather reached out and put her hand in Marius'. "Thank you. I was losing track of my time."

"I'll make sure you get there safely," his tone was steady and strong, bolstering her own feelings.

She smiled and gave him a grateful nod, relaxing as he walked her down the hall and toward the stairway leading them to the stage level.

STANDING in the wings with Marius at her shoulder was an experience that she'd never forget.

In the beginning, she'd play on street corners or under awnings when people wouldn't chase her away.

Even then, she barely made any money. Coins were the biggest take in her violin case. Sometimes paper money would find its way into her hands.

It wasn't until she was approached by a well dressed man with Mr. Blackwood's business card between his fingers that she ate a decent meal seated in the outer office with his secretary watching her like a hawk.

Small venues, barely bigger than her dressing room, were her first successes. Listening to people applaud as the sounds bounced from the walls,

made her heart swell and her soul lift.

It built from there until she had made a name for herself and the audiences filled larger spaces.

Now, she could play bigger venues that she had only heard of before.

This was all due to Mister Blackwood's assistance. His patronage had brought her here. She wanted to make him proud of her, but she hadn't expected him to ask to see her face.

That she didn't want to share with him.

He might know some of the people that she was hiding from. People who would have known her father while he was involved in crime.

To hear her father talk about it. Men with money weren't any better than men who committed crime to get money.

They just hid their crimes better.

And that lesson had stuck with her.

The people in the audience... they wanted to hear her music. They wanted to listen to what she could create with her hands and her heart.

She could put something beautiful into the world. She wanted to give the audience something beautiful to cherish.

One step after another took her out into the center of the stage.

The red X had been replaced with a smaller mark that took her another step downstage.

It was curious, but she didn't second guess it.

Pausing behind her music stand, she smiled at a note written onto the upper corner of her sheet music.



The handwriting was masculine. Her first thought was Marius, but there

was something strange about the shape of the letters.

There wasn't time to think or worry about it. She had a concert to perform.

Lifting her left arm, she set the back of the violin into place before she touched her chin to the chin rest.

As it always did, the music that filled her heart rose up. It sang in her ears and she rocked forward and back to the tempo she felt inside.

But it didn't truly come to life until she touched her bow to the strings and made them sing.

The vibrations of the strings under the varying pressure of the bow created deep-reaching notes. They brought the notes to life, rising up from the instrument into the air.

She felt a new, heady power as she pulled note after note from the violin. It had intimidated her before, a masterpiece of design and function.

How could she bring out the heart of this instrument?

But now, she felt like she could find the heart and soul of the violin because she had finally found her own.

She could bring the magic from her soul into the instrument in her hands.

Beauty. True beauty came from the strings and they filled the air.

She had never felt so entangled and in touch with the music, believing that it might be singing from the very tips of her fingers.

And then the piece was over.

Her bow lifted away from the strings.

Her lungs filled with air over and over as the remaining sounds rose up and into the rafters of the room.

She lowered her bow to her side and with her hand gently holding the neck of the violin, she lowered it as well.

The crowd erupted into a torrent of applause as she bent at the waist to bow and thank the crowd.

It was when she stood up that she heard Marius call out her name.

"Heather, get down!"

She saw it. Saw the danger coming in her direction like it was moving in slow motion.

But she froze and couldn't manage to move out of its way.

A red beam of light coming from the back corner of the room, high up in the rafters.

She drew in a deep breath and closed her eyes.

CHAPTER SIX

THE LASER SIGHT THAT CUT THROUGH THE AIR OF THE ROOM MIGHT NOT HAVE been so visible if it hadn't been for the light haze of dust in the air.

Marius burst out of the wings with one thought in his head.

Save Heather.

He grabbed her and drove her down to the floor as gunfire bit into the wooden stage, POW POW. Side by side like fangs.

"Get up, baby. Get up."

He put his hands on her and lifted her from the ground.

She moved with him. Putting her feet under her body and managed to keep up with him when he ran her into the shadows.

It was a hallway that he'd scouted out earlier when he was with Miles.

His job wasn't to seek out the shooter. His job was to get Heather and the violin out of danger.

And that's exactly what he did.

From the venue into a car.

From the car to a nearby hotel.

And from that hotel into a secure room.

But that's where the plan ran off the rails.

Once they were in the room, Heather turned on him.

IT TOOK a few seconds to see that the violin was intact. It was whole and in good condition. She couldn't see a single mark on its surface, but the same

wasn't true for her heart.

She turned around and glared at Marius. "How... how could you?"

He stared back at her in shock. She could read that much in his expression.

"What?"

"You!" She screamed at him, almost frantic inside.

Now that the rush of adrenaline had worn off, she felt the fear coursing through her veins.

She reached up and tore off the mask that was barely remaining in place on its own. Heather threw it across the room and heard the satisfying thump where it hit the wall.

Marius took a step forward but he hesitated instead of reaching for her. "Heather-"

"No..." The word felt more like a moan coming from her gut. "No." She shook her head. "No!" She lurched forward and pushed him back, her hands on his chest. "You don't get to do that!"

He grabbed her shoulders and then dropped his hands to her upper arms.

She struggled against him.

She didn't want to let go of her anger.

"Heather-"

"What if you had been shot?"

"What?"

"You," she struggled again, hoping he would let her go, "you could have been shot!"

"Baby-"

"No! Don't try to placate me. I didn't want you to get hurt. I can't... I won't survive it."

He pulled her closer, tugging her off balance. "Heather, stop."

She brought her hands up between them and pushed with all of her might.

She was angry.

She was scared.

Her heart was pounding in her chest. Blood roaring in her ears.

She pulled free of his arms and turned around. She wrapped her arms around herself and fought off tears.

"Heather, look at me."

She felt his heat behind her, his hands on her shoulders, gently holding her still.

Heather shook her head. "Don't. Please."

She heard movement behind her and when she heard his voice it was lower, as if he was on his knees behind her.

"This is my job," he spoke quietly, but clearly. "I'm here to protect you."

"I don't want you to risk your life for mine." She bit out the words, curling deeper in on herself. "I don't want to lose you too."

"Ahh, sweetheart-

She was suddenly off of her feet and in his arms.

The sudden change shocked her enough to let loose of her arms and reach for his wrists, holding tight.

He moved them across the room and dropped her on the foot of the bed.

She turned back over, glaring at him through her tousled hair.

"GO AHEAD," he goaded her. He knew she wasn't going to let go of her anger easily. There was a fire in her that he admired, even when it was directed at him.

And partly because she was worried for him.

"Be angry at me, baby. Yell at me. Hit me if you want."

She shook her head, more shocked than angry. "I don't want to hurt you," she admitted, her voice softer and smaller. "I'm angry at you."

"Because I could have been shot."

Her expression changed to a visceral expression of pain. "Exactly."

"But they were going to shoot you, Heather."

"I... I don't care." She stared at him, her whole face a mask of terrifying fear. "I can't lose you. I know you're alive. I know you're happy. If something happens to me, I know you're fine. That," she got up on her feet and the determined stare that she gave him spoke clearly... loudly, "is all I need to know."

He wanted to argue with her, but he was struggling under the weight of her pain.

She walked right past him and all he could do was breathe.

Until he heard the hotel room door close.

And the sound of the lock clicking into place.

"No." He shook his head. "Not like this."

He turned on his heel and drew in a steadying breath. "You're not walking out of my life like this. Not again."

SHE JAMMED the button to call the elevator and the DOWN button lit up, but she couldn't hear any sounds of gears or machinery working in the elevator shaft.

She wanted to stomp her foot or kick the door.

Childish? Sure!

But she hadn't had much of a childhood in her life.

Her father's crimes and criminal enterprises had forced her to grow up early. When would she get a chance to act like a child?

She'd had precious little of the fun that she should have had.

She'd lived in the shadows hiding from her father's enemies.

And now that she'd found the one shred of happiness that had survived the hell of her life, he'd nearly gotten himself killed!

Damn it!

Stupid elevator!

She turned around and saw Marius standing outside of the room, a determined glower fixed on his face.

She took a step back.

"Stop!" He took a step closer and she countered with another step back. "Don't you dare."

Lord help her. She tipped her chin up in a defiant move.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To find the stairs," she shot back, "I can use those to run."

"Run?"

He took another step toward her, but she found herself up against a wall.

"Where are you planning to run to?"

"I don't know. I was just going to run. Run until I can't run anymore and hope... hope that you'll just go back to what you were doing before you took this job.

"Please, Mars. Please, just go."

The elevator dinged beside her and the doors opened up. Taking the easiest route, she rushed in and tried to jab the CLOSE button on the panel,

but she wasn't fast enough.

Marius slid in between the closing the doors and stared at her, his eyes dark, his shoulders rising and falling with each quick breath, and his hands clenching at his side.

She stepped back and found the wall too close for comfort.

He glared at her and the intensity of his gaze made her catch her breath.

Marius reached out his arm and punched the emergency stop with the side of his fist.

The alarm rang out. The electronic siren screaming in her ears.

She put her palms over her ears to dampen the sound but it barely did a thing to ease the pounding pressure.

Cringing, she pulled into herself and hunched her shoulders, praying that it would end.

And then it did.

Confused, she waited a moment to see if she could still feel the waves of pressure from the screaming alarm, but felt nothing against her skin.

She looked up at Marius, lowering her hands to her sides.

He had a smile on his face that was a little scary in how happy he was, but that was before she saw a handful of wires in his hand.

A quick look at the control panel showed that he'd pried open the panel and done something to stop the siren.

Shaking her head, she looked back at him.

"Why?"

"Why did I stop that ridiculous alarm?"

She nodded and shrugged at the same time. It was a good enough question to start with.

"Because I wanted to talk to you."

"There's nothing to-"

"The fuck there isn't!" He took a step forward. "You're not running out of my life, Heather! You're not leaving me again without telling me why."

"I told you," she pointed at the doors. "I told you in the hallway. I'm not letting you put yourself in danger because of me. I'm not!"

"Well, I have news for you." He laughed and the sound was hard and cold. "All I've done for years is put my life in danger. I did it for my country. Then I got a job as a bodyguard, so I did it for myself. And now," he got so close to her that she had to tilt her head back to look into his eyes, "I'm doing it for you because if something happened to you when I could have stopped

it... this time, I couldn't live with myself."

His voice.

She felt it deep inside of her.

She felt it as if he was pressed against her.

Pressed inside of her.

It was a deep, primal vibration that shook her to her soul.

She'd just said the same words to him. A nagging truth that she couldn't ignore, only to find out that he felt the same way.

Life was cruel. She knew that already.

But her life seemed determined to rip her heart into pieces and burn them up in front of her eyes.

"Mars, I'm sorry, I can't-"

He groaned and she felt his breath hot against her cheek. "Say it again."

She managed a shallow breath and an even quieter tone. "I'm sorry, I-"

"My name... No. *Your* name for me. Say it again."

"Mars, I-"

He swallowed the rest of her words and her thoughts with his kiss. She felt the rough press of his lips against her and reveled in it.

The last time they'd been together, their kisses had been softer... almost gentle in their fervor, but not now.

Now, he was feeding off of her, trying to climb inside of her.

The intensity held her there between him and the elevator wall.

She turned her head to the side to try and breathe, but his mouth moved with her, cutting off any escape and when he slipped his tongue between her lips and opened them up, he gave her air from his own body.

Oh god.

Her knees went weak and he propped her up, his knee between hers.

She tried to put her hand on his arms and then his chest, but he moved them up and over his shoulders so she linked them behind his neck.

Another deep sweep of his tongue in her mouth and she was lifted up, her back against the wall of the elevator.

Her backside bumped against the railing and a soft cry of pain rushed up from her lungs, but before she could really feel the full measure of it, he had a hand between her and the hard brass.

He wasn't just protecting her from the pain, he was soothing it away with his fingers.

And then he was pressed against her.

His narrow hips between her thighs, his broad chest against her own subtle curves, and oh heavens, his hard erection was already spreading her open around its girth.

She cursed deep in her throat, wanting him closer.

"I'm not patient either, Heather." He paused and shifted so that he could look right into her eyes. "Have you... been with anyone?"

"No." She shook her head. "I've only ever wanted you."

He groaned and then she felt his forehead touch hers. "I've wanted you forever. I've looked for you since you disappeared, Heather. I never stopped."

She sobbed and the sound echoed in the constrained space of the elevator. "I never wanted you to find me. I didn't want you to know what my father had done. I didn't want you to know what happened to us because of his crimes. I only wanted you to remember me the way we were that night in the pool house."

"Then let's go back to the room," he suggested, his voice as thick and heavy as his erection pressed up against her belly. "Let's go back and I show you what we can be like now."

He stepped back, her body still in his arms, and then he set her feet on the floor.

As soon as he leaned back to touch the controls on the elevator she grabbed the front of his shirt and stopped him.

"Here." She could barely hear her own voice and said it louder because she didn't want him to think that she wasn't sure. "Here, Mars. Make love to me here."

He drew in a deep, chest-expanding breath and gave her a look that sent chills through her body.

"Only because you called me-"

"*Mars*," she smiled and fanned the flames of his arousal.

"Fuck me," he growled.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HE BACKED HER UP AGAINST THE WALL AND SAID A SILENT PRAYER THAT THE elevators in the hotel were enclosed and not walled in glass.

"Hands, Heather. Give me your hands."

She held her hands out to him and he felt his heart kick against his ribs. She looked so sweet and sexy at the same time.

Holding her wrists together, she looked as though she knew what he had in mind, but he wasn't sure if she understood how hard it was to treat her as gently as she needed him to.

He could let some of his hunger show, but he'd do whatever it took to make it easy on her.

He took both of her wrists in one hand and lifted her arms up and over her head so he could pin them against the wall.

Marius looked at her face to judge how she felt and he was surprised to see her eyes almost swallowed by her pupils. Her lips parted so he could hear the soft pants of her breath and it was impossible to ignore the rise and fall of her breasts under her silk dress.

Her nipples were hard, he could see the subtle outline of them under the silk and his mouth watered with the need to taste them.

With one hand holding her hands in place, he leaned in and covered the tip of one breast with his mouth. Dragging his tongue over it. He found out then just how sensitive she was.

She cried out, her voice echoing off the walls, her wrists tugging at his hand to free themselves and her hips lifted away from the elevator wall.

He smiled against her breast and again, dragged his tongue over her nipple while his free hand sought her other nipple through the silk.

She bucked her hips against him, her mouth uttering sounds that he'd never heard from her sweet lips.

Moans of wanton heat.

He turned his head slightly to the side and looked at the wet silk formed like a second skin over her areola.

He'd never seen something so arousing before.

"You like that?"

She was breathing erratically and shaking against the wall.

"Baby?" He turned back and lightly clamped his teeth over the very tip of her nipple. "I asked you a question."

"Yes," she shuddered and arched her back, pressing her nipple against his lips. "I love that."

"Good." He fit his teeth back in place and smiled, putting just a hint of extra pressure on her sensitive skin.

Marius dragged the tip of his tongue over her nipple and heard her whimpering above him.

He released the pressure for a moment. "Do you want me to stop, baby? Does it hurt?"

Marius looked up and she shook her head, her thick wavy curls flying around her face. "Don't."

"Don't what?"

He knew what she was going to say. He was certain of it.

But then Heather turned his world upside down with her eager plea.

"Don't make me wait." Her voice was quivering. "Tease me later. Do whatever you want later, but I want you inside me. I need to feel you where I've imagined you for years and years."

Aw, fuck.

How could he do anything but what she wanted?

But he had to be sure.

"You want me inside you?"

She nodded, but that wasn't good enough. He stood a little taller so that he could look her straight in the eye and see the truth for himself.

She hid nothing from him.

She lifted her chin to show him the clear intent in her eyes.

Lord, she'd never looked so beautiful or filled his heart that way before.

"Tell me again, baby. Please, I need to know."

She swallowed and then spoke in a clear and heartbreaking tone of her

beautiful voice. "If this is what you want... If *I* am what you want, Mars. Then make me yours. I'll never leave you if I'm yours. Never."

He couldn't help himself.

Marius reached his free hand down while he had his eyes on hers. His fingers gathered up the hem of her dress, lifting it up until he could slide his hand under it and reach her thighs.

When his fingers slipped between them and he felt the slick heat of her arousal he ground his back teeth together and swore under his breath.

He reached higher and bless this amazing woman, she spread her legs open so his fingers reached all the way to the top and stopped when he felt her coating his fingers.

Marius nearly growled his approval. "You're not wearing panties."

"No." She was panting each breath, her thighs quivering on either side of his hand. "It makes lines in the silk and I..."

He smiled and swept the tip of his middle finger through her folds. "And you..."

"I hoped that we could-"

He slipped a finger up inside of her.

"Oh!"

He grinned and gently swirled his finger inside of her. "Like that?"

She opened her mouth to speak and he slipped another finger in with the first.

Her knees buckled a little but with his hand around her wrists and his hand securely between her thighs, she remained almost in place.

A quick look up at her face told him what he needed to know. Her eyes were nearly closed. Her lips slightly parted and her nipples pressed against the fabric harder and tighter than before.

The spot over her breast where he'd wet the fabric with his mouth was wrapped tightly against her, the sight almost lewd in nature.

He was so proud of her.

So damn...

"I love you, Heather."

His voice was deep, seeming to come from his very soul. "I don't know how I lived without you, but now that I have you back in my life, I'm going to keep you... As long as you want me to."

She bucked against his hand and he felt her slick curls against his palm.

It was so much better than all of the nights he'd imagined making love to

her. So much more visceral than he could have conceived.

And she was there.

Riding his hand, her eyes fixed on his.

Glazed over.

Her lips full and open.

Had there ever been a woman as wonderful and giving as she was?

"I want..." she sagged back against the wall, her breath making her voice almost impossible to hear, "I want..."

"Tell me." He kept his voice gentle, but his fingers pushed in deeper, curling into the walls of her sex coming close, so damn close to heaven.

"Give me the words."

"I want to come."

She blushed at her own words, turning her head to the side to hide the flush of color that flooded her cheeks.

"Look at me, Heather. I want to see you."

It was only a moment to wait before she obeyed him and turned her head. He met her eyes, making sure she was focused on him, and then he plunged his fingers back into her body and his fingers curled into the textured flesh at the front of her sex.

He saw the moment that she felt the difference.

And then he watched as she rose up on her toes with his hand working at her and exploded all over his hand.

IT FELT LIKE MAGIC.

She was floating and still, she felt the gravity of the earth pulling her closer to him.

Needing more of him.

More of his touch.

Without the use of her hands, she was struggling to feel as much as she wanted to, but she trusted Marius to care for her. The crazy man had been willing to give his life for her, what more did she need to know?

Her knees were all but ruined, shaking and loose, she would have fallen to the ground if he moved his hand away from her wrists or removed the one from between her legs.

"Oh." Her body convulsed around his fingers again and she felt a cool flush flow across her cheeks. "That's... that's amazing."

"That's not all."

Her body clenched around his fingers at his words.

He probably hadn't meant it as a warning, but she worried that she might not survive anymore.

"I'll take you back to the room," he began, but she refused to listen.

"No. Here."

"It won't be easy for you. It might hurt."

Her eyes widened at his words and the cool touch on her cheeks became a hot flush of frustration. "I know what hurt is. I want to feel you. I want to feel *us*."

She knew when he gave in.

She could see it in his eyes and feel the deep sweep of his fingers inside of her body.

It thrilled her.

He let go of her hands and tugged at the buttons on his shirt, splaying open the bottom so that she could see his body.

Then he gestured at the front zipper of his pants.

She didn't waste time asking what he wanted her to do. She did what she wanted.

Her hands shook a little. Having been held over her head for the last little while, her fingers were a little shaky and she could feel the prickles of sensation as blood made its way back into her fingertips.

But that hardly stopped her from opening his belt and the button on his waistband.

The zipper opened easily as the weight of his erection helped her push it down.

Heather fumbled a bit as she reached for the opening to his boxer briefs, but when her short-trimmed nails skimmed over the hardness of his erection, the hiss of breath that came from his mouth was followed by a deep-throated groan.

From there he took the lead, pushing the waistband of his briefs and pants down to his thighs, he took himself in hand and stroked himself from base to tip and back again.

It left her speechless and heaven help her, she felt her arousal paint the insides of her thighs.

"Lift up your skirt, Heather. Show me where you want me."

She did as he asked and then she slipped her hand between her thighs. She shuddered as her fingertips touched her clit and rubbed it a little harder.

"I'd love to watch you someday." His voice was a harsh whisper. "But if I tried to do it now, I'd lose my control."

Before she could say a word, he walked forward and, with both hands on her hips, he lifted her up against the elevator wall, setting her just above the handrail. Once he had her pinned there, he stepped closer and she lifted her legs to wrap them around his waist.

"Oh, fuck." His eyes closed to half mast and she smiled, knowing why.

She could feel the tip of his erection drag through her folds. It almost sent her over the edge, too.

He groaned and adjusted his hold on her hip with one and reached between them with the other. That's when she felt him fit up against her, just slightly pressing into her sex.

A soft grunt reached her ears. "I'll try to make this easy for you."

With her hands free, she could change things up on her own. She grabbed onto his shoulders and changed the angle of her hips. "Mars?"

He met her eyes but she could see what a strain he was under.

"I'll never stop loving you." A moment later she relaxed her arms and sank down.

Her whole body shook as he filled her up. One heartbreaking moment and she was lost in another orgasm.

Her head fell back as she screamed.

Marius caught the back of her head, somehow keeping it from hitting the wall.

And as she rode out the orgasm that had nearly torn her apart, he thrust into her again and again.

Against the wall of the elevator, he had more than enough of a brace to keep her steady as he found the angle and speed to have them both panting and straining to reach the same peak together.

She wished that they were bare. She wished that she could feel his skin against hers, but she knew that this was just the beginning for them.

Well, a second beginning of sorts.

And what a new start it was.

Marius moved closer, bracing his hands on the wall at her shoulders.

She clung to him with her legs and arms, accepting each thrust as it came

and sinking into his frenzied movements, hoping that it would make the sensations even more keen.

When she felt sweat course down her back and the snap of his hips nearly lift her away from the wall, she knew that they were both close.

So close that when he buried himself between her thighs with a shout of his own, she felt his release paint the walls of her sex over and over.

She'd never felt so loved or wanted, and she knew that he'd meant his words.

She was his, and he was hers.

They'd make their way together.

LATER THAT NIGHT as the world still wondered what had happened at the concert, Marius tucked Heather into bed beside him.

Miles had followed the shooter into the back alley and lost him in the maze of tunnels beneath the city.

The other Big Sky Bodyguards were headed their way to lend support and Marius knew it would be over soon.

The job, not his relationship with Heather.

That would continue for the rest of their lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Books have always been a big part of my life. Reading was an escape from my classmates who teased me because of my speech impediment. Books were the walls of my castle, protecting my fortress, and allowed me to bask in the sunlight of my beautiful labyrinth filled with fantasies.

Now, I hope that I can share that same gift with others. If I can give them a place of shelter, of joy, and yes... love, then I will count myself blessed.



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