



KEEPING ASTRID

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
NICOLE FLOCKTON

Keeping Astrid

ALLIEZ SECURITY

NICOLE FLOCKTON

Copyright © 2023 by Nicole Flockton

1st Edition

Cover Design: Greeff-iti Designs

Logo Design: Skylar Flockton

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews. No part of this book may be used to train generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to generate text is expressly prohibited. The author reserves all rights to license uses of this work for generative AI training and development of machine learning language models

This copy is intended for the purchaser of this book ONLY. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from Nicole Flockton. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Nicole Flockton](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter One

“WE’LL PULL THIS OUT OF THE OVEN. AS YOU CAN SEE, THE cheese is golden in color and bubbling nicely.” Celebrity Chef Astrid Conway placed the oven-proof dish on the ceramic pot holder. “This dish is perfect for a cold winter’s night. Nothing like the comfort of a cheesy pasta dish to put a smile on your face. And warm your belly.”

Astrid smiled and winked at the camera while waiting for the green light above it to extinguish, her shoulders slumping and the smile slipping when it did.

“And we’re out. Good job everyone.” Basil, her show’s director clapped and smiled before coming over to where Astrid stood. “I told my wife I wouldn’t sample your dish today, but damn, this smells good.”

He went to grab one of the forks sitting on the plates that had been set up as part of the shot.

Astrid quickly lifted the dish away seconds before he dug the fork in. “Nope, not happening, Basil. This dish is going down to the homeless shelter. I promised I’d bring them something that they could add to their meal today. Not to mention I don’t want to be on the receiving end of another text message from Nancy saying that I’ve spoiled your appetite again.” Astrid smiled. She and Basil had this discussion at least three times a week while filming her show.

Basil let the fork drop to the counter with a clatter. “You’re no fun, but as you’re taking it to the shelter, I’ll forgive you this once.” He winked.

Astrid rolled her eyes. “So very generous of you. You know I do this with at least three of the meals I make.”

“I know. Just teasing you, kid. Good job today, by the way. Enjoy your day off tomorrow, and I’ll see you Wednesday.”

Astrid nodded. “Yep, see you then.”

Placing the dish back in the oven to keep warm, Astrid headed to her dressing room to change out of her clothes and take the heavy makeup she wore off. The second the door closed, Astrid leaned against it and dropped her head forward. She was exhausted. She needed more than a day off, but the show’s filming schedule didn’t allow for it.

“Three more weeks. I have to get through three more weeks, and then the season is done.” It wasn’t unusual for her to talk out loud. From the second her first cooking video had gone viral, talking about what she had happening in her life, what she needed to get through, was as natural as breathing. Thinking to herself had become second nature.

Peeling herself away from the door, she headed to the make-up table. Her make-up artist had laid out everything she needed to go from television star Astrid Conway to regular Astrid.

As much as she loved cooking and was so very grateful for all that it had given her, part of her just wanted to be able to cook for people in a restaurant. Yes, the hours would be brutal,

but she could be hidden in the kitchen, and no one ever needed to see her do her thing.

Unfortunately, her life was what it was and she shouldn't be wishing for things to be opposite to what she had. Fame was fleeting, and she needed to make the most of what was happening to her right now. Take it. Run with it and build up a good reputation and a nice nest egg so that when the show finished, she could live without financial stress and then she could go work in a restaurant kitchen. Be the anonymous chef in the back—although she feared that would never happen. Not after being in the spotlight for so many years.

Would it be so bad as to be the reason people came to the restaurant?

In some respects no, but in others yes, because of the expectations that people would always have of her.

Now wasn't the time to think about the future. Or what might or might not be. Astrid had always lived in the present, and that was what she needed to do right this moment.

Fifteen minutes later, she headed out of her dressing room when her phone buzzed. She pulled it out and smiled when she saw a message from her PR goddess, Penni. Astrid would've been lost without Penni's help over the last few months.

PENNI:

Hey lady! Just checking in. How did today's show go? You haven't forgotten that you're needed at House of Pans tomorrow for your product launch.

Astrid inwardly groaned. She hadn't forgotten, but she hadn't allowed herself to think too much about it. At least when she was filming her show, if she made a mistake, they could do a re-take. When she was doing an in-person event, her nerves got the better of her and she stumbled over her words more times than she liked to admit.

ASTRID:

I'm trying not to think too much about it, but yes, I know I've got to be there.

PENNI:

You've got this and Knox is going to look after Logan for me, so I'll be there as well.

Astrid smiled at that message. She'd met Penni's Navy SEAL husband only once. He'd intimidated her, but she also swooned a little at his handsomeness. Penni was one lucky lady. Knox only had eyes for his wife and vice versa.

One day she'd love to be the center of someone's world. The one person they couldn't live without. But she'd have to go out and meet a guy that wasn't looking at her as a meal ticket or a way to get his influencer career off the ground. She couldn't remember the last time she'd gone on a date.

She shot off an acknowledgement to Penni, pocketed her phone, and felt the vibration of Penni's return message. She'd read it later. What she needed to do was get the food to the shelter, then she could go home, put her feet up, and wallow in the latest episode of her favorite sitcom. It may have finished a few years ago, but thanks to streaming services, she could binge watch the series over and over to her heart's content. The perfect way to decompress after a heavy day of shooting and get herself relaxed before her big event the next day.

An endless cycle and as much as she may mentally complain about it, she wouldn't have it any other way.

At least for now.



ASTRID CHECKED the street as she exited the homeless shelter. Skid Row was a well-known area in LA as a place for those seeking shelter or needing help to congregate. There needed to

be more facilities, as the numbers were growing on a daily basis and space was limited. It was why she tried to bring down as much of the food she made as possible—anything to help the stretched thin facilities.

Not wanting to draw any attention to herself, she lowered the cap she wore and kept her gaze fixed on the cracked pavement as she hurried toward her car. She hadn't been able to get a spot close to the shelter, so she'd driven back to a parking lot she'd used on a couple of occasions. Normally it was well lit, but tonight most of the lights were out.

Did kids still use slingshots? Had they used the lights as targets to practice their aim?

The sound of an argument reached her. They were speaking Spanish, and while she'd studied the language in high school, it had been a while ago and anything she'd learned had retreated to the far recess of her brain space.

The voices got louder as she approached and cursed. The argument was taking place in the lot where her car was parked. Astrid stumbled to a stop. Two men were badgering another man while another one watched it unfold. Everything in her screamed to walk away. This wasn't something she needed to get involved in, but her legs refused to move.

The man being yelled at and held down wasn't cowering, and it shocked her. If anything, his chin jutted in defiance as if to say he could take anything either one of them dished out. Neither of the men threatening him looked like they were there to play. An air of danger surrounded them all, particularly the man who stood to the side with his back to her. He had the most sinister feel about him and Astrid couldn't even see his face, but he had a tattoo sleeve on his arm.

I need to get out of here. I should go back to the shelter and wait it out. I'll be safer there.

Astrid took a backward step, only to freeze again as one of the men looked over his shoulder, right in the direction of where she stood. She wasn't close enough to see the color of his eyes, but after witnessing the way he had been gripping the man, she imagined they were cold and heartless.

Shit!

Turn around!

At last, her internally screamed messages from her brain connected with her body. Astrid turned her back on what was happening and hurried in the direction of the shelter.

A shot rang out, followed by another, and they echoed around the area. Astrid yelped and then stuck a fist in her mouth before darting into the portico of a rundown building. The area stank of urine, and she swallowed down her gag reflex. Beneath the thumping of her beating heart, she caught the sound of rapid footfall and sank farther against the wall, hoping and praying she melded into the shadows.

Had they heard her cry of alarm? Was that why they were racing toward her?

One of them had glanced in her direction, but she couldn't be sure that he was looking at her. He could've been looking at something else. Fear poured over her, and she tightened her muscles, as if that could make her seem smaller than she was.

Why hadn't there been a parking spot out the front of the homeless shelter?

Why had she chosen tonight to drop off the food?

Why hadn't she hung around for a little longer, and helped out those serving the food? If she had, then she would've seen and heard nothing.

Not that wishing helped right now.

The scurrying footsteps halted not ten feet from her. She waited.

Have they found me?

What do I do?

Are there enough shadows to keep me hidden?

Car doors slammed.

Astrid fought the urge to run. Doing so would give her position away. As it was, the angle of the portico column

prevented her from seeing them. She pressed her lips together tightly to stop a yelp of despair from escaping.

The engine fired, and the tires squealed as they pulled away.

Astrid let out the breath she'd been holding and counted to ten. Then twenty, to make sure the car wasn't going to come back, before leaving her hiding spot. Her legs shook, and she staggered over to the tree, clutching at its thick trunk until her muscles lost their elasticity and could hold her up again. She took in deep breaths to try to rid the lingering urine scent from her nose.

The street was still quiet. Too quiet considering what she'd heard.

Why didn't anyone come out to see what was happening? Surely they heard the gunshot.

Why wasn't there a buzz of conversation rising as they discovered the person who'd been hurt?

Did I imagine it? Was I so scared that I imagined the whole thing?

Astrid immediately disregarded the thought. No way had she conjured it all up. Why else would the men have come pounding down the street and peeled away from the curb as though the hounds of hell were chasing them, if they hadn't done something?

What if they come back?

A shudder rippled down her spine at the thought that she could be in danger staying where she was. Had she turned away quickly enough so the guy hadn't been able to get that good of a look at her?

Wait. What about the man?

Maybe he was hurt. Someone who needed her help. Someone who could be saved.

Forcing her feet to move, despite the fear still pumping through her system, she headed toward where her vehicle sat.

She approached the area with caution. Why wasn't anyone standing out on the street?

Maybe they didn't want to get involved. Or thought someone else was looking into it. Or guns going off in the neighborhood was a regular occurrence that they didn't think anything of it.

The second she walked past the large brick wall of the building that abutted the parking lot, she saw him. Sprawled in the middle of a vacant bay, her car no more than thirty feet from where he lay. There were two other cars parked in the lot, but they'd been there when she arrived and their owners could be anywhere.

Dragging her phone out of her back pocket, her fingers shaking as she dialed 9-1-1, she approached the man, both of his arms splayed out to the side. He wasn't moving, and even in the dim lighting, she could make out that his chest wasn't rising or falling. How could it when there were two holes in the middle of it and the front of his shirt was stained red from the blood he was losing?

Her stomach turned, and she swallowed down the bile rising in her throat. If she hadn't lost the contents of her stomach in her stinky hiding place, she wasn't going to now.

Turning her back, she hit connect and waited for an operator to answer.

"9-1-1 what is your emergency?" The voice was polite and eased a little of the terror that had curdled within her at seeing the dead man.

"I-I-I." Astrid swallowed and then cleared her throat. "I'd like to report a shooting. There's a man dead in the parking lot in Skid Row, just past Fifty-Third Street."

"Are you hurt?" The operator asked.

"No."

"Okay, I'm dispatching a patrol car there now. Would you like me to remain on the line until they get there?"

What Astrid really wanted to do was get the hell out of there, but she couldn't. The man wasn't known to her, but she couldn't leave him lying alone until the police came.

"It's fine. I'll be okay. Thank you."

Astrid disconnected the call and rushed over to her car. Once in, she closed and locked the doors. Had she just made a too-stupid-to-live move, like so many people did in horror movies? Had she left herself wide open to being the next one shot?

For the second time that night, Astrid wished she were anywhere but where she was.

Chapter Two

CALLUM “GROWLER” TAYLOR ADJUSTED THE TIE SO IT WASN’T choking him.

How the hell did anyone wear these things regularly?

At least it was only for the evening and he could go back to wearing jeans and a button-down shirt in the office—this time, at least.

He slipped on the jacket and rolled his shoulders. He was still getting used to wearing civilian clothes. The only time he ever wore a suit jacket was when he was in his dress whites for a formal occasion. Now those whites were hanging at the back of his closet, along with the fatigues he used to wear daily and when he went on a mission.

Would he get rid of them? Maybe. Maybe not. They represented a part of his life that shaped him into the man he was. There were good memories and bad memories associated

with them. He had especially good ones the last couple of years when he was part of SEAL Team Tango. Those guys were like his family now, unlike any of the other men he'd served with. They'd created a unit and one he was grateful to have been part of. Being with Fort and the others had taken him in the direction he was now taking his life.

“And you're going to be late if you don't get your ass into gear,” he muttered as he tugged on the tie again.

He and Kyle “Ox” Matthews were headed to a concert to provide security for a country star who was doing a solo tour. The venue had asked them to help out, even though he had his own team of bodyguards. The performer was young but had hit the music scene with a big bang a year ago and was now capitalizing on that success. Rumor had it, he had plenty of underwear, panties, and boxers thrown at him on stage.

Yeah, he wouldn't be doing that tonight. Not only was he on the job, but he couldn't think of anything worse than throwing a pair of used underwear at someone. What did the guy do with it all?

Growler shook his head and climbed into this car—not his problem. His job was to make sure he got to and from the stage without any dramas.

The drive to Alliez Security's office didn't take long. He'd made sure he'd found a place close to the office so that he didn't have to deal with bad LA traffic every day. His apartment wasn't flashy, considering the price of rent in the city, but it was adequate and after the places he'd laid his head over the years, he didn't need anything fancy.

Once he arrived, he let himself in and walked down toward Ox's office.

“I wish you'd informed me of this a couple of hours ago, instead of fucking fifteen minutes before we left.”

Growler paused in the doorway, not getting a good vibe from the little he'd overheard.

“Right, well, next time, check with the star's management before you contact me.” Ox hung up the phone and blew out a

breath, looking up and noticing that he was standing in the doorway. “Hey, didn’t see you there.”

Growler shrugged and entered the office. “Just got here. Problem?”

“Yeah.” Ox indicated to one of the free chairs opposite him, waiting for Growler to sit before continuing. “That was the head of security at the venue. Apparently Barry’s management weren’t happy with extra security being brought in for tonight’s show. We’re *not needed*.”

“Right.”

“This pisses me off. It’s why I’ve been steering away from doing these small security jobs. They’re usually more hassle than they’re worth. Ash and Storm will be annoyed when they hear this. They’ve worked with this venue for a while. It was one of the reasons why they opened an LA office.”

The frustration in Ox’s voice was plain to hear. “What are you thinking?”

He may not have known the man long, but as Ox was a former Delta, his mind would always be on the move. Looking for different angles. Just because they weren’t taking down a terrorist, didn’t mean that he wasn’t thinking of ways to take the business away from the road it was heading down.

Ox sat back and drummed his fingers on the table. “Personal security will always be there. But I want to do more. As you know, there’s more evil out in the world than some over-excited fans who want to throw their underwear at singers.”

“Have you talked to Ash and Storm about this?” Growler had only met the men who’d started Alliez Security over a video conference call when Ox brought him on as a new member of the team. They were based in New York and seemed quite happy to do what they were doing. Then again, both were married and had kids, so he doubted they’d want to do anything that could be dangerous.

He only had his mom, and their relationship was tenuous at best. He didn’t visit her much, and Growler didn’t see that

changing in the future. His mom was so far lost in the bottle, her son ceased to exist to her.

“I haven’t, but I plan to. I’m even thinking of either expanding here or talking to them about opening an office down in San Diego. You know better than anyone that we’ve worked with your former SEAL team on a lot of issues. I think we can do more. Get into places and do things that the military can’t.”

Growler processed everything Ox was saying. He’d gotten out of the military because he’d seen so much shit and had felt helpless on so many occasions because their hands had been tied.

Was Ox talking about bordering the lines of legal and illegal?

Of course, there’d been many times when he’d wished he could take matters into his own hands, but he wasn’t the type to go rogue.

“How do you propose doing that?” Growler asked, shifting in the chair. “I’m sure Ash and Storm wouldn’t want their names or the name of their company associated with operations that could bring danger to their doorstep.”

“I’m aware, and I’m not talking about going into places and shooting shit up without thought.” Ox gave him a “Do you think I’m stupid” look. “I’ve been contacted by a guy in the FBI. He works for a division that gets government clearance to work dark ops. We would have government backing for any of the operations we could potentially be assigned to.”

Growler couldn’t deny his interest was piqued. If he was being honest with himself, he’d been worried that going into personal security, the likes of the jobs Ox and his team did, would render him bored. This, though, could be something he could get on board doing.

“Do you think Ash and Storm will go for it? They seem pretty happy with how things are.”

“When they came to me and asked me to open an office in LA, they said that they were open to new ideas. We’ve been

busy providing security services, and it's been fine. It's just—as I said working with your former team has brought the hunger back to do more,” Ox finished with a shrug.

Growler had no idea what led Ox to leave the military, and he wasn't about to ask. They all had their reasons for doing what they did.

“Whatever you want to do, I'd like to be involved. I agree there are people out there that need to be dealt with. So many women, men, and children go missing on a daily basis that are never heard from again. You know that most of them haven't gone voluntarily, and their lives, well, fuck, who knows what their lives are like, but they're not sunning themselves on a deserted island, surrounded by people serving them drinks and feeding them grapes.”

Ox's lips quirked in half a smile. “I haven't spoken to Angel or Irish, but I'm sure they'd be more than happy to follow my lead.”

Growler hadn't had much to do with the other guys as yet. Tonight was supposed to have been his first assignment, but now that wasn't happening. “I guess that means we've got a free night?”

“Looks that way.” Ox checked his watch. “You want to go get a drink? I know this great little bar which serves great burgers along with cold beer.”

Growler's stomach grumbled even though he'd had something to eat before he'd taken a shower, but he could always go for a good burger and beer. “Sure.”

“Great, let's get out of here.” Ox stood and Growler followed, the evening may have been a bust in terms of work, but after the conversation he had with Ox and the fact he'd shared some of his inner thoughts with him, Growler was feeling more part of the team than he had when he'd first walked in.



GROWLER TOSSED his napkin onto his empty plate. “You’re right, that burger was amazing.”

Ox lifted his beer bottle. “And the beer isn’t that bad either.”

Growler chuckled and raised his own bottle to his lips. The pale ale was the right amount of bitter, and it slid down his throat easily. Like him, Ox had nursed one beer through most of the dinner. Considering he was driving, Growler appreciated it.

After seeing his mom and her dependence on alcohol, he always limited himself to one glass or bottle when he was out.

Growler glanced around the bar. The crowd had increased during the time they’d been eating. It reminded him a little of the bar close to base that most of the Navy personnel frequented.

He waited for the stab of regret to hit him that he wasn’t still living close to the base. Close to the beach where he could surf and paddle board when he needed to clear his head. There was a smidgeon of feeling, but nothing to make him wish he was back there.

Was it because of the discussion he and Ox had had earlier that he wasn’t feeling that way? Or was it because he was happy with his decision?

Time would tell what the real reason was, but for the time being, he was content.

“Have you heard from any of the guys from your former team?” Ox asked when the live band stopped playing and a DJ took over.

“Not this week. Last week Rocket called to shoot the breeze. He sounded happy and said the rest of the team were all good. They were getting ready to head out on another mission soon.”

“Do you miss it?”

Growler shrugged. “Some days. I mean, I’ve not been out long, you know that, but yeah, I’m happy with the decision I

made.”

“That’s good, and if things go the way I want them to, then there could be more chance for you to put your skills to good use. It was one of the reasons why I was glad to have you join us. It gave me more of an impetus to finally do something that had been in the back of my mind for a while.”

“Whatever you need, you know I’ll be there for you and the others.”

Ox nodded and glanced over the crowd again, his brow furrowing and his lips thinned. Growler tensed. He followed the direction of Ox’s gaze but couldn’t see anything but a group of women laughing together.

“Something wrong?” he asked when Ox’s attention remained where it was.

Was he missing something? Normally, if shit was about to go down, the back of his right hand itched. He’d learned not to ignore it very early on in his career. But his skin remained itch-free.

“Not really.” Ox turned his attention back to him, but Growler didn’t miss the way his fingers clenched his bottle tighter than he had been. “Just someone from a rival security agency is here.”

Growler was tempted to question him further, but the door opened again and two women walked in. One had black hair that was curled so that soft waves fell just past her shoulders. Her companion also had dark hair, but it was short, cut into a pixie style. Both headed to the bar. He couldn’t say what drew him to the one with long hair, but the urge to get up and talk to her was one he hadn’t had in a long time. Gone were the days when he picked up women who piqued his interest with a wink and a big smile.

Maybe it was the way her body language suggested she wanted to be anywhere but there. Her eyes were darting around the room, as if waiting for someone to jump her. Her friend tugged her hand to get her attention and pointed to the person who had come up to them, holding her phone.

It was clear the newcomer wanted a selfie, and his dark-haired mystery lady nodded and plastered a smile on her face. Growler may not know who she was but he could spot a fake smile anywhere, and the one she was giving for the photo was anything but genuine.

“Who are you?” he murmured under his breath.

“That’s Astrid Conway. She’s got a cooking show on the Tasty Network. Started off doing videos on social media. Some went viral, and her career took off.”

Ox had either caught him looking at her or he’d heard his quiet question—which would be a miracle considering the noise level in the bar. His boss had relayed the information as if he was giving a rundown of a suspect in a crime. Was Ox interested in Astrid Conway?

Growler didn’t want to examine why that bothered him. Did it matter if Ox was interested in Astrid Conway? It wasn’t like he was going to follow through with his urge to go up and talk to her. As far as he was concerned, the next year of his life was going to be focused on getting his new career up and running. He didn’t need the distraction a pretty television star could provide.

“You’ve done some security work for her?” Growler found himself asking.

“Nah, but I have made a couple of her dishes. The recipes are easy and quite tasty.”

“You watch a cooking show?” Growler bit back a laugh, trying to imagine Ox sitting on the couch, taking notes about how to stir a sauce. Or fry a steak.

“I do,” he said without shame. “It’s a good way to unwind.”

“Fair enough.” How could he argue with that?

Growler looked back to the bar and couldn’t find her. The crowd had swallowed her up, and a shaft of disappointment lanced him.

He shook it off and downed the rest of his beer, reminding himself where his focus needed to be. On his job and not on a pretty celebrity chef.

Chapter Three

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, SOMEONE SAW YOU? AREN’T YOU THE best in the business?”

Pedro withstood the glare from Mr. Rook on the computer screen. He didn’t know his real name. No one did, he was known around the drug world as Mr. Rook and that’s all everyone called him.

“I am the best. Don’t worry, I’ll find her because I got a good look at her. I think she’s famous. She looked familiar to me. Shouldn’t be too hard to find her.”

Mr. Rook laughed harshly. “You’re in fucking Los Angeles. There’s a starlet on every corner. Find her and deal with her. If you don’t, you’ll regret making this mistake.”

The screen went black, and Pedro slammed his hands on the table. He never made mistakes. If the chump hadn’t made a

grab for the gun, he, Andrés and Enrico would've knocked Luiz out and put him in the car.

He'd deliberately chosen that parking lot because of the location. Everyone minded their own fucking business and didn't flinch if they did see or hear something.

The woman had looked too refined to belong in that area. He bet the bitch was the owner of the newer model BMW parked in the lot. No one who lived in that area drove a car like that. He'd been surprised it hadn't been stripped when they'd gotten there.

He hadn't lied when he told Mr. Rook that he'd thought he recognized her.

Yes, he was aware they were near fucking Hollywood and everyone in the town wanted to be a star. It was why it was so easy to lure women into his car with promises of a better future. Once he handed them off, he forgot about them. He'd done his job.

One he was damn good at. He had plenty of people happy with his services, and he'd prove to Mr. Rook that he was a man of his word. He would find her and eliminate her. Then he'd progress a little higher up the chain.

Pedro turned his attention back to his computer and opened an internet browser, searching for stars who helped out at Skid Row. He didn't think there would be that many, but it may help him narrow down who he was looking for.

Four pages later of articles and pictures, he was beginning to think that maybe he'd been wrong. And then he saw it. "Found you."

Chapter Four

ASTRID CHECKED OVER HER SHOULDER AGAIN AS SHE MADE her way toward the store where she was supposed to be doing her in-person event. Ever since she'd gotten out of her car, she'd had the weird sensation that someone was watching her.

Or maybe after the shooting incident, I'm just jumpy.

After she'd given her statement to the police, she'd called her friend from culinary school who'd invited her to drinks before she headed back to New York. Initially, Astrid had told Emery that she couldn't make it because she'd be tired from filming all day—which she had been—but after what she'd seen, she'd decided she needed to get out and to not sit at home alone, and brood. And worry. And not freak out.

It hadn't been a great idea. She'd hated being at the crowded bar. The noise grated on her frayed nerves. As always, she'd been recognized, and she'd smiled for selfies

when asked. All throughout the night, she hadn't felt like she was being watched, unlike now.

Sparing another look over her shoulder, she found the sidewalk empty, and there was no strange car creeping down the street toward her.

“Okay, stop imagining things that aren't there,” she muttered as she stopped at the shop next to the one she needed to enter.

As far as she knew, Penni would be waiting for her inside. The last thing she wanted to show her new PR person was any sign of freaking out. Yes, she found in-person events difficult, but she got through them. This feeling, though, it was different from her normal anxiety, and she was sure it was written all over her face. Penni had told her she had an expressive face, which was why she appealed to so many and was a natural on the screen.

“I am confident. I am a good cook. I am happy. Positive and energetic.” Astrid muttered the words she always did before she walked onto set. She'd started saying it the first day she'd started at culinary school and found comfort in the words now.

Straightening her shoulders, she marched to the front door. She plastered a smile on her face and pulled it open, relaxing a fraction when she saw Penni was waiting for her, as promised.

“Astrid!” Penni came rushing over and gave her a big hug. “So good to see you.”

“Hi, good to see you too.” Astrid returned the hug, but even she heard the tentativeness of her response.

Good impression there.

“Are you okay?” Penni stood back and gave her a once-over. “You're not needed for another fifteen minutes. Do you need to get some air?”

So much for being confident and happy. As horrid as the event she'd witnessed had been, she couldn't do much more than what she'd already done. The police weren't positive that they'd be able to track down who'd killed the man, since her

descriptions had been vague. It was as though her brain was hiding the reminders, or any distinguishing features—apart from the tattoo sleeve—to protect her. She hadn't even been able to give them a license plate or make of car. She'd been too busy staying hidden.

Determined to put the incident behind her and concentrate on the here and now, Astrid shook her head. "I'm fine. Just a little nervous. I always am when I do an in-person appearance. Once I get started, I'll be fine."

Penni canted her head to the side and tapped her forefinger against her chin. "Hmm, okay, but if you need to talk, I'm here. I'm not only your PR person, I'm also your friend."

Was that a good idea, to have one of her team as a friend? Astrid supposed it was better than Penni hating her. "Thanks, I appreciate it."

"I know what you're thinking," Penni returned with a knowing smile.

"What's that?"

They'd been working together for a few months now, ever since Penni had reached out when her previous PR person said she couldn't help her anymore and left Astrid hanging. At the time, she had no idea how Penni had known what was going on. She'd just been grateful that someone was ready and able to help her.

"You think it's weird that I said I'm your friend when you're paying me to help you keep your name, face, and brand in the forefront of people's minds."

Again, her insight was impressive. "Nothing gets past you, does it?"

Penni shook her head and laughed. "I admit I wasn't this observant early on in my career, but as time has gone on I've picked up a few things. Also, it helps to be married to a SEAL who observes *everything* whenever we go out anywhere, so I picked up a few handy tricks."

"I'm sure." Astrid wasn't sure she could deal with someone as intense as Penni's husband. But then again, having

a strong man beside you and protecting you, like she imagined Knox did for his wife, could be a good thing.

“Right. If you need anything at all, you only need to ask. After dealing with Symmone for years, I’m ready for someone less diva-ish. And I know that’s you.”

At the mention of the reality star Penni worked with previously, Astrid took the opportunity to ask what had always intrigued her. “Do you miss working with her? I mean, you were with her a long time, right?”

Penni shrugged. “She wasn’t easy to work with, but I could manage her. My priorities changed once I met Knox and then had Logan. My focus is on them, and Symmone didn’t like the way she wasn’t the center of my attention anymore. It wasn’t difficult to say goodbye to that job. Now that I’ve started my firm, I get to pick my clients instead of having them dumped on me. I choose my hours, and life is good.” She finished with a big smile, and Astrid had no doubt that every word spoken was nothing but the truth.

“I’m grateful that you are happy to work with me. How about we get started?” Astrid had noticed the shop owner getting a little anxious.

“Sounds good. You know what you’re doing, right?”

Nerves assailed Astrid, and she swallowed. After all the appearances, not to mention her TV show, she should be used to facing people, but it wasn’t something that still came easily to her.

“I think so.”

Penni squeezed her arm, and Astrid was immensely glad that Penni had made arrangements to be with her that day. “You’ve got this. I know it’s different from being behind a camera and having a teleprompter and being able to do retakes. If you make a mistake, pause and then move forward. You’d be surprised at how many people like seeing that you’re not perfect.”

A little of the tension dissipated within her, and she took a deep breath before blowing it out. “Thanks. I needed to hear

that.”

“Right, let’s get this happening.”

Astrid followed Penni, smiling at the group that were gathering, stopping when asked if a teenager could take a selfie with her. The reason she was successful was because of people like the teenager, as well as all the others who were gathered to see her talk about her new range of cookware.

Two hours later, Astrid’s cheeks hurt from smiling, but the event had gone off well and she had only stumbled over her words twice, instead of the usual four or five times. She attributed that to knowing Penni was with her. Whenever she felt like she was about to lose her way, she took a moment to gather her thoughts and then proceeded. No one seemed to notice the little pauses.

She finished signing the last cookbook and handed it over to the man. “Thanks for coming out today. I hope your wife enjoys the book.”

“Thank you for being generous with your time. And she’s going to love it. She didn’t know I was coming here today, and she’s going to be so surprised. She loves your show.”

“If you see Penni”—Astrid pointed to where she stood—“she’ll let you know when my next in-person appearance is happening and will arrange some tickets for you and your wife. I would love to meet her.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary.”

“Please, I insist. My success is because of people like you and your wife. It’s my way of saying thank you to you all.”

“Well, in that case, thank you.” He gave her a nod and a smile before walking over to Penni.

This wasn’t the first time she’d done something like this, so Penni wouldn’t be surprised when he came up to her.

Astrid sat back and tilted her neck to the right and then left, enjoying the satisfactory crack of bones, releasing the tension from being hunched over for the last thirty minutes, signing books and posing for photos.

This part of her fame she enjoyed. She loved getting out and meeting her fans. A movement to the left caught her attention, and she saw a man standing in the back corner of the store. A shiver of apprehension spiraled down her spine.

What did he want?

He didn't look like he frequented home goods stores, which was awful of her to make such an assumption, but he didn't. There was an air of danger around him.

Oh shit, he isn't one of the guys from the parking lot, is he?

Astrid tried not to let the thought take hold and freak her out. How could any of those guys possibly have tracked her down here? But her flight instinct was kicking in again. She needed to get out of here.

“Astrid, you okay?” Penni rushed up to her. “You look like you're about to pass out.”

Penni cupped her elbow and sat her back down.

When did I stand?

I don't remember getting up.

The thoughts tumbled in her mind, and her breath was coming out in rapid gasps. Maybe she was about to faint.

Astrid looked over to the corner where she'd seen the man, but he wasn't there anymore. Had she imagined him? No, she knew for a fact she hadn't conjured him up—he'd been standing there, watching her.

Had she made too much out of it? Was her reaction over the top because she was still a little freaked out by what had happened the previous day?

Anything was possible. Perhaps he was just a fan, and that was it.

Her breathing was settling down, and her heart rate was kicking back to normal. “Sorry. I'm okay. I think I just stood a little too fast.”

Penni looked like she was about to question her further, but Amy, the store manager, came over to them.

“Thank you so much for coming, Astrid. We’ve sold out of your new product range and have a list of people who want it too. We’ll be ordering more for sure,” Amy gushed.

Astrid should be over the moon that her products were such a hit, but all she could muster up was a small smile. “That’s great.”

Her mind was blank, and she couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“That really is fantastic, Amy,” Penni took over for her. “I’ll make sure that your store is linked to when we upload the pictures. Are you good to go now, Astrid?”

She nodded, needing to get out of this place so she could examine why she was freaking out as much as she was. This was more than appearance anxiety. As silly as it seemed, Astrid knew that man wasn’t there to buy her products.

He was there for her.

Like she had earlier, Penni cupped Astrid’s elbow as they both exited the store. They’d taken a few steps when Penni stopped and looked at her. “What’s going on, Astrid, and please don’t say nothing, because I know there is. I’ve seen too much shit in the last few years not to believe that something is going on with you. Apart from looking like you were about to pass out, you looked ready to flee the store, as if being chased by a swarm of angry customers.”

Could Penni help her? Could her husband? Although she didn’t know what Knox could do. He worked for the Navy. He couldn’t go in and demand something be done to help her.

Astrid looked around to make sure that there wasn’t anyone in the vicinity that might overhear what she was about to say. “Last night, I witnessed a murder. Well, more heard than saw, but I did see an argument and then heard shots and men ran past me and took off in a car. When I went back to my car, there was a man on the ground. He’d been shot.”

The words were a jumbled mess, and hopefully, Penni could understand what she’d been trying to say.

“Shit. Did you report it to the police? Did you see someone here? Is that why you freaked out?”

Astrid shouldn't be surprised that Penni had been able to connect the dots from her rambling confession to her reaction in the store.

“I d-don't know if who I saw a few minutes ago was involved, but he was watching me and I got a...”

What would Penni say if she said she had a feeling that there was something off about him? Would she laugh and tell her she was overreacting?

“You got a what? A bad feeling?”

“Yeah. Dumb, huh?”

Penni shook her head, her ponytail swishing left and right like an angry bee. “Not dumb at all. If you had a hunch that something was off with him, then it probably was. Never discount your gut feeling. If I've learned anything, being married to a Knox and being around his team, is that they always listen to and trust their gut.”

Relief swept through Astrid—Penni didn't think she was overreacting. “Thank you. I mean, it's probably nothing. I'm just hyper-aware of things after what happened, but it was... unsettling.”

Penni nodded, a thoughtful look on her face. “As I've said, over the last couple of years I've seen a lot of things that I thought could only happen in movies. Hell, I was held at gunpoint in a convenience store and then kidnapped a few weeks later, so I think, until whoever was involved with the incident you witnessed last night is caught, your safety is a priority. You're a well-known face, and your public appearances are listed on your website. I think you need some security, and I know just the people who can provide it for you.”

“Security as in a bodyguard?” Astrid's voice pitched higher than normal. She was still trying to process the fact that Penni had said she'd been held at gunpoint and kidnapped so

casually. “I don’t think that’s necessary at all. It’s probably nothing.”

Penni shook her head. “Nope, it’s not nothing. I’m surprised the studio hasn’t thought to provide you with security, anyway. Particularly out at these public events. Someone else may brush off your concerns. But not me. I’ll call Ox and set up a meeting.”

Astrid wanted to argue the point more, but the look of determination in Penni’s eyes and the way her chin jutted up a little told her that Astrid would be wasting her breath.

“Fine. I’ll come to the meeting and decide then if personal security is necessary.”

In all the years she’d been famous, she’d never felt the need to have any type of security. So what if her public persona was increasing? There were guards at the studio where she spent a lot of her time, and she’d always felt safe there.

Another sensation of being watched washed over her. Maybe a bodyguard wouldn’t be a bad thing.

Chapter Five

THE SUN BEAT DOWN ON GROWLER'S HEAD AS HE JOGGED along the street. It wasn't the same as running on the beach like he'd done every morning when he'd been part of the team. He did miss the soft sand beneath his feet. The rush of the waves in his ears and then the cool wash of the water over his heated skin as they swam for two miles.

Morning PT was something he'd never thought he'd miss, but he did. Swimming in a pool wasn't the same as the ocean. Maybe on the weekend he could take a drive to the beach and battle the waves.

He turned down the street to his complex, coming to a stop outside so that he could catch his breath. He didn't have to be in the office until ten this morning. Ox had flown over to New York to meet with Storm and Ash to discuss his idea of expanding the firm. He was due to land back in LA at seven, where they were going to discuss the next moves.

Climbing the steps, he took a moment to look around, scanning to see if anyone lurked in the shadows. A habit he couldn't seem to shake, and perhaps not a bad one to keep. It always paid to be on the lookout for danger—whether to himself or someone else.

Not seeing anything out of the ordinary, he made his way up to his apartment. Some days, like today, he missed being in the military. Missed his friends. Missed the knowledge that in an hour he'd been meeting with his teammates again to discuss the latest skirmish somewhere in the world where they may have to fly off to at a moment's notice.

Were the team getting ready to leave right now?

What his team did wasn't his issue anymore. That was his past. Things would work out. He had to believe it, and maybe it would be possible that he could have both. New life and old one combining seamlessly. If Ox had been able to leave behind his military career and forge a new one, then he could do it too.

The resolve was still strumming through him when he walked into the air-conditioned offices of Alliez Security. Today was going to be a good day. The day he embraced his new career.

“Morning, Cass.” Their computer guru was manning the front desk and gave him a wave.

“Hey, Callum.” She looked over the top of her glasses at him. “Kyle needs to see you. He said to tell you to go to his office when you arrived, not the conference room.”

He was still getting used to Cass, and Yolanda, the usual receptionist, using everyone's given name instead of their nicknames—like he always used. “Any idea why? I thought we were all meeting in the conference room to discuss his trip?”

“Nope.” Cass shrugged. “I'm just passing on the message, seeing as Yolanda is out getting coffees and I was sitting here when he came in a few minutes ago.”

Growler nodded and headed toward his boss's office. Things had been quiet while Ox had been away, and Growler couldn't think of anything he'd done wrong to warrant the summons. He was glad he'd arrived a little earlier than he was scheduled to be there.

Knocking on the door, he opened it when he heard the faint "come in." "You wanted to see me?" he asked as he paused behind the chairs sitting opposite where Ox was.

"Hey, Callum!" A familiar female voice floated around the room. Ox turned his computer monitor and Penni, Fort's wife's, face filled the screen.

"Hey, Penni, good to see you. How are you?" Growler always enjoyed being around his former team leader's wife. She was fun and vivacious and cared for everyone she met.

"Good. Keeping busy. Knox says hi. He's on diaper duty this morning."

Growler nodded and smiled, still getting used to the fact Fort was happy changing a dirty diaper. He would ask why Fort wasn't on base, but he swallowed the question down. He'd left that life behind and his new one was in this office.

"Take a seat, Growler. This shouldn't take long." Ox pointed to the chair his fingers were digging into.

Even though he'd already told himself that he hadn't done anything wrong when he walked into the office, the feeling that he was about to be reprimanded crept slowly up his spine. Although if he was being given a dressing down, Penni wouldn't be part of it.

"What's going on?" he asked after he sat.

"Penni has a client who needs some protection. She heard, more than witnessed, a murder, and when she was at a recent in-person event, someone was lurking around that didn't seem like they belonged. She didn't get a good feeling about him."

Great, I'm going to be stuck babysitting some diva reality starlet who won't listen to anything I say. How can I get out of this?

“I can see that look on your face, Growler, and I know what you’re thinking,” Penni admonished him. And she used his nickname—that didn’t bode well. Ever since he’d left the team, she’d called him by his given name.

Clearly, he’d annoyed her somehow. Growler thought he’d kept his expression neutral. No way could she see his mental eye-rolling. Being a former SEAL, he was trained in the art of showing no emotion.

“I’m not sure you can know what I’m thinking,” Growler responded without emotion.

“Astrid Conway is a sweetheart and not at all like any of my past clients.” Penni started before Ox could say anything. Ox sat back, as if handing over control of the meeting to Penni. “Astrid created her own success and is still very down to earth. She’s a celebrity chef, and any leftover food she makes for her show, she will always take down to Skid Row—which is where she saw the incident.”

Wait!

Astrid?

Was Penni talking about Astrid Conway?

The same Astrid Conway that Ox told me about at the bar?

What were the odds that the woman he admired from afar and had suspected that something was going on with her, was the same one who now needed security services—and after Ox had said they’d never done work for her before? He looked over at his boss, and Ox wore a “funny how things work out” look on his face.

“Right. And are the police involved? Are they investigating her claims?” Growler asked, getting his head back in the game.

Skid Row was known for things like arguments over food and clothing leading to someone losing their life or ending up in hospital with serious injuries. Not to mention around the area it was a hotbed for drug deals and young people disappearing off the streets, never to be seen again.

Memories of some of the rescues he'd been a part of—freeing people who'd been trafficked—threatened to overwhelm him, but he forced them down.

Now wasn't the time to relive the past.

"I'm going to get Cass to put a call into a contact we have when we need some information to see if we can get a copy of the police report," Ox said. "I know this may seem like an overreaction to you, Growler, but this is what we do. I trust Penni, and she saw how Astrid reacted. The girl was afraid, and according to Astrid, one of the guys saw her. It's possible these guys, whoever they are, could want to eliminate any witnesses to protect their business by any means possible."

How could he argue with that?

"When do I start?" he asked, not able to hide the resignation in his voice. It wasn't as though he could say no.

If he was reacting this way, maybe personal security wasn't for him.

Dammit, why am I doing this? Mom had destroyed the good things in her life with alcohol. I'm not going to do that.

The thoughts were sobering, and he checked them. This was an opportunity he would not waste. Besides, there was always the possibility that the team would do other things besides acting as bodyguards in the future.

"Penni is going to arrange for Astrid to come here tomorrow, and then we can discuss what our plan of action is. You'll be video conferencing us again, Penni?" Ox looked at the screen.

"Yep. Just send me an invite, and I'll be there. Thanks for doing this Growler, I appreciate it. Bye, guys." Penni waved, and then the screen went blank as she left the meeting.

Growler sat back and blew out a breath, waiting for the dressing down he totally deserved with his disinterest during the meeting.

"You good, Growler?" Ox leaned forward, his stance casual, but his attention was laser-focused.

“Sorry. Yeah, I’m just...still adjusting, I guess. I keep having moments of *what the fuck am I doing?* hit me. Not to mention you pointed Astrid out the other night, and here we are looking at providing security for her.”

“After all I’ve seen and done the last few years, I don’t question anything now.” Ox lifted a shoulder. “And I get your see-sawing feelings. You’ve only just left the military. It takes time to adjust to civilian life and not doing what you’ve always done. Not having to answer for every moment of your day. I know this job may not be exciting, but it’s a good way to make the transition a little easier. Besides, I’m going to need your skills for other projects coming up.”

Growler sat up a little straighter. Did Ox mean what he hoped he meant? “Are you saying?”

“Yes, Ash and Storm are onboard with me, expanding what we do here. They’re more than happy for me to take the company in this direction. While we’re still going to do what we’ve always done. We’ll be taking on special missions too. We had a teleconference with my contact in the FBI while I was in New York. Ash and Storm grilled the guy and were satisfied with the end goal. As former SEALs themselves, they know how shit the world can be.”

The restlessness within him that he’d made the wrong decision settled down with this news. Ox giving him this information before the rest of the team was a surprise. Growler suspected Ox sensed his discomfort at his career change and wanted to give him something else to focus on.

“I’ll do whatever I can to help. And thanks for letting me know before the rest of the team. I’ll be sure to not let on that I knew what was happening before they did. As the new guy, I don’t want to piss off the people I’m going to be working closely with. Team dynamics are everything.”

Ox stood. “I told you because you needed to hear it. If it was Angel or Irish feeling what I suspect you’re feeling, I’d have told them too. You guys are my team, and I want you all to be happy here.”

And there it was. His suspicions were confirmed. Ox had sensed his discomfort. “Thanks. And I’ll do a good job with Astrid. I’ll make sure nothing happens to her.”

“I know you will.”

Together, they walked out of the office and headed for the conference room. A hint of apprehension circled Growler. Penni may have said that Astrid was a sweetheart, but he was going to reserve his judgement until he’d spent time with her.

Anyone who had their own television show had to have a certain amount of arrogance and self-entitlement in them. Although when he’d seen her in the bar, she’d shown no signs of those traits. All he’d seen was uncertainty...and fear.

And now he was going to be her bodyguard.

Chapter Six

ASTRID STOPPED AND STARED AT THE GLASS AND CHROME structure. Did she have the right address? This building seemed a little too flashy for a security company. Didn't they usually work out of beat-up offices in the seedy parts of town?

Astrid mentally scoffed at her assumptions—clearly, she'd watched too many movies. This company Penni had referred her to appeared to not have that hang-up and wanted everyone to see how successful they were.

“Okay,” she muttered. “Let's do this.”

Before she entered the building, Astrid glanced over her shoulder, not seeing anything or anyone out of the ordinary. In fact, on the way to this meeting, she hadn't had the sensation of being watched or followed. Maybe the incident in the store was a one-off situation. Maybe she had been hyper-sensitive after what she'd witnessed.

Yet...it didn't feel like she'd been overreacting. The fear had been real, and so had the creepy way the guy had been looking at her, as if he wanted to do things to her that were the stuff of nightmares.

Her skin prickled, and her heartbeat kicked up a notch at the memory. Her palms grew sweaty and her breaths were coming in short, sharp bursts.

She needed to calm down before she went into the meeting.

Her phone buzzed, and she pulled it out of her purse, smiling when she saw it was Penni. Was the woman tuned into all of Astrid's emotions?

"Hey, Penni, I'm outside the building where Alliez is located."

"Great. I wanted to let you know you don't have to worry. Everything will be okay. Callum will take good care of you."

Astrid knew Penni had had a meeting the previous day to see if Alliez would take her on as a client. "Okay, I'm sure whoever they've chosen will be fine. I don't imagine I'll be needing them for long." Astrid crossed her fingers on the hand not holding the phone.

"Whatever's necessary to keep you safe is what will be done. And don't worry. I've spoken to the powers that be at your show's production company and the television studio, and they're going to cover half the costs of the security detail. They should've been providing you with one in the first place."

Astrid sighed, not wanting to let Penni think she hadn't been looked after by her bosses. "They did offer. I told them I didn't need any, as I wasn't that famous."

Silence greeted her confession before she heard Penni sigh. "Why did I know you were going to say that?"

Astrid laughed. "Because, somehow, we've only known each other a few months, but you seem to know everything about me. How I think. What I'm feeling. It's a little unsettling sometimes."

“I am good at my job.”

Astrid pictured Penni rubbing her knuckles up and down her shirt with a satisfied smile on her face. “That you are. Now I’m going to hang up, and I’ll *see* you in a few minutes.”

“You will. Bye!”

Astrid was still smiling as she stopped outside the large glass doors advertising Alliez Security’s offices after she exited the elevator. On the frosted glass doors, the company’s logo was prominently displayed. Two swords behind a black shield with the company name in the middle. It looked impressive and whoever designed the eye-catching logo had done a fantastic job.

“This is it,” she muttered and pulled the doors open.

The reception area was crisp, with the dove gray carpet on the floor and the shiny wooden desk where a lovely woman sat.

“Good morning. Welcome to Alliez Security. I’m Yolanda. How can I help you?”

Astrid walked up, her legs a little shaky as a wave of nerves hit her. “Um, hi. I’ve got an appointment. My name is Astrid Conway.”

Yolanda checked her computer screen before looking up at her again. “If you take a seat, I’ll let Kyle and Callum know you’re here. May I get you a drink? Coffee? Tea? Water? Soda? Or juice.”

Wow, this place was definitely professional and not some second-rate place. Why was she so surprised? There was no way Penni would send her to a place that wasn’t anything but top-notch.

“I’ll take some water, thanks.”

“I’ll be right back.” Yolanda got up but paused before going to get her drink. “Can I just say, Ms. Conway, that I love your show and your recipes are so easy? My husband loves your Cottage Pie.”

Astrid smiled and relaxed a little. She loved hearing that people tried her recipes and liked them. When she'd started her videos, she'd been determined to make simple food that everyone could make. Yes, she put her unique twists on traditional recipes to give them a little kick, but everything was easy. "I'm glad. It's one of my favorite comfort foods when I've had a busy or stressful day."

"I like your no-fuss chocolate cake. Although I try not to eat too much of it." She patted her slightly rounded belly and disappeared through the door behind her desk.

Astrid sat on the buttery soft leather couch. The atmosphere of the reception area was professional, yet calming at the same time, as if they were determined to give their clients a sense of safety—a good thing for a security company seeing as most people who visited the office were looking for someone to keep them safe.

Just thinking about the reason for why she was here ratcheted up her anxiety a few clicks. Before all of this happened, she'd been relaxed. The only nerves she suffered from were the ones facing a roomful of people in person. And the seconds before the camera clicked on and the recording of her show started. Over the years, she'd perfected tools to help with that type of nervousness. This anxiety she was experiencing now was different. It clawed at her like it wanted to rip her open and expose her vulnerabilities to the world.

Sleep had been difficult over the past few days. She'd fall into bed exhausted, and for a couple of hours, she'd sleep deeply—and then fragments of the argument. The sound of the gunshot. The pounding of feet would invade her sleep, and she'd toss and turn and then wake up, her heart pounding, her sheets wrapped around her legs as if she was trying to wring them out.

"Ms. Conway?"

Astrid startled and jumped from the couch, bumping into Yolanda, spilling the glass of water she held all over the gray carpet. "Oh, my goodness, I'm so sorry."

She dug into her purse and pulled out the travel pack of tissues she always carried around, attempting to blot up the mess on the carpet.

“It’s fine, Ms. Conway. It’s not the first time we’ve had a spill. Please sit. I’ll fix this up in no time. And get you a fresh glass of water.”

Mortified at her reaction, Astrid clutched the sopping tissues in her hand, the action causing water to trickle over her fingers. “I’m sorry again. I didn’t hear you.”

Yolanda touched her arm, her green eyes filled with sympathy. “Truly, it’s okay.”

“Everything all right here, Yolanda?”

A deep voice sounded behind Yolanda, and Astrid wanted the floor to swallow her up when she looked up and her gaze connected with the cliched tall, dark, and handsome man. His brown hair was short at the sides but a little longer on top. He wore a navy-blue suit jacket with a blue shirt beneath. His warm brown eyes were taking in the scene around him.

“Oh, Callum, yes, everything is fine. I stumbled a little and spilled the glass of water for Ms. Conway. I was just cleaning it up and was going to get her a fresh one.”

Callum’s eyebrow lifted and the corner of his mouth quirked up as if he didn’t quite believe their competent receptionist would spill a glass of water. “Right. Are you okay, Ms. Conway?”

His voice pitched a little lower, almost like a growl, and a shiver of...appreciation trickled down her spine. This was the guy that Penni said was going to be watching over her. Once again, her assumption, or more like hope, that she’d have a gentle giant look after her was blown to smithereens. There was nothing gentle about the man standing in front of her.

He may be wearing a nice suit, but there was an edge about him. As if he could disarm a perpetrator one-handed while he drank a coffee with the other.

“Umm, yes, I’m fine,” she stammered after the silence stretched between him asking and her answering.

Callum studied her for a few seconds as if he was deciding if he believed her not. “Well, if you’d like to follow me, we’ll get this meeting started.”

Astrid admired the snug fit of his trousers. The way the material hugged his thighs and ass as he walked. She never knew pants could look so good.

No, she wasn’t going to fall for her bodyguard—how gauche would that be? Very.

She would treat Callum with the same politeness that she treated the security guards that let her on the studio lot. Yes, she’d follow his instructions, but she would not—one hundred percent—not fall for the guy.

Chapter Seven

GROWLER ATTEMPTED TO GET HIS BODY UNDER CONTROL. HIS physical reaction to Astrid Conway was not professional in the slightest.

After the meeting with Ox and the rest of the team the previous day, he'd spent the remainder of his time researching the celebrity chef. He'd put her name in the search engine and the screen filled with links to videos, photos, and numerous news articles. Not to mention a range of cookware. The girl was busy.

Close up, she was even more stunning than her pictures and the distant glimpse he'd gotten of her when he'd seen her at the bar. If the photos he'd seen had been photoshopped, they hadn't done her justice. Her black hair was glossy. He wanted to reach out and touch it to see if it was as soft as it appeared. There were tiny gold flecks in her eyes, and he wondered if they'd brighten in the throes of passion. Her lips were coated

in a shiny pink gloss, tempting him to see if they tasted as good as they looked.

Fuck. Stop. She's a client. Not a convenient lay.

Growler had stopped indulging in one-night stands when he'd come to the realization he was using women like his mother used alcohol—and not in a healthy way. For a while, his apartment door had been a revolving one with the amount of women he'd let pass through it.

“Here we are.” He stepped to the side to allow Astrid to precede him into the conference room. A hint of vanilla teased his nostrils as she walked past, and he wanted to reach out and grab her, haul her back so that he could sink his nose into the crook of her neck and inhale deeply.

Fuck! Not happening. Hands off.

How many times would he have to remind himself that Astrid was a job?

Maybe he should go out and find someone he could lose himself in—just for one night. No, he didn't want to fall into that trap again. He would find another way to deal with the inconvenient way his body was reacting to being close to Astrid.

Growler closed the door, noting that Astrid hadn't moved far into the room. Was she nervous?

Of course, she was nervous. She was in a roomful of people she'd never met to discuss the prospect that she needed a bodyguard because she'd heard a murder.

“Take a seat, Astrid.” Growler came up behind her and went to place his hand on the small of her back but pulled back at the last second. No way was he going to give her any more reasons to be skittish, and an uncalled-for touch was the quickest way for that to happen.

He pulled out her chair for her, and she smiled shyly up at him. “Thank you.”

Along with looking at her pictures on the internet, he'd pulled up some of her cooking videos. Her early ones were fun

and full of joy. Even he'd been tempted to try some of the things she'd cooked. He'd only watched two of her shows and had to admit he preferred her earlier videos. With a full production team, not to mention editing, the more recent shows were slick and professional. There was nothing wrong with them. He just preferred the unpolished version of Astrid Conway.

"Growler, you want to take a seat?" Ox queried, a questioning look in his gaze.

Dammit, he didn't want to give his boss the impression he was starstruck—not a good look for a new job.

"Sure. Sorry."

"Growler? Isn't your name Callum?" Astrid looked confused, and he couldn't blame her.

Growler took the seat opposite her and poured two glasses of water, sliding one over to Astrid.

"Growler is my nickname from my time as a SEAL. Callum is my given name. Feel free to use whichever one you're comfortable with."

Apart from his mother, who tended to slur it whenever he'd seen her, no one in the past fifteen years had called him anything other than Growler or his Navy rank. Seeing as he was going to hear his given name more often, with Penni and Yolanda using it, why not add another person to the list?

"Hey, Callum, fancy seeing you again!"

A smile quirked the corner of his lips when he heard Penni's voice, glancing up he spied her on the big screen, sitting in the living room of his former team leader's house. "Hey, Penni, again. All okay?"

Yeah, he really needed to make the effort to go down and visit his former teammates. Maybe he could go this coming weekend, that is, if they weren't headed out on a mission soon.

"Everything's good. Got a message from Knox for you."

"Yeah? What's that?" He figured it probably aligned with what he was just thinking.

“He says you need to come down and see us.” Penni winked, and Growler chuckled.

Yep, nailed it.

He doubted Knox “Fort” Porter’s demand was quite as polite as Penni made it out to be.

“I’ll see what I can do.” He may want to continue with the casual chit-chat, but that wasn’t the reason they were there. “How about we get started?”

Across from him, he caught the audible sigh Astrid emitted and turned his attention to her. Her fingers gripped the glass as if it was a life ring and she was bobbing in the middle of the ocean, awaiting rescue.

The urge to reach across the expanse of the boardroom table and place his hand over hers in comfort was strong, but he buried it.

“I really think this is all unnecessary. I’ve survived this long without personal security and nothing bad has happened. I don’t want to cause a fuss.”

Why was she brushing witnessing a murder off as nothing?

Was she hoping that if she didn’t talk about it, it would go away? Perhaps this was a coping mechanism for her.

The Astrid he’d watched doing her cooking videos and show was confident, as though she could take on anyone who came at her. That Astrid he could believe didn’t think she warranted personal security.

Yet, the woman in front of him was nothing like that one. This one was vulnerable.

Scared.

Looking like she wanted to be anywhere but in a conference room with people she didn’t know.

The instinct to protect her slammed into him.

“Astrid, I know you feel that way and feel like you overreacted at the incident in the home goods store, but your profile is rising. More people are tuning into your show. Not to

mention your views on your internet channel are up twenty percent. You're going to be recognized more and more." Penni rattled off the information as if she were reading a shopping list.

Growler appreciated her stating the facts, but Astrid didn't want facts. She wanted a concrete reason as to why he, Ox, and Penni believed she needed him to watch her.

Growler glanced at Ox, and he caught his boss's imperceptible nod giving him the go ahead to say what he wanted to say. As he was going to be the one providing the security detail, he needed to establish a relationship between him and Astrid—and he wasn't talking personal, even if that was a thought taking seed in his mind. No, the relationship they were going to share first and foremost was a professional one, so Astrid needed to be comfortable around him.

"I know having a shadow isn't what you want. I'm sure what I'm about to say next is something you don't want to hear—but you witnessed an argument and a murder. That would freak anyone out and then you had your event. What you felt or emotionally experienced there wasn't an overreaction on your part." Growler kept his attention on Astrid and was pleased that she wasn't shying away from what he was saying. Her focus was on him too, and the rest of the people in the room melted away. "Don't ever disregard what your gut was telling you. I may not have been there, and I heard about it second hand, but you don't seem the type of person to create drama out of nothing. There's a reason this person stood out to you. Gave you the feelings you had. That's the important thing here."

"I hear what you're saying. I do. I just..." Astrid's gaze slipped away from his and he cursed the breadth of the table between them. He wanted to reach out and take her hand. Stroke it and let her know that she wasn't alone anymore. That he would be there for her when she needed him.

Fuck, where are these thoughts coming from?

"It doesn't feel real," she continued, her back a little straighter than it had been a second ago. "None of this does. It

feels like instead of being on my cooking show set, I've been thrust into a cop drama set."

There it was, the spark of determination he'd seen in her early videos, when she didn't really know what she was doing but was hell-bent on making it happen.

"We may live in the land of television shows and movies, and I'd like to say we are on a show, but we're not. This is real, and I believe you know this is the right thing for you," Growler said.

"Growler's right, Astrid. We've both seen things that would fit right into a movie, but it happened to people around us." Ox held up his hand when Growler glared at him. She was already freaked out. Ox didn't need to scare her more by talking about the shit they'd seen. "Steady, Growler, I've learned to lay the facts on the table, no matter how hard or harsh the truth can be. It's the only way to deal with some people."

Annoyed at Ox's generalization, Growler counted to ten so that he didn't blast the man who was his new boss. "Astrid is not some people."

Ox's eyebrow quirked again, and he sat back. Shit, had he pushed too hard? He couldn't take it back now, and he didn't want to. "I can see that."

Growler held Ox's gaze, not willing to back down. He was given this task to protect Astrid, and that's what he was going to do. After a few silent seconds, Ox gave another nod, and Growler relaxed a little.

Had he passed a test with Ox? Growler wasn't sure, but he was going to take the victory and run with it.

"Are you both done now?" Penni asked. "I can practically smell the testosterone, and I'm hundreds of miles away. You doing okay there, Astrid?"

"It is a bit whiffy." Astrid waved her hand in front of her face as though she really was smelling something off. "I'll survive though."

Growler chuckled, her teasing helping to ease the tension in him. “Good to know. How about we move forward with the next steps? You tell me what your movements are over the next few days, and we can come up with a plan that you’re comfortable with.”

“I guess we should. Thank you for taking me on.”

“It’s what we do.” Ox stood and looked at Growler. “You’ve got it from here?”

“Yep. Once we’ve got an idea of how we’re going to proceed, I’ll let you know. I’d like to try and head down to where the incident occurred and have a look around in the next couple of days. I know it’s probably a dead end, but you never know.”

“Sounds good. I’ll get Cass to see if there are any cameras or anything she can get access to.”

Growler nodded, aware that Astrid was watching their conversation with interest. At least she’d come around to what was in her best interests. “Thanks.”

“Right, well, Logan is stirring, so I need to take off my PR hat and put my mom hat on. Astrid, I’ll talk to you later,” Penni said.

“Sounds good. Hug Logan for me. And, Penni?” Astrid waited until Penni was looking at her. “Thanks.”

“Pleasure. Growler, look after my girl. Otherwise...”

Growler held up his hands. She’d used his nickname again. “Yeah, yeah, I know. You’ll send Fort after me.”

Penni smiled sweetly. “No, I’ll come after you. Knox has nothing on me. Bye!”

The screen went dark, and Growler shook his head at Fort’s wife’s antics—she was one of a kind.

“She’s a firecracker, isn’t she?” Ox commented as he stood in the doorway.

“Yes, and I’m glad she’s on my side,” Astrid answered before Growler could say anything.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it, and Astrid, welcome to Alliez Security. We will do everything in our power to ensure your safety and deal with whatever is happening in your life. Our goal is for you to go back to living your life without having to look over your shoulder.” Ox smiled and then exited the room, closing the door and leaving Growler and Astrid alone.

Well, this was going to be interesting.

Chapter Eight

ASTRID WANTED TO GET UP AND CALL OX BACK INTO THE room. It wasn't because she was afraid of the man sitting opposite her. Nope, not that at all. She was afraid of how she was going to sit in her seat and not want to climb across the table and straddle Growler before sinking her fingers through his hair and kissing him until she didn't know who she was.

Never before had she ever had this type of visceral reaction to a man. This need to feel his lips against hers.

Everything about him was...intense.

The way his brown eyes darkened when he talked about wanting to protect her. The way his voice lowered to a growl. The way he looked ready to pounce on Ox when he'd been ruthless in his assessment of why she needed security.

“Is that how you got your nickname?”

“What?” Growler’s brow furrowed in confusion at her question.

Oh God, why did I blurt that out?

“Nothing, it doesn’t matter.” She lowered her head, grateful when her hair fell in a curtain covering her face. At least he wouldn’t see her bright red cheeks—if the heat in them was any indication of how they must look.

“No, I think it does.”

His voice came from right beside her, and she pushed her hair out of the way to find he’d come closer.

How the heck had he moved so fast? Wasn’t he on the opposite side of the table only a second ago?

Growler took the seat next to her, his leg brushing against hers. Desire flared to life, and she gulped down the rest of her water, grimacing at the warmness of the liquid. Water really was only best when it was ice cold.

What she would give for some ice right now. Anything to cool this fire burning inside her.

How was she going to deal with this man being her constant shadow if she wanted to jump him every chance she got?

You’re a client. Nothing more. Remember that.

Yes, that’s what she needed to focus on—they had a business relationship—that was all.

“Right, so my schedule will be getting a little lighter in a couple of weeks as we should finish filming for this current season of the show.” Astrid was pleased with how professional she sounded, even though her insides were as wobbly as the jelly her grandma used to make her when she was sick.

“We can talk about that in a minute. I want to go back to your earlier question.”

Astrid shifted so she was facing him, but also pushed the chair back a fraction so there was more distance between them.

Should she feign ignorance that she didn't know what he was talking about?

Somehow she didn't think that would work—case in point, the fact he'd brought it up right now. Better to give in and deal with it, then they could move on to working out a plan for her security detail.

“Fine,” she huffed out. “I asked if that was how you got your nickname.”

Growler looked at her. It was intense, and she had to stop herself from leaning toward him. “I feel like something is missing. Your question suggests I did something that had you wondering about the origin of my nickname. But from memory, I don't think I said or did anything to warrant you wanting to know.”

Astrid blinked, taking in the very long, wordy response to her question. As she'd decided to be nothing but honest with him, she was going to have to suck it up and deal with the embarrassment. “Your voice. It gets growly sometimes. I was wondering if that's how you got your nickname.”

She looked away, studying the piece of art on the wall. It was a mass of different colored swirls. It didn't make sense to her, but it must have made sense to others.

“You think my voice is growly?” Amusement laced his tone.

When will I learn not to put my foot in my mouth all the time?

“Look, can we move on, please? I have to be at the studio in a few hours.” And she needed to make sure everything was prepared. Today she was making gnocchi, an item that was a little more complicated than what she usually made for her viewers. But it was a favorite of hers, and her father had loved it. Before he'd gotten to the stage where he couldn't eat at all, the Italian dish had been one of the only things he could stomach.

Astrid attempted to push thoughts of her father and his illness away. It had been three years since he'd passed, and it

still hurt. It had been the two of them for so long that she felt as though a part of her had died when he had.

“Astrid, you okay?”

A light touch on her hand had the fog she’d fallen into dissipating, and she became aware of her surroundings. Of the man right next to her. This close, she could see that there were tiny gold flecks in his brown irises. The dark scruff on his face tempted her to reach out and place her hand against it, the small bristles teasing her palm.

Her mouth dried, and she licked her lips to moisten them. Growler’s nostrils flared and, if possible, his eyes seemed to darken even more. His mouth parted a fraction. The distance between them seemed to shrink. All she had to do was lean forward and then... she did.

Growler reared back, putting space between them, and heat bloomed in her cheeks again.

What was it about this man that made her blush? Not to mention do things she wouldn’t normally do—like attempt to kiss him.

What is wrong with me?

He’d asked her something, hadn’t he?

“I—uh—I.” She stammered and then stopped, hoping that Growler would take over the conversation so that she could get her thoughts coalescing into something sensible.

Growler cleared his throat and stood, pacing over to lean against the sideboard that rested beneath the windows. “You mentioned you had to go to the studio. How long will you be there? Will I need to be cleared by the studio to be able to get onto set with you?”

Thankfully, he’d heard her silent plea to take the lead. These questions, though, she could answer one but not the other. “I’ll be at the studio for at least six or seven hours today. The recipe I’m making is involved, so shooting will take longer than it normally does.” If Growler was anywhere near her during filming, she suspected that she would be having to

do numerous takes. “As for being cleared, I don’t know the answer, but I’m guessing so.”

Growler nodded. “I thought as much. If you can give me the number of the studio or your producer, I’ll get Yolanda to call them, and we’ll proceed from there.”

That was something she could do. Astrid grabbed her phone, unlocked it, and found her director’s number. “Here are Basil’s details. He’s the director and should be able to help you.”

Growler’s fingers brushed hers as he took the phone from her outstretched hand. Shivers of need flared to life again, and it took everything she had not to snatch her hand away.

Falling for her bodyguard was so clichéd, and she wasn’t going to do it.



GROWLER STOOD in the shadows of the set, watching as Astrid came alive beneath the harsh studio lighting. Initially, she’d been nervous, and he hoped it wasn’t due to his presence. All it had taken was a couple of phone calls and he had the necessary clearance to be on set with her.

Having watched some snippets of her show, he’d been surprised that the kitchen was quite large and not the shell he’d imagined it would be. The smell emanating from the spicy tomato sauce she’d made to top the gnocchi had his stomach rumbling. They’d broken for a break about an hour ago, but instead of eating, he’d taken a walk outside to not only clear his head, but to get the lay of the land.

He would speak to Cass to see if she could pull the blueprints of the complex, and he would study them. Determine if there were any weak points where someone could slip in.

“Who are you?”

Years of training kicked in, and Growler had the person’s arms twisted up and behind their back before they could even squeak out a protest.

“Who the fuck are *you*?” He kept his voice low, but menacing, annoyed at himself that he’d been lost in his thoughts he hadn’t been aware of the person approaching him.

Not a good look for a bodyguard. At least he’d reacted in a manner that would suggest he’d been aware of everything going on around him.

“Whoa! Let me go! I work here!”

Even though Growler had been quiet, this guy wasn’t, and attention from the set was now firmly on them and not on Astrid.

Basil came marching over. “Leon, what the hell is going on?”

The second the director said the guy’s name, Growler loosened his hold but didn’t let him go entirely. “You know this guy?” Growler asked.

“I said his name, didn’t I? Of course, I know him. He’s a junior cameraman on the show. Can you let him go now?” Basil demanded.

“Callum?”

Shocked at hearing his name from Astrid’s lips, he let go of Leon and strode over to where she stood. “You good?” he asked, running his gaze over her. He couldn’t see anything wrong.

“I’m fine. But are *you*?” She canted her head over to where Leon stood rubbing the arm Growler had twisted.

“Totally.” Nothing more needed to be said about the situation. “All good here.”

Astrid rolled her eyes. “You expect me to believe that? You almost broke Leon’s arm and interrupted our shoot. How about you try again?”

Where had this sassy woman come from?

Growler liked it. He liked it a lot. “He came up behind me, and I just reacted. It’s what I do. What I’ve been trained to do.” He glanced over to where Leon and Basil were

conversing quietly. “Maybe he’ll know not to come up behind someone without their knowledge.”

No way was he going to admit that it was because he’d been lost in his head that he hadn’t noticed the other man approaching him.

“Well, next time, try asking before reacting.” With that, Astrid strode back to the set.

A smile lifted the corners of his mouth. He’d known Astrid possessed an inner fire. That the woman he’d met in the office earlier that day wasn’t a true representation of the woman that she was. The one who’d given him a dressing down was the real Astrid, and he would do whatever was necessary to eliminate the asshole who threatened to take that fire away from her.



PEDRO LOITERED beneath a tree opposite the studio where Astrid Conway shot her show. Snatching her off the street in front of the complex wouldn’t be a good idea. Not only did they have a guardhouse, but there were cameras everywhere.

What he needed to do was follow her to find out where she lived. Although, again, not the greatest idea because every fucking person now had doorbell cameras or other cameras up to protect their properties. Before, it was only the rich and famous who had security cameras. Alarms, bah, they were easy to disarm and never posed much of a deterrent.

Why the fuck did everyone have to follow trends?

Life before everyone had cameras was so much easier. Deals were done easily on the streets, and people would walk by and not give a shit. Now everyone had a phone, and they could record just about everything if they wanted to—and most did.

What he needed the bitch chef to do was go back to Skid Row and do her goody two shoes routine, then it would be easy to get rid of her.

Well, not rid of entirely. He planned to have a little fun with her before he handed her over to Mr. Rook. After that, he didn't care what happened to her. Whatever Mr. Rook wanted to do with her was his business. She could be his personal chef and sex slave for all Pedro cared.

All that mattered to him was that she wasn't around to be able to link him to the murder. He had more business to take care of. More goals to achieve. He was going to make his mark in Mr. Rook's organization.

Yes, he'd shown his face to her at that home goods store. He'd had to sit through three hours of her, first talking about her cookware—like he cared about that. Then all those stupid people wanted a selfie with her and for her to sign her cookbook. A cookbook, for fuck's sake. Who got a cookbook autographed?

He wanted to know if she recognized him. She hadn't, but he'd taken perverse pleasure in seeing the fear in her eyes. Instead of taking her, he'd walked out.

Movement at the gate caught his attention, and he stood a little straighter. He recognized her car from the parking lot. He still couldn't believe she drove it to Skid Row. She was asking for trouble with that thing. The late model BMW was probably one of those electric ones. She seemed like the type to have one.

“What the fuck?”

Behind the wheel wasn't the chef. She was in the passenger seat. Driving the car was a man he hadn't seen around her before. He definitely hadn't been at the in-person event. Only a perky blonde who Pedro didn't care about.

Fuck. Had she gotten herself a bodyguard?

Only one way to find out. Pedro raced to his car, adrenaline spiking within him. If she had a guard, it would make it harder to get to her, but he could get rid of the guy if he had to. He had means and ways to make sure he always came out on top.

Chapter Nine

“YOU’RE GONNA NEED TO GET SOME SECURITY CAMERAS AND an electronic gate at the front of your property.”

Astrid trailed behind Growler as he walked around her house, pointing out everything that was wrong with her place.

It was late, and she was tired. All she wanted to do was have a bubble bath, drink some sparkling water, and put on a show where she didn’t have to think or pay attention. Background noise instead of mind stimulation.

But no, she couldn’t do that because her bodyguard was picking apart the home that had been her safe haven for years. A place where she’d always felt secure and never worried about anyone breaking in.

Was that naïve considering her fame? Likely, but she did live in a gated community, so that had to be on the plus side.

“Are you almost done? Because I’d really like you to leave,” Astrid said as they were headed back downstairs.

Her home wasn’t large in terms of Hollywood, but it was spacious and had been perfect for her and her father. After his death, she’d thought about moving. Going to someplace that wasn’t steeped in memories, but then it hit her. She wanted those memories. Wanted to walk into the bedroom that her father had used and remember him reading in the big chair in the corner. When his illness had progressed and he’d needed full-time care, she’d asked him about getting a live-in nurse, but he’d told her he didn’t want her to stress too much and insisted on going into a facility that catered to people with his illness among others. She’d found the best one, and they’d provided him with top-notch care. She hadn’t needed to worry about a thing. But that didn’t mean she didn’t and wished that he was in her house instead of there.

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying here tonight. In the morning, I’ll call the office and find out if we have a company that provides security systems. I’m sure Ox will have one.”

“What? You can’t stay here,” she sputtered. Astrid hadn’t heard anything else he’d said after that little tidbit.

That wasn’t happening. No way. After the stressful shoot, she wanted her peace, and she wasn’t going to get that with him being in her house.

“It’s for your safety,” he replied patiently, as if talking down to a recalcitrant child—which she most definitely wasn’t.

Anger and annoyance flared to life, and she marched over to where he stood leaning against the kitchen counter as if he had been in her home a hundred times.

She poked him in his chest. “Listen to me and listen well. This is my home. I’m in a gated community. I don’t need you here annoying me. It’s bad enough that you’re at the studio. I. Don’t. Want. You. Here.” She punctuated each word with another poke of her finger.

Growler captured her hand and held it flat against his chest, right over his heart. Astrid stilled, all her anger disappearing as the flame of desire took over.

What was I thinking poking the bear—literally?

“How about you listen to me?”

Dammit, he was using his growly voice. Did he even know what a weapon that was? How it had the power to turn her into a puddle of goo?

Not happening.

“What?” Astrid lifted her chin in an act of defiance.

When she first met him, she may have been out of sorts, but now? Now she was in fight mode. She was fighting for her life to return to what it was before she’d made that visit to Skid Row. Where she hadn’t heard gunshots, racing feet, and squealing tires and come face to face with a dead body.

One corner of his mouth lifted in a half smile. Did he think this was funny?

The anger was back, and she pulled her hand out from under his, shoving it into her pant pocket in a desperate attempt to ignore the tingles coursing through the flesh.

“I’m here to protect you, Comet, so get used to it. And”—he paused, his lips stretched in a full-blown smile, one that she’d never seen before and boy was it lethal—“if you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.”

Words were impossible. Astrid had no idea what to address first—*Comet*—or the cliché he’d just used.

“Did you just use a cooking metaphor on me?”

Growler laughed, a deep laugh that strummed along her skin like fingers covering guitar strings. “I do believe I did.”

What the what!?

Astrid had had enough. She was tired. Smelly from cooking all day, and all she wanted was peace and quiet—something she wasn’t going to get anytime soon. “You’re impossible. Do whatever you want.”

With those parting words, she swiveled on her ballet flats and stormed out of the kitchen and upstairs, Growler's laughter following her.

Damn, she'd taken getting out of the kitchen, literally. She'd deal with *Comet* later. Or maybe never.

How the hell had her life become so complicated?



FUCK, she's magnificent.

Growler watched Astrid flee the kitchen and head upstairs. A door slammed, and he tried not to think of what she was doing behind that closed door.

He shouldn't have laughed, but he hadn't been able to help himself. He didn't make a habit of using metaphors or clichéd sayings in his life.

Shaking his head, he studied the kitchen, noting the high-end appliances—not a surprise given her occupation—but it had many homey touches. The open shelving on either side of the sink that overlooked the garden was something he hadn't really seen before. There were bowls and plates neatly stacked, ready to be used on one side and coffee mugs and glasses on the other.

In the corner of the counter, on a book stand, was a cookbook, not the one he'd seen on display at the back of Astrid's set at the studio. That had been hers. No, this one looked old. The pages were a little dog-eared as if it was regularly used. As if it had been passed down from mother to daughter for a couple of generations. Or maybe father to daughter.

This was the heart of the home.

The heart of Astrid.

The sound of running water reached his ears, and his body immediately responded to the image of Astrid standing naked in the shower, water cascading over her body, flattening her luscious dark hair against her scalp and down her back. His

soapy hands washing her back. Massaging her shoulders before sliding down and cupping her breasts.

Growler closed his eyes, grabbed the edge of the cool counter, and counted to fifty. One hundred. One hundred and fifty. Finally, he curbed the urge to march upstairs, join her in the shower, and bring that fantasy to life. His body was hard and ready for action.

What was with this wild attraction and need to mark her as his own?

Was it because his life was mixed up at the moment?

Was it because he was adjusting to civilian life?

Or was it because it had been so long since he had been with a woman that his body was telling him it was time to get back on the wagon?

No, it wasn't the latter. He'd been approached by many women, and he hadn't been interested. Hadn't been drawn to them like he was with Astrid.

The water shut off—how long had he been standing there lost in his thoughts? Long enough for Astrid to finish showering.

“Yeah, maybe staying here isn't the best idea I've had,” he muttered and walked over to the large double-door stainless steel refrigerator. Yanking it open, he pulled out a bottle of water and chugged down half of it.

What he needed to do was make a list of everything that needed to be done. All the things he noted and what he wanted to talk to Ox about.

Yes, get my head back into the game and focus on the job at hand.

There had to be a notepad somewhere.

Growler pulled open the drawer closest to him, the rattle of cutlery telling him he'd struck out. He shoved it closed and opened the next one. This one had tongs, spatulas, and whisks all neatly laid out in a drawer liner.

Where the fuck was the junk drawer? The one where miscellaneous stuff was tossed into and then forgotten about. Didn't every household have one of those?

“Is there something you're looking for?”

He startled and cursed under his breath. Dammit, this was the second time he'd been caught unawares on the same day. Where the hell had his SEAL instincts gone? The ones that had kept him and his team safe whenever they'd been on a mission.

Had he handed them back to the Navy, along with his weapon, when he signed his discharge papers? Sure fucking seemed like it.

“I need a note—” He swallowed the rest of his words.

If getting surprised wasn't going to get him killed, resisting the urge to rip off the silk robe that caressed every curve of Astrid's body was going to give it a red-hot go. Her hair was gathered up on the top of her head in a sexy haphazard knot. Tendrils had escaped and brushed her cheek like a lover's caress.

Growler grabbed his water again and finished the contents, crushing the bottle to give his hands something to do. Anything to remember his earlier resolve about focusing on the job and not learning every single inch of Astrid's body.

“You were saying?” The corner of her mouth lifted and her eyes sparkled, as if she knew exactly why he was reacting the way he was.

Had she done it deliberately?

No.

He may have only known Astrid for less than a day, but he'd seen enough to know she was nothing like the women who threw themselves at him in his early days as a SEAL. All they wanted was a trident pin wearer to add to their bedpost. He doubted Astrid had come down here to seduce him.

Although if she did, I wouldn't put up much of a fight.

Giving himself a mental head slap, he answered her question. “I’m looking for a notepad or something so I can make a list of everything I need to get done.”

Calmly, Astrid walked over to another stack of built-in cabinets, opening a drawer and extracting the items he required. “This what you need for your list making endeavor?” Her eyebrow quirked in question.

Again, her sass only increased his attraction to her.

I’m in so much trouble.

“Yeah, thanks, that’ll work.” He took them from her outstretched hand, making sure not to brush his fingers against hers, even though he wanted to do just that. The vanilla scent he’d smelled on her earlier was stronger. It had to be her body wash or a lotion that she used.

Yeah, staying here was a bad, bad idea.

Chapter Ten

ASTRID STARED AT THE CEILING, HER BODY BUZZING WITH AN energy she wasn't used to experiencing. Every inch of her skin vibrated as if she were sitting in a massage chair and it was on top speed.

It was all Callum "Growler" Taylor's fault. Perhaps if she always referred to him by his full name in her mind, it would make things easier.

Astrid snorted, the sound echoing around the quiet of her bedroom. As if that would make a difference to how she reacted to him.

When she'd come downstairs and found him still in the kitchen, rummaging around, she'd had a moment where she'd thought how right it was, how good he looked in her kitchen, as though he belonged there.

Fortunately, her brain had still functioned, and she was able to say something other than, “Take me against the wall.”

“Ugh!” Astrid tossed the covers aside and padded over to her window, pulling the drapes aside so she could stare down at her backyard. Her dad had put some solar lights around the garden beds, and they cast a creamy beige glow over the plants and edge of the grass.

What would he have thought of Growler? Would he have liked him? He’d probably have quizzed him about his life in the military. Her dad had never served, but he always enjoyed watching movies that depicted past war battles. Astrid would never forget the time they’d gone to Hawaii and toured the Pearl Harbor memorial. It was one of the few times she’d seen her father cry.

“I miss you so much, Dad. I wish you were still here,” she whispered, resting her head against the cool glass.

About to let the drapes fall and go back to bed, Astrid paused, pressing her face hard against the window. Had she imagined that shadow? She squinted her eyes as if that would make it easier to make out anything—it didn’t.

Convinced she’d seen a feral cat, raccoon, or possum, Astrid loosened her fingers a little when she saw something again, in the far corner of her small yard, another movement.

Fear curled around her as the shadow formed into the shape of a person. Gasping, she let the material fall and rushed over to her door, pulling it open.

Her home. The place she had been convinced was her safe haven, looked like it wasn’t. Skidding into the kitchen, she grabbed a large knife from its wooden holder. Not an ideal weapon if the person in her yard had a gun, but it was better than nothing.

Astrid crept toward the sliding door. Was she making a rookie mistake, again? Like she’d done that day in Skid Row. More than likely, but adrenaline overrode her good sense. The instinct to protect herself was a thumping mantra in her mind.

Sweat lined her palm, and she adjusted her grip on the knife as the door began a slow slide open.

Growler!

Not once had she considered calling out to Growler. Why hadn't she? The guy was in her *house*. He was a former SEAL. He could probably handle whoever was coming through her door with his eyes shut.

Sorry, Growler.

She sent the silent message out to the universe and prayed he heard it.

Lifting her arms, she flexed her fingers around the knife's handle. She did have the element of surprise. If she could hurt the intruder in some way, that had to work in her favor.

Before she could even bring the weapon down, her arm was grabbed and twisted—hard. The knife clattered to the ground and she let out an almighty scream, hoping that Growler heard her and would come running to her rescue. Or one of her neighbors suffered insomnia and heard her and would call for help.

“Dammit, Astrid! Stop! It's me, Growler!”

It took half a second for the words to register. To notice that her hands were free. That she wasn't held by someone wanting to murder her.

“Growler?” she whispered.

“Yeah, Comet, it's me.”

The nickname bounced off her as the fear coalesced into anger, and she hit his arm, her hand bouncing off the hard muscle. “Why the hell are you creeping around the backyard? Sneaking into the house. Grabbing me as if I'm a criminal.”

By the end, she was screeching, and her breath was coming out in ragged gasps.

“You were about to stab me. I was taking preventative measures.” Growler's calm tone grated on her nerves more than it should.

“I thought there was someone in the backyard and then thought they were breaking into the house.” Her heart rate was beginning to slow and shock from everything she’d been through the last fifteen minutes hit her. Shivers wracked her body, and she wrapped her arms around her stomach in an attempt to warm herself.

“And you thought, what? You could take them on yourselves? What if they had a gun? What if there were two of them? Did you think about that at all?” His angry tirade was a complete 360 to his previous calmness.

“Yes, I did, and I knew the risks. Risks I was willing to take. And I’d do it again if I had to.” She returned with quiet dignity.

When she’d been standing at the door waiting, she’d known it was a bad idea, but she did it, anyway. If that made her foolish in his eyes, then so be it.

Delayed reaction to the situation had well and truly set in. Her teeth were chattering, and her knees had begun to tremble.

“Fuck!”

She heard the quiet curse, and a second later her head was smashed against a hard chest and she was locked in a tight embrace, one that heated her better than what she was attempting to do to herself.

“I’ve got you, Comet. Sorry, I got angry and sorry I scared you. I was doing a perimeter check.”

He spoke so softly, she wasn’t sure she really made out what he said, but it was enough to calm her.

They stood like that for what felt like an hour but was probably only a minute or two. But during that time, being held by Growler soothed her frayed edges.

“What’s with you calling me Comet?” she asked when she felt sure her voice wouldn’t tremble. She needed a change of subject.

“Astrid. Asteroid. Comet,” he responded, as if she would understand his reasoning—she didn’t.

“That makes no sense to me.”

He chuckled, his chest rumbling beneath her ear. Of their own accord, at some stage, her arms had curled around his waist and she was clinging to him as tightly as he was holding her. “Some nicknames aren’t meant to make sense.”

“Yours does,” Astrid complained. It was so obvious why he was called Growler because of his voice.

Wait!

When she’d asked him about it, he’d avoided the subject altogether. Now was the perfect time to discuss it. Not only would she find out how he got that name, but it would help to take her mind off the fact that she’d almost stabbed him and had had a freak out because of thinking a stranger was hovering in her garden.

“How does my nickname make sense?”

Astrid dropped her arms from around him and wished she hadn’t when he copied her. “I told you a few hours ago your voice turns growly,” she said simply.

“Ahh, yes, that,” he nodded. “Still don’t hear it.”

Astrid gaped at him, then rolled her eyes. Of course, he wouldn’t hear the difference. To him, it probably sounded the same. “Trust me, it does. Are you saying that’s not how you became known as Growler?”

He nodded. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. I got Growler because we were jogging during boot camp and some tiny, yappy dogs came running up to us. They were getting around our feet, tripping up a couple of guys. I was annoyed, and so I growled at them and they all took off. The guys thought it was hilarious and started calling me Growler.”

“I don’t—well, I suppose that makes sense. Maybe they heard your growly voice as well, and that played into how they came up with it. It sounds like it comes from here.” Astrid placed her hand on his chest.

The muscles tensed beneath her palm and her gaze locked onto his—dark and full of an emotion she couldn’t quite make

out. Her fingers curled around his shirt. They stayed that way for seconds, before he blinked and the moment was lost.

“I doubt it, but”—he glanced at the wall oven, which showed it close to two in the morning—“we’ve got a busy day tomorrow. You should head up to bed.”

“Right,” she muttered and put some space between them.

The thought of walking up those stairs alone didn’t appeal. She hadn’t been able to sleep before, and she doubted after all that had happened since she’d crept downstairs, she’d be able to now. Plus, she wanted to prolong being near Growler. Initially, she may have disliked the idea of having a bodyguard, but now she liked it.

Maybe a bit too much.



EVEN IN THE dim lighting of the kitchen, Growler could make out the myriad of emotions flitting across Astrid’s face. The one that stuck with him, though, was fear.

“How about I make us some warm cocoa?” he suggested when Astrid still hadn’t moved to go back to bed.

As if his question jolted her from the daze she’d fallen into, Astrid straightened her shoulders, a soft smile teasing her full lips. “I’ve got something even better. Go take a seat.” She pointed to the barstools as she turned the lights on.

He grabbed a stool and sat without even being conscious of moving. His mind was still on that smile. The way he wanted to taste it.

Nope. Not going there. Client, remember?

Growler was beginning to think that no matter how many times he lectured himself, he was going to be losing the battle of keeping the relationship between him and Astrid strictly professional.

Perhaps he should talk to Ox when he phoned to discuss the security upgrades he wanted to make here and suggest that either Angel or Irish take over looking after Astrid.

Nope. No other man is looking after her.

The mere thought of not being able to protect Astrid wasn't a thought he wanted to entertain. It wouldn't be a good look if he hooked up with his client on his first job. Ox would likely kick him to the curb, and he could kiss his new career away.

No matter how tantalizing the prospect of pursuing Astrid would be, he had to maintain his professionalism. Sadly, he believed this might be a battle he would end up losing. Particularly if Astrid kept looking at him the way she was now. Her gaze kept sliding to him. To his chest encased in the white t-shirt he'd had on under the dress shirt he'd worn.

As his staying over at Astrid's hadn't been part of the plan, he hadn't had a change of clothes. Not to mention his car was still parked at Alliez's office. He'd donned his suit pants when he'd patrolled the backyard.

Another item he needed to add to his list of things to do tomorrow—go to his place to pack a bag and maybe... condoms.

Chapter Eleven

THE WHOLE DRIVE TO THE STUDIO, ASTRID WAS CONSCIOUS OF Growler beside her. The confident way he handled her vehicle. She hadn't put up a fight when he held out his hand, indicating he wanted her keys the day before at the studio or again this morning. Astrid had handed them over without a fight. What would be the point of arguing? No way was she going to win it.

Growler looked into the rearview mirror, the third time in a matter of minutes. What was going on?

Astrid leaned forward a little to look at her side mirror, noticing a silver sedan that seemed awfully close. Then again, it was LA.

Growler changed lanes and put his foot on the gas. Astrid clutched the side of her seat, her stomach doing little twirls as if it was a ballerina.

“What’s going on?” she asked, not sure she truly wanted the answer to that question.

“Fuck,” Growler muttered as he, once again, checked the mirrors.

Astrid twisted to look out the back window—the silver car was still there. Tiny darts of dread bloomed in the pit of her stomach. “We’re being followed, aren’t we?”

Way to state the obvious.

“Yep. Hang on.” His words were clipped, but there was no mistaking the command in them.

Why is this happening?

“Shall I call 9-1-1?” Why did she ask that? As if calling the police would help. What could they do? By the time they got through the traffic snarl to where they were currently, things could be completely different.

But she couldn’t just do nothing. She checked the mirror again—the car was still there.

“Call Alliez. Put the phone on speaker.” Growler veered back into another lane. An exit was approaching—would he take that one?

Whatever he did, Astrid knew he would do whatever was necessary to keep her safe.

“What’s their number?” she asked as she pulled her phone out, her hands shaking. The buzz of adrenaline spiked, and all she wanted to do was get out of the car.

But she couldn’t.

Growler rattled off a number, and Astrid dialed and hit the speaker button when the phone began to ring.

“Good Morn—”

“Yolanda, I need Cass now,” Growler yelled as he took the exit at a pace that was bordering on out of control.

“Got it.”

Astrid was impressed that Yolanda didn't even question him. Nor did she sound annoyed that Growler had cut her off.

"Dammit, that didn't work," he muttered as turned the car sharply around a corner, causing Astrid to fall into the window, slamming her shoulder against the glass. She grimaced, but didn't make a sound.

"What do you need, Callum?" Cass's voice filled the car.

"Check license plate 4XPT291. Silver Ford. Maybe a Fusion."

Through the speaker, Astrid picked up the *tap tap* of keyboard strokes. They were now traveling in an area she wasn't familiar with. Did Growler know where they were? How to get to the studio if they were able to shake off the car following them?

Did all of that matter? How had her life got turned upside down so quick? Two weeks ago, she was blissfully unaware of the dangers that lurked and showed up when you least expected it.

Fear had a stranglehold on her now. Her whole body was warm, and pinpricks of sweat coated her palms.

"Car was stolen two nights ago according to the police report filed by the owner," Cass said. "I'll let the authorities know the vehicle has been sighted. Hopefully, that will help you out."

"Thanks. Call the studio. Astrid's going to be late."

Astrid gaped, welcoming the flare of anger. It was better than fear. Did he think she was incapable of making a simple call when she'd dialed the number for Alliez? "I do know how to make a call, you know."

Growler glanced at her. "I know, but I want to keep Cass on the line."

Cass's chuckle sounded through the phone's speaker, and Astrid gripped it a bit tighter. Great. Her humiliation could be heard by goodness knows who. "On it. And Astrid, don't let Callum boss you around. Keep standing up for yourself."

Glass shattered, followed by ping of something hitting the back of the car. Astrid yelled and instinctively ducked down in her chair.

They were being shot at now. How could this get any worse? Fear swallowed the short burst of anger. She wanted the anger back.

“Fuck. Shots fired. Where are the fucking cops?” Growler yelled, and the car veered to the left. Astrid yanked her seatbelt tight, the material almost cutting her in half, but she didn’t care. If they were going to crash, then she was going to do everything possible to keep herself safe.

Another ping hit the car, causing Astrid to fumble with the phone, nearly dropping it. Beneath the screeching of tires as they bounded around another corner, she caught the faint sound of a siren.

“They’re nearby,” Cass shouted.

“Yep, hear them,” Growler responded. “Perp can too. He’s pulling back. Fucking coward. Turned down a side street.”

The speed with which the car was traveling diminished, and Astrid sat up. Buzzing sounded in her ears, and her body felt light, as if she wasn’t there.

The sirens got louder and, glancing out the shattered back window, she saw flashing lights in the distance.

“I pinpointed your position when you told me the driver turned off. I’ll relay that information to the police, and they can continue to pursue the perp.” Cass sounded calm, as if this was a normal thing for her.

How can being shot at be normal?

“They’re not going to find him. He’s dumped the car and ran. Probably got someone to meet him somewhere.” Growler said as he brought the car to a stop in a strip mall parking lot.

A sharp knock sounded on Growler’s side of the car, and Astrid jumped at the sound. A police officer filled the space, and Growler got out.

“Is that the police?” Cass queried.

“Yes, Growler’s gotten out and is speaking to them.”

Astrid’s whole body shook. The adrenaline from the last few minutes dissipated out of her.

“I need to go, Astrid, but you’re safe with Callum. He’s a good one.”

Astrid heard what Cass was saying, but it was as if she was listening to her in a tunnel, the words muffled and seeming to come from a distance. Dimly, she was aware that she’d dropped the phone on her lap. Her mind was a dense fog. Nothing made sense to her. It was as though she was present, but wasn’t at the same time.

Something warm brushed the top of her hand. Trailed up her arm until it cupped her cheek. “Astrid, you’re safe. You’re okay.”

There it was. That growly voice that represented safety. A voice that seemed to always be there when she needed it. “Callum?”

“Yeah, Comet, it’s me. Let’s get you out of the car, huh?”

All she could do was nod. Her surroundings were beginning to come back into focus. Her door was open, but she didn’t remember doing it. Or even seeing it happen.

How long had she been locked in her little vortex?

Long enough for another few squad cars to pull up. Astrid counted four in the lot surrounding.

“Are you hurt?” Growler asked as he led her to the front of the car.

Astrid did a mental check of her body. Nothing appeared to be hurting. She could move her fingers and toes, and as she’d walked from the side of the car to the front—her legs worked.

“I think I’m good.”

It was then she noticed the trickle of blood on Growler’s neck. She reached up and touched the flesh below it. “How did this happen?”

Growler shrugged. “Not sure, maybe a piece of glass from the back window when it was shot out.”

How could he sound so relaxed? They’d been shot at. Chased, and he was acting as if this was a normal Wednesday morning.

Then again, he’d been in the military. He more than likely endured far worse than what had happened to them.

An officer came up to them, with his blue eyes and smile friendly. “Ms. Conway, big fan. Are you okay?”

Growler moved close to her side, and was that a...growl coming from him? Astrid shook her head, sure she’d imagined the sound. But there was no way she’d imagined the warmth and weight of his arm as it curled around her waist.

Aware that the officer was still looking at her expectantly, Astrid plastered a smile on her face. “Thanks for being a fan. And yes, I’m okay.”

Slowly, the panic was subsiding, and it had everything to do with the man beside her.

The officer nodded. “We’ll need you both to come to the station to give us a statement about what happened. Are you up to it?”

Irrational annoyance flared to life within her. Why did he have to ask if she was “up to it,” but he didn’t ask Growler the same thing? Did he think she was about to fall at his feet in a dead faint because she’d been in a car chase and had been shot at? Before Growler comforted her, that may have been the case, but now? Now she was only a little shaky.

Astrid lifted her chin. “Yes, I’m up to it.”

Growler’s fingers around her waist flexed. “We’ll follow you,” he said, still growly.

“Very good. I’m sure you want to get this over with, so shall we leave?”

Growler nodded, and when the officer left to go to his patrol car, Growler placed his hands on her shoulders. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

If she bristled at the way the officer had spoken to her, she melted when Growler asked her almost the same thing. “Yeah, still a little shaky, but I’ll be okay. Let’s get this over with, and then I can get to doing what I love most in the world—cooking.”

At least when cooking, no one would shoot at her. Or try to chase her off the road.

Chapter Twelve

GROWLER STEPPED OUT INTO THE SUNSHINE AND PUT HIS sunglasses on. In the hour or so since they'd walked into the police precinct, the sun had risen higher in the sky and the day had warmed up. Beside him Astrid stopped and rummaged in her bag, donning her own glasses. He didn't like not being able to see what she was thinking. Her eyes were a window into her emotions and thoughts. He liked being able to see them. It brought him closer to her.

“Ox sent a message, letting me know he'd arranged for your car to be towed to a garage. He said it would be ready in a couple of days.”

“Really? That wasn't necessary. I had plans to call my insurance company and lodge a claim to get it sorted.”

“Insurance may have dragged it out. At least this way you know it's getting repaired without the hassle of speaking to an

adjuster who can delay things until they're ready to approve it.”

Growler waited for her to be annoyed that Ox had taken control of the situation, especially after how she'd reacted when the officer had questioned her about her ability to give a statement.

“I suppose, but I'll speak to my insurance agency about getting the cost reimbursed or something. Although I don't think my policy covers damage caused by bullets.”

“There is that.” Every instinct wanted to find the asshole who chased and shot at them, and pummel him to the ground, but he fought it back. He was glad to see her sass was returning, though. She looked a little less haunted now. “Ox also said that he would leave one of the company cars for me to use and drive you around in.”

Growler headed to the far-right corner of the lot and spied the large black SUV with the dark tinted windows—bullet-proof windows, but he wasn't going to let Astrid know that bit of information—at least not yet. After what they'd been through the last few hours, he didn't want to freak her out any more than she already had been.

Then again, maybe she wouldn't like him keeping that from her.

His head hurt, thinking about what the best course of action was. Indescribable fear climbed into his soul when the car's back window had shattered. He'd wanted to haul Astrid close to him so that he could protect her and keep her safe.

The risk the asshole had taken shooting in a residential area was huge. They had balls and wanted Astrid badly.

Who the fuck were they?

Why did they want to erase her when she hadn't seen anything? Hadn't seen them pull the trigger.

None of this made sense.

He pulled the door open for Astrid, and she climbed in. “Thanks,” she murmured.

Growler got into the car and started it, but before he pulled out, he glanced over at Astrid as she gazed out the passenger window. He may have thought she looked less haunted than she had when they'd arrived, but he was worried that it was all a façade.

“You good?”

“How many times are you going to ask me this? Yes, I'm *fine*. I gave my statement to the police, and now I just want to get to the studio and put this whole thing behind me. So can we go, please?”

“You can't do that, you know.”

“Can't what?” she snapped back.

“Bury the last few hours. It's not healthy. We were chased and shot at. It's okay to still be freaked out about it.”

Silence fell in the car. The only sound was the soft hum of the engine. However long it took, Growler could wait. Hell, he'd waited hours when on missions for insurgents to come out of their hiding places. He also could deal with the silence. The quiet never bothered him.

“What do you want me to say?” she whispered eventually.

Growler reached over and took her hand, holding it to his cheek. “Anything you need to say. If you're angry, yell at me. If you're scared, tell me that too. Just don't let it fester because that will make it worse. And you telling me what's going on with you doesn't make you weak. It makes you strong as fuck because you're facing it all.”

“I was so scared,” she started. “What was happening to us was straight out of an action movie. It didn't seem real, but it was. The bullets were real. What if you hadn't been here? What if I'd been alone? But you, you were so calm. Driving and watching what he was doing. Talking to Cass. Not even flinching when the window shattered.”

“That's because I've been shot at before, but do you want to know what I was really feeling?”

If Astrid was baring herself to him, he was going to return the favor.

“What?”

“Fucking scared. I was fucking scared that I couldn’t do enough to keep you safe. That I was going to let you down. But I couldn’t let that get the better of me. I had to bury it all and focus on not only making sure I got you out of the situation without coming to any harm, but also making sure that the people around us weren’t hurt.”

“Growler.” His name was a mournful whisper, and he pulled her across the console and into his arms as Astrid let go. Her tears came hot and fast and wet his shirt, but he didn’t care. All that mattered was she was purging the events of the day.

“I’m sorry.” She sniffed when her tears had all but stopped. “I’ve made a mess of your shirt.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about. My shirt will dry.” Growler leaned back to look at Astrid. Her eyes were red and puffy, but she’d never looked more beautiful to him. “You good now?”

“I think so.” Astrid yawned.

Reluctantly, he released her so she could get herself situated in her seat again.

“It’s been a long morning. Are you sure you want to head to the studio and not go home so you can decompress and process all that happened?” Growler would prefer that over her being surrounded by people who would undoubtedly ask her a million questions about what they’d been through. Especially after her little breakdown.

Cass had also sent a message to say that news of their chase had hit the internet, so even though he was sure Yolanda hadn’t gone into too much detail about why they were going to be late to the studio, they would know now what had happened.

Astrid straightened in the seat and wiped her face, a look of determination firing her hazel eyes and strengthening her

voice. “Of course, people are counting on me. I may be the star of the show, but we’re a team and I can’t be who I am without them.”

Growler’s admiration for her grew. Astrid was prepared to put aside her discomfort for others. Few people would, particularly after what she’d endured in the last few hours. “Okay, the studio it is.”

“Besides, they’re only going to want to know what happened, so may as well answer their questions today instead of putting it off until tomorrow.” She shrugged. “It’s all over the net, so the publicity department at the studio may want to talk to me about it. Or they’ll contact Penni.”

“How did you find out about the headlines?” So much for trying to protect her. She already knew they were in the news.

“I’ve got alerts set up so whenever my name is mentioned in a news article or on a website, I get a notification for it. Plus, Penni sent a text while the police were interviewing you asking if I was okay.”

Clearly, he had a lot to learn about the inner workings of being a celebrity. He wouldn’t even know how to set up an alert, but he was glad to hear that Penni was aware of what happened. She would know the best way to spin it so that it wouldn’t bring more attention to Astrid than was already on her. “Do you need to call Penni?” he asked as they hit the freeway.

Conscious of what happened the last time they were on it, Growler paid extra attention to what was going on around them. Aware of the vehicles that were coming up beside and behind him. So far, nothing seemed suspicious, but he wouldn’t relax until they were behind the studio gates.

“I’ll call Penni later. She said she’s working on a press statement for me and will email it over when it’s done.”

“The price of fame, huh? Every little facet of your life needs to be addressed.”

How did anyone survive in what was essentially living in a fishbowl?

Considering the world was full of actors, models, influencers, and sports stars, not to mention YouTubers and internet influencers, Growler guessed a lot didn't mind the scrutiny. The service he'd given and what he'd done while in the Navy had provided them the freedom to be able to follow their dreams—that was a good thing.

“I knew what I was getting into when I signed the deal. My life has been pretty boring until recently, and I can't say I'm a fan of what's happening. But dealing with parts of my life being open to the public? Well, the second you put yourself on the internet in any capacity—whether it be cooking videos or publishing a book—there's the chance you take off, and the public wanting to know all about you is a by-product of it.”

They pulled into the studio, and Growler flashed the identification he'd been given. The guard studied it, smiled at Astrid and waved them through. Growler would've preferred it if the guard had done a more thorough check, but he wasn't in charge of how the studio did things.

Once they arrived on set, everyone rushed around Astrid, throwing a million questions at her. He was about to intervene when she held up her hand and everyone stopped.

Now that was power.

“I'm fine. Yes, we had a little excitement on the way to work today. It's over, and all I'd like to do is get ready to do today's filming so I don't hold you all up any longer than necessary.”

It was a bit more than what she was making it out to be, but if that was what she needed to say to get through the next few minutes, then he wouldn't stand in her way.

“She's impressive, isn't she?”

Growler glanced over his shoulder and spied Basil standing beside him—this time he'd been aware of the man's approach.

“She is. And she has a good relationship with everyone, which must make things easier for you,” commented Growler.

While he believed that whoever had seen Astrid in that parking lot was behind what happened this morning, Growler wasn't going to rule out that it could be someone close to Astrid who wanted her attention and was going about it the wrong way.

“From the second we shot the pilot, I knew we were on a winner of a show. I already knew the camera loved Astrid because of the videos she'd posted—and they were on far inferior cameras than what we use.” Basil scratched his chin. “When we got the green light to shoot a short season, Astrid worked hard and tirelessly. Never complaining about anything. She always thanked everyone after every shoot—still does.”

Growler may have only been on set once, but he'd already noted how Astrid interacted with her team. There wasn't any reason for anyone to want to harm her, but he'd heard too many stories about how people had presented one persona to someone, but underneath it all, they were playing for the other side and planning their demise.

“Is it rare for a star to act the way Astrid does?” Growler didn't believe Astrid was the only one who was polite. Not every star was a diva or asshole—at least he wanted to believe they weren't.

“Not really, but there are always the outliers who start off humble, but the moment their show takes off and they're fending off groupies as well as invites to all the major events, they change and believe that they can do no wrong.” Basil indicated where Astrid was still conversing with the crew. “Even when she was grieving her father's death after his long illness, she didn't throw fits when things didn't go right. She took it all in her stride and produced some of the best shows we've made. She's definitely one of the rare ones.”

Growler took everything Basil said and filed it away, ready to go over later. In the dossier that Cass had prepared, it had been listed that both Astrid's parents had died. There weren't a lot of details as to how they passed, as that wasn't necessary, but with Basil mentioning her father's long illness, Growler wondered how much pain she'd gone through alone.

All this information only increased how impressed he was with Astrid. How resilient. Even now, she showed no signs of the shock that had overwhelmed her. No matter how strong she was acting at the moment, he would watch her carefully once they were home. When there wasn't a show that required her attention, her mind would circle back to this morning's events and the potential for her to sink back into that shock was possible, regardless of her crying episode in the car. Having her car shot while being chased wasn't something that she could easily get over.

If she needed him, he was going to be there for her. Even if it went against his edict of keeping his distance. If she needed to be held, he was going to hold her. If she needed a shoulder to cry on, he'd give her one. Whatever Astrid needed, he would give it to her.

Chapter Thirteen

THE SAUCE BUBBLED AWAY ON THE COOKTOP, AND THE AROMA of tomato, onion, basil, and garlic teased Astrid's nostrils, calming her.

How the hell had she gotten through the shoot today?

While she smiled and guided people through making an upside-down pineapple cake, inside, her heart had thumped so hard she was surprised the sound guy hadn't questioned what that loud sound was.

No one had any idea that she was hanging onto her composure like a scraggly tree clinging to the side of a cliff. However there was one person who may have picked up on her unease—Growler.

Unlike yesterday when he'd been on set, Growler had stayed out of her line of vision. Lurking in the shadows as though not to get in the way of the crew. Today, though, he'd

remained just behind where Basil sat so that when she looked up and smiled into camera three, there he was looking at her.

It had been unnerving and comfortable all at the same time.

“Something smells good. Although, aren’t you tired of cooking?” Growler walked into the kitchen, his hair damp from his shower.

The black t-shirt he wore clung to his chest, and the material stretched enticingly over his shoulders. He’d paired it with black sweats that fitted snugly around his thighs.

What would he look like if he wore gray sweats?

How many pictures floated around the internet with guys wearing gray sweats that left nothing to the imagination? Although the black ones Growler wore defined his crotch area quite nicely.

Oh my God, stop it. He’s your bodyguard.

You wouldn’t mind if he was more.

Great, now her inner thoughts were fighting each other as if she had an angel and a devil residing in her mind. Although she couldn’t deny she was leaning toward the devil side of things.

“Astrid, you good?”

Growler came up beside her, not touching, but close enough that if she wanted to, she could lean her head on his shoulder.

“Cooking calms me.”

It wasn’t a lie. How many times had she gotten up in the middle of the night, when her show was just starting out and she was stressed about how it would perform, and cook up meals for the week? So many times.

“We could’ve ordered in. You’ve had quite the day.” Growler brushed his fingers against the back of her forearm. The touch was gentle and comforting.

“I’m good. Can you check the pasta for me? It should be done.”

“Do you trust me to know that it’s cooked?” he asked as he shifted and lifted the lid off the saucepan.

“Use the fork there,” Astrid pointed to one resting on the counter. “Twirl a noodle around it and then toss it at the tile. If it’s done, it’ll stick. And the pasta will be perfect.”

“Al dente?” Growler queried as he followed her instructions.

“Ahh, you know your pasta.” She grabbed a small tasting spoon and dipped it into the sauce, lifting it to her lips. Astrid closed her eyes and tasted it.

Was that a moan?

Opening her eyes, Astrid caught the glint of silver out of the corner of her eye. Growler clenched the fork in his hand, a spaghetti noodle hanging limply from the tines. His lips slightly parted. Her heart raced when their gazes connected. Fire burned, deepening Growler’s chocolate brown eyes to a rich, dark chocolate. Astrid loved dark chocolate.

Her mouth dried, and her grip on the spoon slackened. “Callum?” she whispered, his given name slipping off her lips as if she always called him that.

“I like it when you call me that.” His voice was deep and growly.

Her body heated, and it wasn’t from standing over a hot range.

Her tongue darted out to lick her dry lips. The fork clattered to the ground, and Growler closed the distance between them. His fingers pried the small spoon from hers before framing her face.

Astrid’s breath caught in her throat as they continued to gaze at each other. Growler’s breath came out ragged. His eyes were so dark now they almost looked black. The look was intense and full of promise.

Promise of what?

Was he going to kiss her? How she wanted him to.

Or was he going to push her away—which made no sense, as he was the one who came at her, not the other way around?

It was almost as if he was fighting with himself. Wanting to do something but holding back due to a reason only known to him.

“I shouldn’t be doing this,” Growler muttered, as if he were having a conversation with himself.

There it was. Her assumptions were confirmed.

“Why not?” she asked, letting him know that she didn’t mind him touching her. Giving him permission to do whatever he wanted to do.

What she wanted was for him to kiss her. Astrid needed it after what they’d gone through today. Needed this touch, this personal connection to feel alive.

Safe.

Wanted.

Loved?

“Because it’s wrong. You’re a client. You’re my job. My first one with my new company, but I can’t resist.” He shuffled closer so that the tip of her breasts brushed the material of his t-shirt.

“Don’t resist.” Astrid placed her hands on his chest as Growler lowered his head toward hers.

The second his lips brushed hers, she woke up, as if she’d been asleep forever. Her body lit up with desire. She scrunched the fabric of his shirt, and she leaned closer so that their lower bodies were aligned. Growler’s mouth was firm and sure as it moved over hers. His tongue traced the seam of her mouth, and she opened, allowing him entrance.

His fingers slid from her cheeks around the back of her head to cup it, holding her still so that he could deepen the kiss. Nothing mattered to her but being held by him. Having his strong arms anchor her to him.

The pop of the sauce and the sting of hot liquid hitting her arm drew her back to the present. To the fact of how close they were to where she'd been preparing the meal. As if he could sense her withdrawing, Growler eased his mouth away from hers, lingering for a moment before putting a little space between them.

“You okay?” he asked as his thumb stroked her cheek lightly.

“More than.” A rush of uncertainty washed over her. “What about you?”

Did he have regrets?

Was he now wishing that he hadn't kissed her?

Not that he was giving any outward indication that he was having second thoughts.

“I'm good.”

Two words spoken with a surety that eased her uncertainty.

Astrid nodded. “Right. I—um—I should finish dinner.”

Growler dropped his arms from her face and stepped back, not far, but enough for her to be able to turn back to the sauce. Giving it a quick stir, she was relieved to see that it hadn't burned and stuck to the bottom of the pan.

“Do you have a strainer so I can fix this pasta?”

While she'd been checking her sauce, Growler had switched the burner off and had his hands, the ones that had been holding her only moments ago, around the saucepan's handle.

Astrid canted her head to the sink. “It's in there ready for use.”

Part of being efficient in the kitchen for her was to have everything ready to go so that she wasn't scrambling at the last minute to find a plate or, in this case, a strainer to finish preparing the meal.

Together, they worked in a companionable silence and moved around the kitchen with ease, as if they'd cooked a

hundred meals together, not one.

“Do you want something to drink? Wine? Water? Soda?” she asked as she set two steaming plates of pasta on the round table in the eat-in nook in her kitchen—a place she’d always used with her father but had taken to eating her meals at the island bench after his death.

It had been natural for her to walk over there and set the food down. A moment of melancholy and sadness hit her that it wasn’t her dad she was eating with, but it quickly passed when Growler brushed past her, his fresh, citrus cologne teasing her senses.

“I’m good with a soda,” Growler stated as he changed direction and headed back to the refrigerator. “What can I get you?”

For a second she was confused—then she remembered what she’d asked him. “Soda sounds good too.”

Astrid sat and waited until Growler joined her at the table, the scene so domestic that she wanted to do it over and over. It hit her then....

I’ve been lonely.

Without even realizing, apparently. After her father’s death, she’d thrown herself into her work, to help deal with the grief, but now with Growler sitting in the chair that her father had always occupied, she could acknowledge that her life had been empty. That she’d been going through the motions. But just because Growler had kissed her and was sharing her house at the moment, didn’t mean it was permanent.

He’d told her she was a job. A job that would be over the moment the danger surrounding her had passed.

How would it pass though, when they had no clue who was after her?

How could they find someone when what she’d witnessed had been sketchy at best? When the time had come to describe the man she’d seen, her mind had remained mostly blank.

Again, she wished that she hadn't gone to the homeless shelter that day. Or had stayed longer, but she couldn't change the past or the circumstances that now surrounded her.

Plus, if she hadn't gone there, she wouldn't have met Growler.

"You're not eating. What's wrong, Comet?" Growler's fingertips touched hers. A simple, sweet gesture that connected them without being overbearing.

Comet.

The nickname was cute and was growing on her. Should she tell him what was troubling her? Would he like this job to be over quickly? That was something she didn't know and didn't want to think about too much right at this moment. If there was any progress to be made and if—the long shot that it was—they were going to take things further than a kiss, she needed to be honest with him. Needed to let him know what she was thinking and feeling—not everything, mind you—just certain things.

"I was thinking about how we're effectively chasing a ghost. We have no idea who is after me. Nothing to go on and nowhere to start."

Growler moved his hand so that his was covering hers and not just touching it. The warmth from his palm heated her skin and chased away the worry. "I'm not going to lie, it is hard with what we have to go on. But trust me when I say that we are going to do everything we can to get to the bottom of this and eliminate the threat."

His voice had hardened to steel as he spoke. The conviction in his words gave her hope that he was right and that they would find who was after her. Astrid decided she didn't want to know what he meant by "eliminate." It conjured up many images and thoughts, some not very pleasant.

"I believe you," she said, wanting him to hear the truth in her words.

"It may not seem like a lot, but I know Cass will have obtained footage from the highway cameras and will be trying

to get as much information as she can about who was driving the car.”

“How can she do that?” Astrid was surprised that Cass would have that much pull with traffic management to obtain what she needed.

Growler smiled, a confident, smug one. “Cass can do anything. I’m not sure where she got her skills, but I’ve been involved in situations where she’s managed to pull things out of a digital hat that not even a magician can do. I don’t know how Ox found her, but she’s an asset to Alliez, and her skills have helped my former teammates out when trouble found their partners.”

Astrid’s mind twirled, like the spaghetti around her fork, at the information he’d just given her. There were a ton of questions she wanted to ask but kept them to herself. If Growler was convinced Cass could help them, then she would believe him and pray that in a few days, this horror movie she’d been dumped in the middle of would be over.

Chapter Fourteen

GROWLER STRODE INTO THE OFFICE OF ALLIEZ SMILING AT Yolanda, who was on a phone call. His skin itched and he wished he was at the studio with Astrid, but he needed to have a meeting with Ox and Cass to find out if they'd made any progress.

The only reason he was here was because Angel had agreed to watch Astrid. Otherwise, Growler would've dragged Astrid to the office with him, where he knew she'd be safe.

Stopping by the staff room, he made himself a coffee and grabbed a donut from the box that was sitting on the counter before heading to the conference room. He stopped in the doorway. Irish and Cass were sitting at the table. Irish had the back of his palm resting against Cass's forehead as if checking for a fever. Cass's eyes were closed, but she was leaning close to Irish.

Growler felt as though he was interrupting a private moment and quietly twisted so that his back rested against the wall by the door.

During his short time with Alliez, he hadn't had much to do with Irish, but he'd heard whispers about him from his former teammates. How he'd been dishonorably discharged from the Army for a situation involving his former Delta team. How he'd been the only one to come back alive from a mission. Only the truth of what happened on that particular one was locked behind military walls and in Irish's soul.

If Irish was that heartless, would he be as gentle as he had just been with Cass? Clearly, Ox believed in the man and Growler trusted his boss.

Deciding that he'd given the couple enough time to do whatever it was they were doing, Growler straightened away from the wall and walked into the room. This time, Irish was standing by the window, and Cass was tapping away on her keyboard.

"Morning, how are you both?" he asked jovially as he sat at the table.

"Hey, Callum," Cass said, looking up briefly from her screen before turning her attention back to it.

"Growler," said Irish.

He was a man of few words, his blue eyes intense and shadowed as if he were hiding a lot of secrets. Perhaps he was. As a Delta, Irish would've seen and done things that even he, as a former SEAL, hadn't been tasked to do.

"Good morning, everyone. Irish didn't expect you here, but it's good to see you." Ox breezed into the room, carrying two tablets, placing one in front of Growler. "Should've given this to you before you started your job with Astrid. Sorry. I've got no excuses except that I messed up."

Growler took the device, surprised at Ox's candidness. "All good. It's been a hectic few days. Things have happened quickly and unexpectedly."

“Your thumbprint has been programmed into the device. All you need to do is press the button on the side to wake it up and then place your thumb in the middle of the screen,” Cass commented as she sat back in her seat.

Growler followed her instructions, and the tablet unlocked and the Alliez logo popped up on the screen before fading away to become the background. He expected the company to have some hi-tech gadgets, but this was impressive. “Are you going to give me some lessons on how to work this?” he asked Cass.

The woman smiled. Her eyes, hidden by dark frames, glittered mischievously. “I will and afterward there will be a test to make sure you’ve taken it all in.”

Even though Growler figured Cass was joking, his stomach turned a little at the thought of being quizzed about how well he could handle the device. “Right. Do I get to take notes?”

“Cass is teasing. She’s programmed these tablets so that it almost knows what you’re thinking before you’re thinking it,” Ox interjected.

“Now that’s a scary thought,” Growler muttered but studied the screen, noticing the folder with Astrid’s name under it. Touching the icon, it opened and listed Astrid’s details, like home address and phone number. The studio details. It also listed her parents’ names and their dates of death. All the information he’d seen in hard copy form.

“Everything we have so far is in that folder you’ve opened,” Cass said. “When I update it with anything I’ve found that’s pertinent to the case, or if you do, everyone who has access to the file will be notified via email.”

“Who has access?” he asked.

“Everyone. It’s a safety measure in case anything happens while on a job. Everyone is able to see what has been happening and, therefore, able to get help to you as quickly as possible.”

Growler liked the idea of having backup at hand if things went to shit. At least when he was a SEAL, he was part of a team and someone always had his six. This new job, he was basically on a solo mission, having no one to rely on but himself, his skills, and his wits.

“I take it I need to have this on me at all times?” As much as he liked knowing his back was covered, carrying around a tablet all the time was going to be a pain in the ass.

“Not necessarily. If you give me your phone, I can load the same app onto it. Angel leaves his tablet in the car in a lock box when he’s on a job and updates it every night. Irish—” Cass glanced over to where he still stood by the window. “He prefers not to use a tablet.”

“Which we have had many discussions about,” Ox interjected.

“I use my phone. Isn’t that why we have the app there too?” Irish countered.

Growler watched the byplay between his boss and colleague. There was no animosity in fact it seemed as if they’d had this conversation many times.

“And you don’t give me nearly enough updates. You always do a report after the fact, which doesn’t help anyone if something happens to you,” Cass admonished.

There was also a hint of...annoyance, anger... and something that Growler couldn’t put his finger on, but an unspoken message was being relayed.

Irish shrugged again. “I can look after myself.”

Cass rolled her eyes and looked as if she was about to say more when Ox held up his hand. “Enough. Not the time or place. Let’s turn our focus on the task at hand—the chase Growler was involved in. What’s the latest, Cass?”

For a moment, it looked as though Cass was going to argue more with Irish, but after a heartbeat of intense glaring between the two of them, Cass returned her attention to her computer—very interesting indeed.

Was there something going on between Irish and Cass? Or did they dislike each other? Growler couldn't determine which one was right.

"Do you need me here?" Irish asked before Cass could say anything.

Ox sighed. "It would be ideal if you were here so that you're familiar with what's going on, but it's fine. Go."

Irish nodded and left the room. There were a lot of questions Growler wanted to ask about the last fifteen minutes. What was the story with Irish? He seemed to prefer to be an island rather than a team player. Could Growler count on him to have his six?

"Whatever you're thinking, change it. No matter how it may seem, Irish is solid and will always be there when you need him." Ox stared him down, and Growler held his boss's gaze.

Again, he had to trust that Ox wouldn't put anyone in unnecessary danger. "Copy that," Growler responded.

"Okay, let's get this meeting back on track. Cass, over to you." Ox sat back and tapped his fingers on the table. Not in an impatient manner but as if the action soothed him.

"Thanks. So, here's what I've pieced together so far." Cass tapped at her computer and part of the wall separated to show a large television mounted on the wall.

The screen lit up to display four separate images. All a little grainy, making it hard to make out exactly who and what was happening. With a few clicks, the images cleared up and Growler could make out him and Astrid in her vehicle. The silver sedan that had been chasing them was on another screen.

"Fuck." Growler thumped the table. "It's impossible to make out the guy's face. His cap is way low and has sunglasses on."

During the chase, he hadn't paid much attention to the guy driving, except acknowledging that he was following them. All Growler's focus had been on making sure he and Astrid were safe. Not to mention the other people on the highway

were as well. No innocent deserved to be hurt—he'd seen plenty of that while on his SEAL missions.

“I know, but”—a shadow of a smile crossed Cass's face —“we have this.”

Another picture flashed on the screen. It was the image of the guy's hand outside of the car, pointing his gun at Astrid's car. The image seared itself into Growler's mind. The moment when things could've gone very differently from how it had had been captured forever.

What did Cass mean when she said they had something?

Growler leaned forward, studying the image as if he could make out the very thing Cass was alluding to. All he could come up with was that the man held a Glock.

“You're going to have to enlighten me here, Cass, 'cause I see nothing of significance except the make of the gun. Is that supposed to give me a clue about who this person is?” Growler grumbled after a few minutes.

He heard Cass tapping at her keyboard again, and the sound was getting annoying. He didn't have time for games. Why couldn't she give the information straight out? What was with the guessing game? Was this what she always did? If so, how did Ox stand for it? What he wanted was for her to relay what she'd found out in a quick and precise manner so that they could decide the next course of action.

Growler sat back, attempting to quell the annoyance thrumming inside of him, as the image on the screen changed and all that was displayed was the perp's tattooed arm holding the weapon.

“This right here...” A circle appeared around one of the tattoos. A circle with two intersecting diamonds. It wasn't huge and blended in with the man's other ink. “...I think is a gang tattoo.”

“Which gang?” Growler queried, impressed that Cass was able to pick it out.

Cass sat back. “That's the thing. It's not one I'm familiar with. It's not in the database I've created. But I know I've seen

it before. Somewhere,” she said almost to herself her eyes dulled as if she was lost in her memories.

“If it’s not in the database, how can you be sure it’s a gang symbol?” Growler asked, trying to ease her discomfort.

“Just a feeling. I swear it’s one I’ve seen before.”

As someone who trusted their instincts on numerous occasions, Growler wasn’t going to dismiss Cass’s. He would respect her and whatever feelings she had. “I’m sure it will come to you.”

Cass smiled, but it looked strained to him. “Maybe. Anyway, it’s something we can move forward with. Maybe the police are familiar with it.”

“I’ll speak to Julian, our FBI contact, and see if he has any information for me.” Ox made a note on his tablet.

“Can I get a copy of this tattoo? I’ll see if Astrid recognizes it. I’m not sure she will, but it’s worth checking with her.” Growler looked at the tablet, wondering how he could make a note to add to the file.

“I’ll add it to your working file so you have it. And I haven’t forgotten you need a rundown of how it all works.” Cass flicked him a smile. “We can do that now.”

Growler nodded. “Thanks, appreciate it.”

While the meeting hadn’t been super productive in terms of getting to the bottom of the mystery of who was chasing Astrid, they at least now had a starting block—albeit a vague one, but from little clues, big ones grew until the mystery was solved.



THIS WAS a call Pedro didn’t want to make, but he knew he had to. Was he taking the easy route by not doing a video? Yeah, but he didn’t care. He still had a plan. A good plan, and while the chase didn’t go as he expected, he’d been able to get out of the situation without being identified.

So what if she'd picked up a guard? It just meant he needed to make adjustments. It would be easier if Enrico and Andrés were with him, but Mr. Rook had wanted them back in Mexico. He hadn't heard from them, and Pedro wasn't going to allow himself to wonder why communication had stopped between them all.

Connecting the call, he put the phone to his ear and gazed out over the ocean. The wind had whipped up considerably since he'd arrived, and waves crashed onto the sand.

"I hope you've got news for me, Pedro."

Mr. Rook didn't spare niceties when it came to business—he wanted answers and action.

"The problem still exists, but I'm getting closer to eliminating her." Not a total fabrication. He had come close.

"Not what I wanted to hear. She's high profile. This needs to be done in a way as to draw no attention to us. To me. I don't trust you not to be able to do that, considering I heard chatter that she was involved in a car chase."

Pedro shouldn't have been surprised that Mr. Rook knew about the chase. He had numerous people on his payroll, including police, judges, and others who could help him with anything he needed. All Mr. Rook had to do was blink, and he could get information on anyone at any time.

"I was playing with her. Letting her know that her perfect life isn't so perfect."

"I'm not here for you to play games. Javier is on his way. He'll be working with you, and you will listen to him."

Pedro cursed silently. Javier was an asshole and Mr. Rook's right-hand man. The chances of Pedro making it back to Mexico in one piece took a left turn.

"Understood." He wasn't going to argue with Mr. Rook, but he would prove that Javier's presence was unnecessary. Nor was he going to hand over the reins of this job—it was his, not Javier's. He would make sure Astrid Conway was out of the picture before Javier arrived.

To make that happen, he needed to get to Astrid Conway as soon as he could. Not tomorrow. Or next week. Pedro had limited hours now to eliminate the bitch and ensure his position in Mr. Rook's organization was protected.

Chapter Fifteen

“HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN WORKING AT ALLIEZ?” ASTRID asked Angel, who was driving her back to her place. Growler hadn’t been available all day, and while she didn’t mind Angel, he wasn’t Growler. He didn’t give her that same sense of safety that Growler gave her.

“Couple years. I was a SEAL before I joined.” Angel indicated as he turned down her street. The drive home from the studio had been uneventful and for that, she was grateful.

“Were you on the same team as Growler?” she asked, hoping Angel would be able to give her a little insight into what Growler had been like while he’d been in the Navy.

“Nah, I was based on the east coast.”

There went her idea to find out about Growler. “Did you like being a SEAL?” she asked instead.

Angel shrugged. “Like everything, it had its moments. But I’m glad I did it, and I know what we did helped a lot of people. Here we are.” He pulled into her driveway and cut the engine, the subject clearly closed in his mind as well.

Before she had a chance to release her seatbelt, the door opened, and there stood Growler. Her heart skipped a beat, and warmth trickled around her body. She liked being greeted by him. Liked knowing that he had to have been watching for her arrival. Had he been waiting outside? He must’ve.

“Hey,” she breathed out, anything else seeming impossible to say.

Beside her, she heard Angel huff out a quiet laugh. “Here’s your girl, all safe and sound.” He directed his words to Growler, but she felt there was a deeper meaning to them, as if he was assuring *her* she was safe and sound now that she was with Growler.

“Thanks. Any troubles?” Growler asked gruffly, holding out his hand for her. Astrid took it and stood beside Growler while he continued his conversation with Angel. She couldn’t help but notice that he hadn’t released her hand.

“No, everything went well. Got a good feed out of it as well.” Angel patted his belly.

Astrid looked up at Growler, wanting him to know that if he’d been there, she would have fed him as well. “I normally take the extra I cook to the homeless shelter, but after my last visit there.” She lifted a shoulder in a “you know why” gesture. “I let the crew eat it. They don’t normally, so they were more than happy today to sample my food.”

Growler nodded. “Good decision. Thanks again, Angel.”

“Anytime. Take it easy.” He started the engine, and Growler closed her door, guiding her back a couple of steps as Angel reversed out of her driveway. The second the vehicle hit the street, Growler turned them toward the house.

“What did you do today?” she asked once they were inside.

“Went into the office and reviewed the case with Cass and Ox. Went over the footage she had of the chase. Checked out the parking lot near the shelter.”

Astrid shivered as memories of their near miss and the event that started this ride she was on swept over her. Surprisingly, she hadn't had any nightmares about the chase ordeal. Maybe it was because of Growler being in the house with her. Or the memory of the kiss they'd shared that had soothed her frayed nerves. Either way, she didn't want to relive either episode, but she knew she would have to.

“What did you find out?” she asked. While she may not think she wanted to know how things were progressing, it was for her own safety and well-being that she kept herself up to speed with what was happening.

“Come outside. I've got some drinks and snacks set up, and we can go over a couple of things.”

If Growler had set up a snack station for them, it couldn't be all that bad. Maybe it was a celebration, and while she'd been cooking and smiling at a camera, he'd been able to track down the asshole who was scaring her and had dealt with them. That would make her very happy, but then again, if it was all over, it would mean that she wouldn't need personal security anymore and Growler would go and help someone else. Astrid didn't like that idea much at all.

How could she not want the threat to her life gone?

She should be happy it was a possibility. And she was. It was just that she liked having Growler around, even though she'd initially balked at the idea. If he hadn't been with her when she was being followed, then the outcome could've been very different.

“Hey, Comet?” Warm fingers brushed up and down her arms, pulling her from the vortex her thoughts were creating. “Talk to me. Sit.”

He held out a chair for her. On the small glass-topped table in her courtyard sat a pitcher with lemonade, and he'd created

a charcuterie board for them—which looked exactly like one she'd prepared in one of her first videos she'd ever made.

“This is impressive. You been holding some culinary skills back from me?” She popped a grape in her mouth.

“I can't lie. I copied you.” Growler sat down and poured her a drink.

Astrid laughed. Some of the tension that had shrouded her only a few minutes ago, lifted a fraction. “I thought I recognized it. You did a good job.”

“I had a good teacher.” He winked, and fissures of pleasure pooled low in her belly.

For the next few minutes, they ate. This was the best way to finish a day. Thoughts from earlier returned. Would this be the last time she was going to spend the evening with Growler?

“What's going through your mind?” Growler scooted his chair closer to hers, his knee brushing against hers. “A minute ago, you were relaxed. Now you're tense.”

Of course, he'd pick up on her change of demeanor. The guy was a former SEAL. She was sure part of his training was to be able to read people to help get the information they needed to complete their missions.

“When I got home, you said you had found out some information. But then you blow me away with this spread.” Astrid waved her arm over the table. “I don't know what to think. Is the threat over? Or is the news really bad, and this was a way to soften the blow?”

Was it the case he wanted to talk about, or was it something more?

Was it her? Was he about to tell her that Angel would be her new bodyguard?

Her stomach dropped at the thought. She didn't want that. She wanted Growler.

Astrid couldn't voice what her real fears were because she had no idea how Growler felt toward her. All she knew was

she was beginning to fall for him. How ridiculous and unbelievable considering she'd only known him for a short time. Not to mention the circumstances of why they were spending so much time together.

Although her dad had told her he'd known the moment he saw her mother at a restaurant with her friends that she was it for him. It had taken him a few days before he convinced her to go on a date, but after that, they were inseparable.

As if he could sense her insecurities, Growler took her hand in his, the touch grounding her. "The threat is still there. I didn't get any answers as to who is after you. As I suspected, there was nothing at the scene of the murder, but I do feel better having seen it in person and not in the police report. But Cass did find something that hopefully will lead us to who the person is."

Was it wrong to feel relieved that they hadn't found who was chasing her? Wanting the threat to still continue so Growler didn't leave her? Yes, to some people, they would think she was losing her mind. To her, it was an opportunity to get to know the man next to her better.

She'd heard what he'd said before he'd kissed her the previous night. How she was a job, but she wanted to be more than that to him and she planned to show him.

Pushing those thoughts aside for her to examine later and to plan her next step, she focused on the other part of what he'd said. "What did Cass find?"

Growler reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, fiddling with the screen for a few seconds before turning it to face her. "Does this mean anything to you? Do you recognize it?"

Astrid studied the image. It was a picture of a tattoo. It wasn't big in comparison to the others that she could see in the picture. There was nothing remarkable about it. In fact, it had the feel of a playing card but without the number. "I don't recall seeing this anywhere or on anyone."

A stab of helplessness pierced her. Nothing she could recall from the incident was helpful. She hadn't been able to give a full description of the people who'd been attacking the man.

Wait.

Astrid gasped and closed her eyes, bringing an image she'd buried deep into the far recesses of her mind forward. The man lying on the pavement, blood seeping out of the wounds in his chest.

The memory shifted and went from a photo still to a slow-moving movie. Her hand reaching down to lift his wrist to feel for a pulse, and there it was, something that she hadn't been able to recall when the police had asked her.

Astrid snapped her eyes open and found Growler's dark brown ones staring at her intensely. "The man who was killed, he had the same tattoo."



ALL THE TIME Astrid had had her eyes closed, Growler had wanted to reach out and pull her into his arms. She had no idea how expressive her face was. How her brow had furrowed deeply. How her lips had fallen open into a tiny *O* of surprise. How her fingers had clenched into fists until the whites of her knuckles appeared.

But the pain she'd gone through had given him information that they hadn't had before. "You're sure?"

Growler believed her. He had no reason not to, but he needed to ensure that Astrid was positive and that she hadn't transferred the information from the photo he'd shown her to her memory of the killing. The brain was an amazing device and could make things happen that most people didn't understand. It could distort memories so that what one person thought had happened was completely different from what had actually occurred.

"I am. I know it seems convenient, but I *know* he had that tattoo on his wrist.

“I believe you.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips against her forehead, desire firing to life from the small contact. “I need to call Cass and let her know. I have no idea if the body is still in the morgue or if it’s been released because the police have finished with their investigations. Either way, with her skills and contacts, she should be able to get photos of the victim and confirm what you told me.”

“Why didn’t I remember the tattoo until now?” Her voice was a combination of frustration and fear.

Growler framed her face and waited until she was looking at him. “You remembered. That’s all that matters. It’s not unusual for people to be shown something that unlocks a memory. That’s what happened. The brain has ways of protecting us, and yours protected you until you were ready to see it. That was today.”

Astrid’s hands covered his, strengthening the connection between them. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“I am too.”

Growler lost himself in her gorgeous hazel eyes, the gold flecks on the outer circle of her iris more prominent. His attention dipped to her lips, the plumpness of them tempting him to taste her again. As much as he’d tried to push the kiss as far as possible from his mind, it had remained in the forefront, reminding him of how wonderful it had been to hold her.

“Callum?” she whispered his name, and he couldn’t resist her. Couldn’t resist the pull any longer.

He should try, though. Allowing his feelings for the woman in front of him to grow could lead to danger. To him not being fully present and putting her in danger instead of keeping it from her.

Or it could strengthen your resolve to do whatever it takes to keep her safe. To be extra vigilant.

Was his inner voice right? Growler recalled conversations between his former teammates and how they all took that extra moment to survey their surroundings, to make sure that every

possible angle had been covered, so that they could get back to their women safely. Instead of softening their skills, it seemed to sharpen them, make them even better SEALs.

“You tempt me so much,” he said as she shifted her hands from where they’d been resting against his face to his chest.

“The feeling is very mutual.”

Growler groaned and gave up trying to do the right thing and pulled her so that she was sitting on his lap. Her arms looped around his neck, bringing her chest against his. He much preferred that to her hands on him. “This could complicate things,” he murmured as he closed the distance between them.

“Complicate me, I don’t care,” Astrid responded.

All thoughts flew out of his head as their lips connected. He adjusted the angle of his head so that he could deepen the kiss. Her taste was intoxicating, and he couldn’t get enough of it, sweet from the strawberries she’d eaten. Tart from the lemonade she’d drunk. He wanted to devour her. To taste every single inch of her body. Trace all her curves and commit them to memory. His body hardened and strained against his trousers, liking the road his mind was traveling down.

Astrid pulled away, and he wondered if he’d pushed her too hard. “How about we take this inside?”

There was no questioning what she meant—if they went inside, they would end up in her bedroom. In her bed—naked. The moment they did that, the goalposts would shift in their relationship. There would be no going back.

“Is this what you want?” he asked, needing to know that he wasn’t jumping to conclusions.

“I want this so much.” Astrid pressed her cheek against his and whispered. “I want *you* desperately.”

If possible, he got even harder. Adjusting his hold so that he could scoop her up, he stood, and she let out a little yelp of surprise before snuggling into his hold. Movement wasn’t possible because nothing had ever felt so right as this moment did. Astrid in his arms, trusting him to look after her. That he

could do and not just keep her from danger. He would take the trust she was giving him and show her just how important she was to him. Growler was going to give her a night she wouldn't forget.

Chapter Sixteen

ASTRID MELTED INTO GROWLER'S EMBRACE AS HE STRODE toward her bedroom. Tonight, she wanted to forget the danger that lurked in the shadows. All she wanted was to lose herself in the vortex of desire that swirled around her.

They entered her bedroom, and she was glad she'd taken the time to make her bed that morning. Normally she left it unmade. Why bother when she was going to get back in it a few hours later? Of course, having the comforter pulled back would make things so much easier. All Growler would have to do would be to lay her down, shed his clothes, help her get out of hers, and then his body could cover hers.

A shiver of anticipation swept over her, and she couldn't hide her reaction from him.

"You good?" he asked as he sat her on the bed, concern mingling with the desire in his eyes.

“No.” She sucked on her bottom lip, hoping she looked alluring and not ridiculous. Growler’s attention zeroed in on her mouth.

“What’s wrong?” His voice pitched to that growly tone again and need enveloped her, coalescing in a pool between her legs.

“You’re wearing too many clothes.” Her index fingers hooked through his belt loops and pulled him toward her, the momentum causing her to fall back on the bed.

A warm chuckle curled around her. “I can definitely fix that, but I’m not rushing this, Comet. I’m going to kiss every inch of skin I expose. Then I’m going to taste you, give you so much pleasure you’re going to weep. And when you take my cock into your sweet pussy, it’s going to be heaven. Tonight is one you won’t ever forget.”

Astrid was officially a puddle of goo. Who knew dirty talk could turn her on so much? Or that Growler could talk like that.

Her body flamed with the need to experience every single moment of what he described. “I want everything you just said.”

Growler smiled, one that lit his dreamy brown eyes up and caused the tiny laugh lines in the corner of his eyes to be more prominent.

I did that to him. I made him that happy.

“It will be my pleasure.” Growler leaned down and covered her body, his mouth finding hers.

Astrid wrapped her arms around his wide shoulders and sank into the kiss. Wanting to be consumed by the heat that they generated. She traced the ridges of his spine down until she reached the place where his shirt was tucked into his pants. Clutching the material, she scrunched it up until it released from his pants and she could touch his hot skin.

How she ached to have his bare skin touching hers. He wanted to go slow, while she wanted hard and fast. Wanted to rip their clothes off and have him sink into her.

Growler pulled back and yanked his shirt off. “I’m giving you this, but only this.”

For a second, she didn’t know what he meant until he took her top off and hauled her up so that her breasts, still encased in their lacy bra, were squashed against his chest. “How did you know?” she asked, reveling in the sensation. It was better than she imagined.

“Because I want to feel you against me as much as you do.”

He nipped his way down her neck, her skin tingling in the wake of his exploration. Any thought to ask him to elaborate further disappeared as he gently pushed her down on the bed, his fingers finding the button at the top of her pants. His mouth created havoc on her breast, while he slowly pulled the zipper down.

Somehow, some way, he kept his attention on her breasts but also managed to divest her of her trousers so that all she wore now was her underwear.

“More,” she murmured as he transferred his attention to her other breast.

“So much more,” he agreed against her chest.

Astrid lost herself as Growler worshiped her breasts, her fingers digging into his shoulders as she writhed beneath him. The fabric of his pants brushing against her thighs caused even more sensations to come alive inside of her.

She wanted him naked. Wanted to close her fingers around his hard length. Wanted to guide him into her. “You need to lose the rest of your clothes,” she moaned.

Growler lifted his head, a cheeky smile on his face. He looked so carefree. Astrid wanted to make him smile like that all the time. “Is that right?”

“Yes.” She reached between them and found the button of his pants, her fingers fumbling around the plastic disc in her haste to get it undone.

A large hand closed over hers, halting her attempts. “I’ve got this.” Growler pressed another kiss against her mouth before he hauled himself from the bed. “Watch me,” he demanded.

Astrid couldn’t think of anything more she wanted to do. “You don’t have to ask me twice,” she responded as she scooted back on the bed and raised herself up on her elbows.

Slowly, Growler worked the button through the small slit in the fabric. Who knew such a small move could be so erotic? Or maybe it was because of the person doing the action. Whatever it was, she was here for it and more—like him releasing the zipper.

Her wish was answered, and the sound of the metal teeth disengaging was the sweetest sound she’d ever heard. Astrid was sure that he was tormenting her by taking his time. Heat pulled low in her belly, her panties getting damper with every passing second.

As he pushed the fabric down, she got her first glimpse of the power thighs she’d touched. Her mouth watered spying the outline of his hard length in his tight boxer briefs. Without thought, she moved to the edge of the bed, kneeling so that his pecs were at her eye level. Reaching out, she touched the hard muscles, following the ridges and valleys of his six-pack. Smoothing a finger down one side of the *V* that disappeared into the remaining thin black covering he wore.

“You are so beautiful,” she breathed out, leaning forward to place a kiss just above his belly button.

He hooked a finger under her chin, lifting it so that she had no option but to look him in the eye. “I want you so much, Comet.”

“Me too.” Reaching behind her, she pulled her bra off, then reached down and removed her panties, before lying on the bed, as bare as the day she was born. “I’m yours to take.”

Growler followed suit and removed his boxers, his cock springing out. “And I’m yours to take,” he murmured as he climbed on the bed and captured her mouth with his.

Astrid gave herself over to the kiss, losing herself in the myriad of sensations his touch brought to life. The musky scent of their arousal swirled around them.

Growler kissed his way down her body until he reached her pussy. Her body throbbed with need for him to kiss her there.

“Taste me, please,” she begged.

“Oh, I plan to.”

Astrid arched off the bed when his mouth closed over her, his tongue darting between her slick folds. “God, yes.”

Words weren't possible after that. She gave herself over to the beauty of the moment. The way his mouth worshipped her clit while his fingers stroked lazily in and out. Heat consumed her, and she was sure she was going to explode into a ball of flames. Her fingers gripped the back of his head, keeping him between her legs. Sensation after wonderful sensation possessed her until she couldn't fight it any longer, and her body shook with the violence of her release.

Growler lapped at her, never letting her fall from the high his mouth, tongue and fingers had created in her. Astrid panted hard, sure that she was about to pass out. As if he could tell that he'd pushed her to the limit, Growler pressed a soft kiss against her thigh.

“You good?” he asked as he lay next to her, his finger drawing lazy circles on her stomach.

“Mhmm.” That was all she could manage at the moment. Her brain was mush.

Growler chuckled. “We've only just started, baby.”

Before she could form a response, he was back to kissing his way down her body, avoiding her pulsing clit. Part of her was disappointed, but the other part was glad for a few more seconds where she could put herself back together again.

As she was catching her breath, she was aware that Growler had moved away from her. She went to moan her annoyance when she heard the crinkle of a wrapper.

Protection.

At least one of them still had the good sense to think about the consequences of what they were doing.

Astrid opened her arms to him when he came over her, lowering the bottom half of his body against hers. The hard shaft of his cock resting on her thigh.

“Ready?” he questioned.

“More than.”

And she was. There was nothing more she wanted than for him to fill her up. To take her to the place his incredible mouth had taken her.

Growler took possession of her hand and guided it to where he rested. Her fingers closed around him, and she hummed low in her throat as she stroked up and down.

“You’re so thick,” she murmured, anticipation building at how well he was going to fill her.

“All for you, Comet,” he whispered as he guided himself to her entrance and then slowly, ever so slowly, slid into her.

Her breath caught in her throat until he landed balls deep in her, and then she sighed out her happiness.

“You feel so good, Callum,” she whispered as she lifted her hips, encouraging him to move.

“So do you.”

Like when his mouth had been on her clit, words were impossible as Growler began to move. His pace steady and languorous. They moved together effortlessly, as if they did this all the time, and it wasn’t their first time together.

Astrid gripped his shoulders, welcoming the quickening of his movements. Heat built from their connection until it spread out and took root in the depths of her soul. Her body tensed as her second orgasm built within her. As if sensing how close she was, Growler slid an arm beneath her hips, lifting her a little so that he could deepen the angle of his penetration.

“Oh, yes,” she moaned as the tightness in her muscles grew.

Astrid dug her heels into the mattress as her body bowed, her breath caught in her throat before exploding out of her in a scream as her climax hit her. Like before, Growler kept stroking in and out, prolonging her release until he shouted out her name as he orgasmed.

Seconds, or minutes later, Astrid didn't know, all sense of time had disappeared the second she'd landed on her bed, Growler rolled to the side, tucking her close to him. Her hand rested over his chest, his heart still thumping hard beneath her palm.

Tiredness swept over her and she closed her eyes, savoring being held by the man who captured more of her heart with every passing hour.

Chapter Seventeen

THE STALE SMELL OF CIGARETTES LINGERED IN THE AIR. PEDRO had the means to book himself into a much fancier and cleaner hotel than the dump he was staying at, but he wanted to keep a low profile. No one took notice of anyone when staying in a place like this. Most of the “guests” were either hookers servicing their clients or dealers making deals.

The owners always turned a blind eye to what was going on. All they wanted was their money. They knew what was best for them—which was why this was perfect for him.

He paced around the room, annoyed and angry that he hadn't been able to get close to the Conway bitch at all that day and now time had run out. Javier was going to be in LA in two hours, and he had to go pick the asshole up from the airport.

Or did he?

“What if I didn’t pick him up?” he mused out loud. “What if I made the asshole make his own arrangements? He can catch a fucking cab or drive share for all I care.”

Javier wasn’t going to be staying at this hotel, Pedro knew that for sure. Javier would be staying in one that smelled nicer, where the rooms were cleaned every day and the guests were actual guests on vacation or businessmen. No way would Javier lower himself to stay in this dump—which, as far as Pedro was concerned—was a huge mistake. The guy could be caught on camera and identified.

Although maybe that would be a good thing. An idea formed in Pedro’s head, and a smile slowly stretched his lips.

Yes, that’s what he could do. It made perfect sense now. Mr. Rook may think that sending Javier was going to be a good move, but in fact, Pedro was going to make sure that Javier didn’t make it back to Mr. Rook’s side. Then he would become the man Mr. Rook would rely on.

He would be the one everyone would be afraid of.

Chapter Eighteen

THE SIZZLE AND AROMA OF BACON HAD GROWLER'S STOMACH grumbling in appreciation as he cracked eggs into another pan. Astrid was still sleeping upstairs. It had been hard to leave her, as he'd wanted to continue to hold her. But he needed to get some perspective on what he'd done the night before.

No way did he regret any of it, but it changed everything. Changed the dynamics between them. In a good way, for him at least. He wasn't sure how Astrid felt now.

"Something smells good."

Just the sound of her sleep-laden voice had his body hardening immediately. "Hey, I thought I'd cook for you for a change, seeing as you always cook for everyone else."

Was it rude keeping his back to her? Possibly, but he needed a few precious seconds to get his body under control.

"I don't mind doing it. I love it. Can I do anything?"

He caught the slight hint of uncertainty in her voice, and he mentally kicked himself for giving the impression that he was ignoring her. Turning off the head beneath the eggs and bacon, he turned and his breath caught in his throat.

Astrid was wearing his shirt. He pulled on his pants when he'd gotten out of bed, not bothering with his shirt. Now he was glad that he hadn't.

"That looks better on you than it does on me," he murmured as he closed the distance between them.

Sleeping with her hadn't cooled his ardor for her, if anything, it only increased it. He wanted more of her. More of her kisses. More of her hands tracing the ridges of his body. More of her sighs and cries of completion.

He placed his hands on her hips, and hers immediately went to his chest. Could she feel the way his heart raced at her simple touch? Feel the way his body was hardening with her being so close to him? Feel his desire, which was threatening to sear his soul?

Needing that connection, he lowered his head and captured her lips with his, tasting the hint of mint on her tongue. Like him, she'd cleaned her teeth when she'd gotten up.

Breaking the kiss, he rested his forehead against hers. "Good morning, Comet."

"Morning, Callum."

Damn, he really did prefer it when she used his given name, something he honestly never thought he'd like.

"How about you take a seat, and I'll get you your breakfast? We don't need to go to the studio today, do we?" He'd already consulted the schedule she'd given him, but that had been a few days ago so anything could've changed. Not to mention he hadn't gone with her to the studio the previous day, Angel had.

"Nope. I'm free until Monday."

Growler placed the plate in front of where she sat at the small table in her eat-in kitchen and sat opposite her. "You up

for a road trip?”

He wasn't sure when the idea to take her to see his former teammates had fully taken possession of his mind, but the more he'd thought about it, the more he liked it. It would be good for Astrid to get away from Los Angeles. Away from the trouble that had been hanging around her like a rotten potato.

“I could be. Where are you thinking we should go?”

Swallowing his mouthful, he took a sip of his water. “I was thinking that we could go down to San Diego. The guys from my old team have been hounding me to go see them. Well, Fort mainly. But you can visit with Penni and the other women. If you feel like it would be too much, we can go somewhere else. Take a drive to Palm Springs even.”

Palm Springs wasn't a place he went to often. In fact, he'd only been there once, but he knew that there were a lot of spas down there. If Astrid would prefer that location, he'd find out which was the best place and make a booking for her.

“I'd love to go meet your former team. And I will never say no to seeing Penni. She's become a good friend, and I need to thank her for what she's done for me—you know, in helping me with this situation.” A light pink hue colored her cheeks.

Was Astrid trying to say she had to thank Penni for introducing them? If it was, then he needed to thank Penni too. Although maybe it was a bit too soon for that. Plus, he didn't want Ox to find out he'd slept with a client. His first client on his first job. Not the sort of reputation he wanted to have.

But that was a problem for another day. Today, and the next few days, were going to be about him and Astrid.

“Perfect. I'll need to check in with the office and let them know that we will be going away for a few days. I don't think Ox will have any issues with it. He'll probably think it's a good idea to get you to a place with a little bit of a different scenery for you.”

At least that's what he hoped his boss would think.

“If it would make it easier, you can tell him that it was my idea,” Astrid offered as she pushed her clean plate away.

“No, that’s fine. I won’t have you lying for me. I think it’s a good idea anyway. I also need to let them know that you said the victim had the same tattoo as the guy who chased us. Us being away will give Cass some time to look into it.”

The more Growler thought about it, the more he liked the idea of them going away. Also, while they were away, Cass could arrange for the new cameras and a new security system to be installed in Astrid’s house.

“Okay, I’m excited. I’m going to run upstairs to shower and pack.” Astrid came over to him and kissed him softly on the lips. He kept his hands firmly in his lap so he didn’t reach up and yank her onto his lap so he could deepen the kiss. “Thank you for looking after me, Callum.”

She gave him one last peck before sailing out of the room.

Growler blew out a breath and collected the dishes. He had a lot of planning and calls to make, but for the first time in his life, he felt some hope that things were about to go in his favor.



“PENNI LIVES HERE?” Astrid admired the house that Callum had pulled into.

She wasn’t sure when she’d decided in her mind that she was going to refer to him by the name he’d been given instead of his nickname. She just had. For her, he was more Callum than Growler.

Although if he annoyed her, she might call him by his nickname.

“Yep. Apparently when Fort bought it, it was a dump, but over the years, and with the help of his interior designer mother, he renovated it until it looks like it does now.”

“He did a great job. It belongs in a magazine.”

Astrid’s house was nice, and she loved it, but there was something about Penni’s place that called to her. Maybe she should look at selling her house and buying a house that

needed some updating, particularly if it could turn out like this place.

“I guess. To me it’s just Fort’s place. Although I’m sure he’ll be happy to go through his before and after photos with you. He is pretty proud of the place.” Callum opened his door. “Come on, let’s go inside. I can see Penni peering through the front window. I’m sure she’s wondering why we’re taking so long.”

Eager to see if the inside looked as good as the outside, Astrid released her belt and was out of the car in a flash. She waited as Callum got their bags out of the trunk. She would offer but she knew that he’d give her the “I’m here to look after you” look he’d given her when she tried to put the bag in the car this morning.

“Hey, you two, you took long enough to get out of the car,” Penni hollered from her front porch, Logan propped on her hip.

Astrid could imagine her walking around the house, holding Logan while booking appearances for the clients Penni had. That woman could multi-task with the best of them.

“I was just admiring your house. It’s beautiful,” Astrid said as she accepted Penni’s one-arm hug. Logan squealed in happiness. “Hey, little man. Good to see you.” Astrid popped a kiss on his forehead.

“Would you like to hold him?” Penni asked.

“Sure.” Astrid immediately took the chubby baby out of his mom’s arms and cooed at him. “Who’s a cute baby? You are.” She glanced over her shoulder, aware of Callum’s presence behind her. “Isn’t he the cutest?”

Callum nodded, a strange look on his face. One she couldn’t decipher at the moment. Did he not like babies? Did he want any of his own? Although if he didn’t like kids, he wouldn’t have taken Fort and Penni up on their offer to stay at their place for the couple of nights they were in San Diego.

Astrid had always thought she’d have a couple of kids of her own, at some stage of her life. Of course, she hadn’t

planned to become a food influencer, which had put her on a different path than she thought she'd go down.

Not that she regretted it at all, but after the last few days, the reality of her stardom had hit her in a way she hadn't expected, and she was glad that she didn't have children—at the moment.

“Come on, the neighbors will be wondering why we're all standing on the front porch,” Penni commented and opened the door.

Astrid crossed the threshold and admired the openness of the foyer and the surrounding area. Yep, this house was magazine worthy. “This is gorgeous, Penni.”

“I know. I was gob smacked the first time I walked in as well. Although it was a bit cold. I've made it a lot warmer than what it was.”

There were hints of colors dotted in fluffy throw cushions, flowers, and paintings on the walls. It was enough and not overbearing at all.

“Growler, good to see you.” Fort walked into the room and immediately filled the space.

Astrid had always felt a little intimidated by the Navy SEAL, something that she hadn't experienced with Callum at all.

No, from the first moment she laid eyes on him, she could honestly say that she'd felt protected by him.

“Thanks for having us, Fort.” Callum accepted the one arm hug from his former team leader.

“Let me show you to your room before the others come.”

Astrid watched as Fort and Callum disappeared upstairs, noting that Fort had said “room” not “rooms.” She glanced over at Penni, who was smiling innocently.

Was she playing matchmaker?

Didn't Penni know that Astrid was Callum's client?

“What are you playing at, Penni?” Astrid questioned, gently prying Logan’s fingers from her hair.

“Nothing,” Penni responded. “Come on, let me get you a drink, and we can put this little munchkin down and he can play.”

Astrid wanted to ask her more, but she let it slide. Honestly, she couldn’t find any fault with staying in the same room as Callum. In fact, she was all for it.

Chapter Nineteen

“SO WHAT’S THE STORY?” ROCKET ASKED GROWLER AS THEY leaned against the brick wall at the side of Fort’s back patio.

When Growler had joined the team, he and Rocket had gravitated toward each other, as they were one of the few single men left on the team. Now Rocket was happily married and well he was...Growler didn’t know what he was, but he couldn’t help but think that maybe he was heading down the same road as all his former teammates—the road to ever after.

What the actual fuck? It’s way too soon to be feeling this way.

It was quick but having her in his arms didn’t feel like a mistake—it was right. But did she feel the same way? Was her interest only because he was protecting her? He liked to think it wasn’t, but he couldn’t dismiss the possibility.

Growler pushed those thoughts away. Now wasn't the time to dissect it all. But the feeling that she was it for him wasn't so hard to push away.

"Astrid's a witness in a murder case." Growler gave Rocket a quick rundown of the situation as it stood and why they were down visiting them all.

"That's one story. What's the other?" Rocket took a sip of his beer.

"There's no other story. I'm doing a job, and I think I'm doing it well." Growler knew exactly what Rocket was getting at, but he wasn't ready to discuss his relationship with Astrid. It was too new.

"You haven't stopped looking at her."

Growler dragged his gaze away from Astrid. So what if Rocket was right? He wasn't going to admit to anything. "She knows no one here. Of course I'm going to watch to see if she's feeling uncomfortable."

Rocket laughed and slapped him on the back. "You keep telling yourself that, buddy. You've got it as bad as all of us."

As much as Growler didn't want to acknowledge it, he couldn't deny that his feelings for Astrid were growing. Changing. After last night, a shift had occurred within him. A shift he hadn't even known he was capable of.

Yes, she was a job, and everything in him wanted to protect her. But it was more than just that. He wanted to be able to share everything with her. Her ups and downs. His ups and downs. The good, the bad and all the in between. First, though, he had to keep her safe. Eliminate whoever was after her.

"Whatever. What's happening with you guys? You about to go on a mission soon?"

How much would Rocket tell him? Now that he was a civilian, he didn't have the same security clearances that he'd had in the past. He wouldn't be privy to the information that he'd once been granted.

“You know how it is. There’s always something going on.” Rocket evaded his question, and it stung a little.

Rocket should know that he wouldn’t blab anything out to the press or tell anyone anything if Rocket had trusted him with the information.

“Right. I’m going to see if Astrid needs anything.” He made to move, but Rocket grabbed his arm, preventing his departure.

“Sorry, man, that was a dick move.”

Growler shrugged. “I get it. It’s good.”

Rocket sighed. “Nah, it’s not. I know you. I worked with you. And yeah, you may not have the clearances, but you know how everything works. I know you’re not going to run your mouth off.”

This was why he’d kept his distance from them. Perhaps, in time, he would have the same dynamics with the guys from Alliez that he did when he was on this SEAL team. At the moment though, Growler was bobbing in the ocean without an anchor to give him the stability he needed.

“You good, Callum?” Astrid’s sweet voice tore through his doubts like a knife cutting through a cake.

A sense of calmness swept over him, and he smiled down at her. “I’m good, Comet. You need anything?”

Astrid canted her head to the side, as though she was trying to determine if he was telling the truth or was just saying it to appease her. Beside him, a small snigger of laughter came from Rocket. When they were alone again, his former teammate would probably question him about the nickname that had slipped off his tongue. No way would Rocket have missed hearing it.

“No, I’m fine. You just looked...” Astrid glanced over to where Rocket still stood, a wary expression highlighting her beautiful eyes. “Tense.”

Growler took hold of her hand and squeezed it. Another huge sign to suggest that there was more between him and

Astrid than the chef/bodyguard that they were supposed to be. “Seriously, all good here, but thank you.”

He hoped Astrid understood that her coming up to him meant the world to him. Having a mother who spent most of her time at the bottom of the bottle now, having someone aware of him. Aware of what he might be going through meant the world to him.

“Okay, I’ll just go back.” She pointed with her free hand to where she’d been sitting with his former teammates’ women, who were all watching the exchange with interest.

Yep, there was no way anyone on this back patio suspected that this was just a job for Growler.



ASTRID CONTINUED to study Callum to make sure that he was telling the truth. Forgetting the look that had crossed his face during his conversation with this former teammate wasn't something she could easily push aside.

Callum had looked devastated at whatever Rocket had said to him. Prior to that moment, the two men had seemed to be having a good conversation, and Astrid has suspected she was the main topic between them. She didn't mind it. The girls had grilled her, politely of course, about what was going on with her and Callum. As much as Astrid had tried to keep it fairly neutral, even she heard the way her voice seemed to soften whenever she talked about Calum.

“Are *you* okay?” Callum asked again, when she hadn't moved or said anything else.

What Astrid wanted to do was lean into him. To have his arm come around her and pull her close to him. All it had taken was one night in his arms for her to yearn to feel them around her all the time.

This was more than simple attraction.

Then again, her heart had already told her that.

In the middle of Penni and Fort's backyard, with dozens of eyes on them, wasn't the place for her to launch herself at Callum.

"Yeah." This time she gave Callum's hand a squeeze before releasing it and using every ounce of her strength to stroll back to where she'd been sitting.

"Damn, girl, that look Callum is giving you is intense." Penni fanned herself and handed Astrid a glass of iced tea. "It's a look I'm very familiar with."

"Me too," Imogene piped up, a smile on her face.

"Just count us all in at being familiar with looks like that," Maddie said with a laugh.

Astrid ducked her head so that her hair fell in front of her face as she sneaked a glance in Callum's direction. He hadn't moved. In fact, he looked as still as a statue, but Penni was right. The look was dark, brooding, and had her blood thrumming to life in her veins.

When she turned her attention back to the girls, Astrid found they were all watching her. "Yeah, okay, it is intense."

What was the point in denying it? None. They'd all seen it and from what they'd said, they'd all experienced it.

"Have you...you know?" Penni wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"Oh my God, Penni, you're incorrigible." Angela swatted her friend on the arm.

"What? Like all you aren't thinking and wondering," Penni responded, sipping her drink.

Astrid couldn't help it. She laughed at their antics. She'd had some friends in culinary school, but ever since she'd taken off, only a couple had reached out to maintain contact with her. Most also lived on the east coast, so keeping up friendships was tough. But in a few short hours Astrid felt as if she'd known this group of women for years.

"A woman doesn't kiss and tell," Astrid said primly, but winked, and another round of laughter erupted from them.

“Once you’ve had Navy, you never go back. Am I right?” Penni raised her glass and everyone, including Astrid, tapped the side of her drink with their own.

“I’m almost too afraid to ask what you girls are toasting. But if I know my wife, it wasn’t an innocent toast.” Fort came up and brushed his fingers down Penni’s cheek. Penni melted against her husband, and Astrid sighed at the beautiful love shared between the two of them.

“We don’t kiss and tell, right girls?” Penni repeated Astrid’s words, and everyone nodded.

Fort laughed. “Then, yes, it was definitely inappropriate. Anyone hungry? The burgers are done.” He looked over at Astrid. “Please don’t judge me and let me believe I’m the best griller this side of the highway.”

Astrid’s shoulder shook in mirth at Fort’s comments. “Trust me. I don’t judge, not to your face anyway,” she winked, clearly stating that she was joking.

Another round of laughter erupted from the group, which now included the men. A brush of fingers against her shoulder told her that Callum had come up behind her. He needn’t have done that as her skin prickled to life the second he’d gotten close to her.

“Duly noted,” Fort replied once the laughter had died down. “Come and eat before it gets cold.”

Everyone rose, and when she did, Callum took hold of her hand and led her over to the table laden with food. She had never felt more cherished than she did right this second. Whatever happened, Astrid was glad that it had. Glad that Callum had brought her here and introduced her to his friends. Friends that she liked to think were hers as well.

For the rest of the time that they were here, Astrid wasn’t going to think about the drama that had led her to this moment. She was grateful that it had.

Chapter Twenty

NIGHT HAD SETTLED IN AND THE HOUSE WAS SILENT, BUT Growler hadn't moved from his place at the window. The yard, which only a few hours ago had been full of fun and laughter, lay still and quiet.

Catching up with his former teammates and their women had been bittersweet and enjoyable all at the same time.

Fuck, I miss the camaraderie. Have I done the right thing joining Alliez?

The potential was there with Alliez to have the same team dynamic as he'd had with SEAL Team Tango, but it would take time. He would put in the work.

Sighing, he turned away from the window, stilling when he spied Astrid sitting on the edge of the bed. Lost in his thoughts, he hadn't heard her exit the bathroom which was attached to their room.

“Hey,” he said softly, then padded over to where she sat, her expression pensive, her fingers clasped tightly together.

Immediately, he shook off his melancholy and squatted down in front of her. “What’s wrong? Did you get a call? Text message?” He fired off his questions, going totally into protect mode. A mode which was a constant with Astrid.

“No, nothing like that,” she said quietly, her gaze not quite meeting his.

What the hell had happened between her going to the bathroom and now?

They’d said their goodnights to Penni and Fort and headed upstairs together, arms around each other as if they’d been a couple for years. She’d even given him a quick kiss on the lips before disappearing into the bathroom.

“Talk to me, Comet. What’s going through your mind?” He brushed his fingers over her clasped ones. A sliver of electricity jolted through him, and he wanted to create more of it. Create it until it consumed both him and Astrid. But he couldn’t do any of that until he got to the bottom of what was troubling her.

“When I came back into the bedroom, I sat here and watched you as you gazed out the window. You looked so sad. As if you didn’t want to be here. Are you sad?”

Have I made you sad?

The question wasn’t said, but he could see it in her eyes. The uncertainty.

He moved to sit on the bed next to her, gathering her close. Tension kept her body stiff in his hold, and he wanted nothing more than to have her relax into him. Let him take the burden that she carried—a burden he’d unwillingly given her.

He wasn’t a sharing sort of guy, but he wanted to share everything with Astrid. Wanted to talk to her about the emotions being around his team again stirred up. Growler couldn’t deny that he wanted more with her. He wanted what his former teammates had with their partners. What he was feeling for Astrid wasn’t what he’d ever felt for a woman

before. Before, he'd dated to relieve an itch. There was no itch with Astrid. There was only longing and dreaming for a future he hadn't allowed himself to want or think about.

Until now. Until her.

“Coming here, being around my former teammates is hard. I haven't been out of the service long. I thought it would be easy to adjust to civilian life. I was tired. A little disgruntled with things and made the decision that the best thing for me was to leave the Navy.” He stroked his finger along hers, and slowly she relaxed the grip she'd had around herself. “There were times when conversation stopped when I came up to a couple of them and knew they were talking about work and upcoming missions. Things that they would've shared with me but can't now. There was no malice on their part. I don't blame them for stopping talking. It just...” he trailed off, not wanting to say the word because he didn't want to sound like he was a whiny teenager and was being shut out by a group of friends.

“Hurt. It hurt, didn't it?”

Growler shouldn't be surprised that Astrid had picked up on what was troubling him. Many times, in the last few days, he'd known what she was thinking. They were in tune with each other.

“It did. I won't lie and say that before I saw you on the bed, I was wondering if I'd done the right thing. I don't have the same relationship with the rest of the guys at Alliez. I miss that team vibe. The inside jokes. The way, no matter what time, I could call and one of them, or the whole team, would be there in a flash.”

Astrid smiled, a hint of understanding in her eyes. “I know it's not the same as having a team, but I get it. I had that with my dad. Is it possible to build that sense of team over time with them? I mean Angel said he was a SEAL, so he would be used to working with a team, right?”

Growler nodded. “Yeah, but what we do is more a solitary job. Angel has his jobs. Irish his. I'm not sure if Ox does any security work or just runs things. But when I was on the team, Ox helped us out a few times. It's why—” He broke off, not

sure if he should say anything about what Ox was planning with the business. But this was Astrid, and if he hoped that they had a future together, she would find out anyway.

“Why?”

Growler made a decision. He trusted Astrid. Trusted that she wouldn't gossip about what Ox had planned to anyone. “Ox is looking at expanding the business from personal security to doing other things.”

Astrid's brow furrowed. “Other things?”

“Yeah. I don't know all the ins and outs, but he's establishing a relationship with an FBI Agent to take on covert jobs for them.”

“Like what you did as a SEAL? Would the FBI work with you or other special forces teams to get the jobs done?”

“There's that possibility, and as I said, I don't know all the details, but there are sometimes places and jobs that the military can't do or be involved in and that's where we'd come in.”

She leaned closer to him, her head resting on his shoulder, and Growler breathed out a breath of relief that she hadn't put distance between them. “Is it dangerous?”

“No more dangerous than what I did before, I'm guessing. Or no more dangerous than getting chased on the interstate and being shot at.” He winked and nudged her shoulder.

“I guess,” she chuckled and then yawned.

“It's late. Let's get into bed. I don't think Penni's got anything planned for us tomorrow, so I thought we can take a trip to the beach and a drive past the base I used to be stationed at.”

“I'd like that. And Callum?” Her fingers trailed down his cheek and fire burned low in his belly, his cock stirring to life. “I'm not *that* tired.”

Growler's body was more than ready for what she was suggesting. “Hmm. Maybe I can help you relax enough that you'll fall asleep easily.”

A slow, sexy smile kicked up the corners of her mouth, and he groaned when her tongue darted out and swiped across her lower lip. “Sounds interesting. How about you show me?”

“Never let it be said I ignore a request.”

He lowered his head and captured her lips. While he may have doubts about his career move, he didn’t have any doubts about the woman in his arms, and he planned to show her how much he was grateful that she was in his life.



ASTRID WOUND her arms around Callum’s neck as he lowered her to the soft mattress. Thoughts disappeared from her mind as his mouth trailed down her neck, while his fingers untied her robe, pushing it open as his hands slid across the silky fabric of her nightgown.

She didn’t normally wear something as pretty as she had on to bed, but when she’d been packing for this trip, she’d found it beneath her normal sleep shirts and she’d packed it. Now she was glad that she had.

“As beautiful as this is, it needs to come off,” Callum murmured against her neck.

“I agree.”

She lifted her hips so that he could push the fabric up and lifted her arms so that he could slide it off. The cool air from the air conditioning pebbled her nipples, and she ached for Callum to touch them. Kiss them the way he had the night before.

As if he could read her mind, a second later, his lips closed over her nipple, and she sighed in pleasure. Her fingers dug through the smooth strands of his hair, holding him in place.

Time was forgotten as she succumbed to Callum’s seduction. She wanted to give him what he was giving her. Show him just how much she wanted to worship his body. The last time they’d made love, he’d been in charge. This time she wanted to be the one tormenting him. She wanted him straining beneath her as she kissed her way over his body.

Take his long, hard length into her mouth. Drive him to the brink and then watch him fall over.

Determined to make her thoughts a reality, she pushed at his shoulders, and immediately he lifted his head.

“Something wrong?”

“Yes.” Using the moment of his inattention, Astrid shifted and pushed again at Callum. He twisted and fell on the bed.

Mirth shone in his brown eyes. “This is how it’s going to be, huh?”

Astrid dropped her head and kissed her way across his chest until she reached one nipple. She took the small bud into her mouth and sucked it while her fingers teased the other. Callum shifted beneath her, his hard cock brushing against her thigh.

She needed to see him. To touch him. Taste him. Kissing her way down, over his six-pack she reached the waistband of his pants. “These need to go,” she said almost the same words as he had only moments ago.

“Yes, they do.” Callum raised his hips, and she pulled the fabric down, his cock springing free.

Astrid admired his hard length. Reaching out, she closed her fingers around him, feeling steel beneath silk. She stroked up and down a couple of times, before she closed her lips around the tip, humming as he took him further in her mouth.

“Fuck, Comet.” Callum groaned, giving her the confidence she needed to take more of him in her mouth.

She licked and suck and stroked him, all the while his groans were getting louder and louder. Knowing that she was giving him pleasure, knowing she was responsible for the way he was reacting to her touch, was empowering.

Astrid increased her pace, bobbing her head up and down over him. His fingers were now tangled in her hair, tightening when she did something he liked and loosening so that she had the ability to move.

She could feel him getting harder and longer the more she sucked him off. His pelvis lifted higher and higher, following her mouth. Droplets of liquid coated her tongue, and she lapped them up, knowing she was making him get close to losing control.

“God, I’m going to come,” he cautioned, and she didn’t care if he did. She wanted to give him the same amount of pleasure that he’d given her. Show him that they were a partnership and their time in bed wasn’t one-sided.

Beneath her, Callum tensed and she gripped his hard shaft, feeling the tiny pulses of his release as he came in her mouth. She swallowed him down and continued stroking him, milking as much as she could from him.

A few seconds later, he collapsed on the bed, and she kissed his softening cock before she snuggled up beside him. His arms immediately came around her, keeping her close to his side. A happy and satisfied sigh whooshed out of her, and she felt Callum’s body shudder as well.

“That was...” He stopped. “I have no words.”

Astrid propped herself up on her elbow and met his slumberous gaze. She could drown in the vats of milk chocolate his eyes resembled right now. “I like making you speechless.”

Callum, once again, slid his fingers through her hair and nudged her closer to him. There was no fight in her. She wanted this as much as he did.

He opened his mouth, then closed it, his gaze sliding away from hers before returning.

Was he nervous?

Why would he be nervous after everything they’d just shared?

“It’s, umm,” he paused and swallowed as though his throat was suddenly dry.

What the heck was going on?

“Let me try that again.” A sheepish grin curled his lips. “It’s way too soon, and everything is complicated, but I’m falling for you, Astrid Conway and I’m not the least bit sorry that I am.”

This was what he’d been trying to say? Happiness welled within her, filling the empty parts of her soul. “I’m falling for you too, Callum ‘Growler’ Taylor.”

Their lips meshed together, and Astrid knew that the next chapter in their story was beginning.

Chapter Twenty-One

THE TRAFFIC WAS AT A STANDSTILL, AND GROWLER CURSED LA traffic. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to this,” he muttered as he checked his rearview and side mirrors. There was nothing out of the ordinary, and he didn’t think there would be, but he wasn’t going to let down his guard.

“I know. And there’s nothing that really can be done, unless they build a double-decker highway and that would take years to build, not to mention the logistics and engineering skills needed to make it a reality. Which I don’t see happening ever.”

“It’ll probably only encourage more people on the road, and then we’d have double the traffic jams.”

Astrid laughed and leaned her head against the window. “What a nightmare that would be.”

God, she’s so fucking beautiful. I can’t believe she’s mine.

The second she'd said she was falling for him too, Astrid had become his and only his. Was that arrogant and misogynistic of him? Probably, but he was hers as well.

Always would be.

What he was feeling for Astrid was like nothing he'd known. His former teammates had talked about how they'd known when they'd met their women that they were it for them. He'd always thought they were bullshitting him, particularly Rocket because he'd pushed Rebecca away on so many occasions, but now he understood what they'd been talking about.

Understood that the emotions bubbling to life were as true as roses being given on Valentine's Day.

Once they arrived back at Astrid's place, he would have to call Ox, advise him that things had changed between him and Astrid.

Growler reached up and rubbed his fingers across his brow in an attempt to slow down his wayward thoughts.

"What's wrong?" Astrid's fingers stroked across the arm still on the steering wheel.

How much did he tell her?

Everything.

From the moment he drove from Alliez's office to her studio, he'd been nothing but honest with her. It was something he'd always told himself he would be, as much as he could've been with his job as a SEAL, with his partner, whenever he got one that lasted longer than two nights. He'd kept his liaisons brief in the past, so it hadn't been something he'd given a lot of thought about. Now though, Astrid was becoming so much a part of his life that the promise he'd made to himself all those years ago was now a major factor in his life.

"I was just thinking I need to call Ox and advise him of the shift in our relationship."

"Oh."

Astrid's response wasn't comforting for him. Had she changed her mind? Had she decided that she wasn't falling for him?

No, he may have only known Astrid for a short time, but no way would she do that.

Now that he started, he needed to go on, tell her what the possible outcomes could be from him making this call.

He glanced over at her, and their gazes connected. There was nothing in her hazel eyes to suggest that she was having second thoughts. If anything, there was clarity, as if she knew what he was going to say.

Shifting his attention back to the road—the traffic was finally starting to move—he took a deep breath. “There are two possible outcomes of my phone call with Ox. He’ll either fire me for crossing the line with a client, or I’ll be removed from watching you and someone else will take over to keep you safe until the threat is gone.”

Saying it out loud didn't make him feel any better about it. He didn't like the idea of someone else from Alliez watching over Astrid.

How had this happened? Why couldn't he have met Astrid in different circumstances, like the night at the bar? He could've gone up to her and struck up a conversation. With everything in him, he didn't doubt that this was where they would've ended up—together.

“I don't like either of those outcomes,” she murmured. “I wouldn't feel safe with anyone other than you. I mean, yes, Angel was on set for one day, but that didn't bother me because I knew that in a few hours I'd be back with you again.”

“It's not something I would want to happen either, but I think we need to prepare for this possible outcome. I mean, either way, I may be taken off your protection detail.”

Astrid shifted so she was facing him. He reached down and took her hand, needing to have that connection with her.

“What if I tell Ox that I don’t want anyone other than you? I’m the client I should be able to have who I want protecting me.”

Growler considered this angle; it was one he hadn’t given much thought to. “I don’t know. It’s possible.”

“Would it be better if we went to the office instead of you making a call?” Astrid suggested. “You know, present a united front.”

The idea appealed, but Growler would much rather have Astrid far away should Ox rake him over the coals for sleeping with a client. He was sure that wasn’t the type of reputation Alliez and Ox were hoping to have.

Although...

“What? You just look like you’ve found gold,” Astrid asked.

“The two guys who started Alliez in New York fell in love and married the women they were protecting.” A smidgeon of worry lifted from Growler’s shoulders. “There’s no way I’ll be fired. It would be a contradictory action.”

“That is good news, but...” Astrid hesitated. “What if Ox doesn’t agree with that? What if he has different policies than the New York office?”

Growler tapped the steering wheel with his free hand, his momentary relief dissipated. “Maybe. I don’t know. I don’t recall anything in the contract I signed. Then again, I didn’t read it too closely. I trusted Ox not to have anything insidious in it.”

“Here’s hoping.”

For the rest of the drive home, they kept conversation to lighter subjects. Growler kept with his original plan of driving Astrid home. As much as the idea of them rocking up to the offices as a couple appealed, Growler didn’t want to chance that it could backfire on them. He decided that he would go and see Ox in person and not have this conversation over the phone.

His boss deserved that courtesy from him.



GROWLER SMILED at Yolanda as he walked into Alliez's office. Astrid was ensconced safely at her place.

With the new system in place, he could access the camera feed from the Alliez app on his phone. If the worst happened and Astrid got into trouble, there were panic buttons around the place. Plus, Cass had also left a pendant that Astrid could wear which allowed her to press the stone in the middle to transmit a silent signal to all Alliez operatives that she needed help.

It had taken some convincing, but Astrid had agreed to wear it.

The pendant also had a tracking device in it. Growler kept that bit of information to himself.

So much for being honest with her all the time.

When the time was right, he'd let Astrid know—which could be the moment he got home from this meeting.

Growler stopped by his desk and picked up the sheaf of papers on his desk. He flicked through them, noting that they were the schematics of Astrid's house and where the cameras had been fitted. He knew all of this information, as it was in the app, but he appreciated having hard copies of the plans as well.

“Did you enjoy your break away?”

Growler looked up to find Ox leaning against the partition dividing his and Angel's desks. There was nothing in the way Ox stood to suggest he was annoyed with Growler and his question was an innocent enquiry. One that co-workers would ask each other.

“It was good to catch up with the guys. Astrid needed a break from everything, and I think it helped her lose a little of the stress she'd been living with.”

Ox nodded. “I’ve got an update for you on the tattoo that was on the victim and the guy chasing you. Wanna come in my office so we can discuss it?”

When had this new information come in? Had it come in while he’d been commuting to the office? It was possible, but Growler’s instincts were telling him that it wasn’t.

A feeling of dread pooled low in his stomach. Was Astrid in even more danger now?

“Growler?”

Ox’s voice pulled him from the hole his thoughts had fallen into. “Yeah, sorry, sounds good.”

His boss studied him for a second longer, and Growler made sure to hold his gaze. Ox had been a fucking good Delta, and he would be able to see any doubts Growler may have. In fact, he wouldn’t be surprised if Ox had already worked out that he and Astrid were sleeping together.

Without saying a word, Ox headed to his office, and Growler followed him, scooping up the papers so that he wouldn’t forget them.

This meeting wasn’t going to be easy, but then what part of his life had been easy? With his mom always burying herself at the bottom of a bottle, he’d struggled in school, only doing enough to graduate. He’d been a good swimmer which was why he’d joined the Navy, becoming a SEAL his end goal. He’d had to fight his way through BUD/S to achieve it, but he’d done it. He could do difficult with his eyes shut. Except this time, the outcome could affect him more than any other part of his life.

Growler closed the door and headed over to the couch in the corner where Ox was already seated in one of the club chairs.

“What you got for me?” he asked as he sat.

“Are you sure you’re good? I get the feeling that there’s something going on.” Ox sat back, looking relaxed, but Growler knew he could go from relaxed to combat ready in the blink of an eye.

As much as Growler would prefer the conversation be about whatever Ox had found out to do with Astrid's case, he had to tell him what he'd come to the office to say.

"I've got something I need to talk to you about, and I'm not sure how you're going to react to it."

Ox straightened, still giving the impression of being relaxed but definitely more alert than he had been a second ago. "Go on."

"It wasn't a conscious thought. I didn't expect it at all. It just happened and"—Growler took a breath, annoyed that nothing he was saying made any sense, even to his own ears—"I don't know what your policy is, but my relationship with Astrid has changed."

"Changed in what way?" Ox asked before Growler could say anymore.

"She's mine," he simply said and prayed that his boss understood what he meant by that.

"Yours? In what way?"

Fuck, of course, Ox wouldn't make it easy for him and, honestly, Growler couldn't blame him. This was his business. His reputation around the city that was at stake. Imagine what other high-profile people would think when they wanted security to hear that the guards Ox employed did what Growler was doing.

No way could he avoid it anymore. He needed to put everyone on the table. Lay it out and deal with the consequences. "I'm falling in love with Astrid. We've slept together, and she says she feels the same way about me."

The words burst out of him like firecrackers, and now that they were out there, a burden appeared to lift from his shoulders.

Ox crossed his leg and rest his ankle on his knee. "That's not what I expected to hear from you."

At least he hadn't fired Growler's ass—yet.

"I'm sure it isn't."

“Are you sure what you’re both feeling is real and not because of the circumstances you’ve found yourself in? Close proximity? Astrid is confusing fear and gratitude for love.”

Growler’s temper rose at the last comment and he counted to ten to try to cool it. It wouldn’t do any good to go off at Ox for saying such an asshole comment. “No, it’s not.”

It wasn’t the first time he’d thought this. He’d asked Astrid and she’d said it wasn’t, but did she really know? How did he really know?

Fuck, he hated that Ox had planted little seeds of doubt when he thought he’d squashed them. There was no doubt about how he felt about Astrid. If he never saw her again, he would be half the man he was. His heart would shrivel into a tiny hard stone.

“Interesting,” Ox murmured, and Growler lifted his gaze to find his boss watching him.

“What’s interesting?” he asked after a moment.

“Your reaction. The anger that you experienced after what I said, and then the moment you wondered if maybe I was right. And the devastation you experienced if it turned out that what you’re feeling for Astrid isn’t returned.”

How the fuck had he been able to see all of that? Growler was never one to show his emotions. Hell, it could’ve gotten him or his team killed if he’d ever shown any indication that his head wasn’t in the game.

“Yeah, well, I don’t know what to say. I only know how I feel. I also believe that Astrid isn’t lying to me when she says she feels the same.”

“But you had a moment of doubt.”

Why the fuck was Ox persisting with this? Why was he being such an ass about it?

“What are you trying to achieve here? Yes, I had a moment of doubt, but then I checked myself. I *know* Astrid. She’s the most genuine person I’ve met—regardless of her fame.”

A slow smile crossed Ox's face as if he'd struck gold after searching for years. Now what did that mean?

"You know this is not a unique situation. Although it is here."

Growler tempered his need to shout at his boss to get to the fucking point. "Right."

This time Ox full on laughed. "It's all good, Growler. Your job is safe. Is that what you were worried about?"

With those words, Growler's anger and the tension that had been riding his shoulders since he'd walked into the building eased. "Have to admit it crossed my mind."

"Can't say I'm thrilled about it." Ox held up his hand when Growler went to interrupt him. "Not sure I want this type of thing to happen with everyone, but you're the first of my employees this has happened to. Also, you can't help who you fall in love with. Or the timing when it happens. Besides, Storm and Ash fell for the women they were protecting, so me sacking you because of that would be a little contradictory. Both of them know that the unexpected can occur."

"Happy to hear you feel that way, thanks. Yeah, this wasn't what I expected when I took the job on. In fact, I never thought I'd feel like this about a woman," Growler commented.

"So what's next?" Ox questioned.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm assuming you don't want Angel or Irish taking over Astrid's protection."

"No, but if you feel that's what's best in this situation, then I'll suck it up and do it. Although I will say that I brought this up when I talked to Astrid about it this morning, and she wasn't happy with the idea."

Ox's eyes widened. "You told Astrid you were coming in here to tell me about the two of you?"

"Of course, why wouldn't I? It concerns her as much as it concerns me."

“That decides it then. You’re staying assigned to Astrid.” Ox stood, and Growler did as well. “Thanks for being honest with me, Growler. You could’ve kept it quiet.”

“Not the way I operate. You’ve given me an opportunity, and I’m a straight shooter. I couldn’t keep this from you.”

“I’m happy to have you on the team, trust me. Now, I know you’re eager to get back to your woman, so go.”

Growler smiled. “Thanks.”

“How about we get down to the other reason why you’re here—the information Cass has found out about the origins of the tattoo?”

Immediately Growler put thoughts of his feelings about Astrid into a box and turned his attention back to the job he’d been employed for. “What about it? What gang does it belong to?”

“It’s not a gang tattoo, which was why it wasn’t in the database. It’s a cartel one.”

Cartel?

What the fuck?

A cartel going after Astrid wasn’t good. It just increased the danger stakes.

“Which cartel?” Growler suspected he wasn’t going to like what Ox was about to say next. In fact, his instincts were screaming he knew the answer to it. “It’s the Ramirez Cartel, isn’t it?”

“Yep.”

“Fuck.”

“You know them?” Ox’s eyebrow quirked in interest.

“Yeah, I can’t go into details, but I’m acquainted with them.”

Growler couldn’t believe that one of the missions he’d worked with his SEAL team, the mission where Rocket and he had almost gotten blown up, was chasing Astrid.

This was not fucking good.

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE TIMER DINGED, PULLING ASTRID FROM HER THOUGHTS OF what was happening Callum. Would Ox fire him for sleeping with her? They had to have crossed a thousand lines, but she couldn't be sorry that they had.

Not having Callum in her life was something she didn't want to contemplate. It should freak her out that she was having such strong feelings for a man she'd just met, but it didn't. If anything, everything about what she and Callum had shared over the last few days was everything she'd ever wanted in a partner.

Had she been looking for a relationship?

No, she hadn't, but wasn't that when they always happened? When you least expected it, happiness fell in your lap.

She pulled out the tray of triple choc chip cookies—the third batch she’d baked since Callum had left. There were two dozen blueberry muffins cooking in her other oven.

Worry about Callum’s meeting had her doing what she always did when stressed—she cooked. Maybe when Callum got back, they could go to the shelter and she could drop off the extra baked goods. Even though they never expected her to keep them stocked with food, she had been going there regularly enough that her not showing up for a while would have them wondering about her.

“Something smells good.”

Astrid jumped, her hand going to her throat at Callum’s voice. “Dammit, you scared me.” She studied him, looking for signs that the meeting hadn’t gone well. He was giving nothing away.

“Didn’t mean to,” he said as he pulled her into his arms.

Astrid sighed, resting her head on his chest—she needed this.

After a few seconds, Callum loosened his hold, but didn’t drop it completely. “You good, Comet?”

God, she was beginning to love hearing that name come off his lips. Her dad had called her *Asti* all the time, and that had been special. But coming from Callum, the big bad SEAL, it seemed extra special.

“I am now.” She leaned back so that she could get a good look at his face. His expression was open, although there was a hint of shadows in his gaze. “How did it go? Do you still have a job? Are you still protecting me? Do I need to speak to Ox and let him know I don’t want anyone but you? Or wait, what if I send Penni a message and ask her to call him and tell him that I don’t want to change protection detail? Everyone always does what Penni says. I know I do. Yeah, I’ll ca—”

Her flow of words were cut off by Callum’s mouth closing over hers. She melted into the kiss. Her fingers digging into his back to keep him close to her. Everything she’d been

feeling since he'd closed the front door behind him dissolved like sugar in hot water.

Desire burned brightly within her, and she wanted him badly. Wanted to lose herself in his kisses. In the way his body moved over hers as it took possession of it. Against her belly, she could feel the hard ridge of his erection. He was as affected by the kiss as she was.

Eventually, the need to breathe to survive had her pulling away, her mind foggy with need and happiness.

“If this is what happens after I ask so many questions, I’m going to do it more often,” she murmured.

Beneath her ear, the rumble of Growler’s laughter did nothing to settle the longing within her.

“You were firing them off quicker than an automatic weapon. How about we sample these delicious cookies and I tell you everything?”

Astrid went up on tiptoe and kiss his nose. “That we can do. Go out on the patio, and I’ll get everything ready. And yes I can do it myself, thank you very much,” she said primly when it looked like he was going to protest.

His laughter rumbled again, filling the kitchen. “Fine. But if you’re longer than five minutes, I’m coming to get you.”

“Trust me, I’ll be there in two.”

“Hmm. I’ll hold you to that.”

“If you doubt me, set a timer,” she joked, as she pulled a plate from the cupboard.

Astrid hummed as she arranged some of the still warm cookies on a plate. She grabbed the pitcher of fresh lemonade she’d made earlier from the lemons in her garden, filled two glasses, and placed everything on a tray. She noticed Callum had left the French doors slightly open so that all she had to do was nudge it with her hip and it opened easily.

The quacking of a duck sounded as she placed the tray on the table. “Is that a duck?” she glanced around her yard, expecting to see one waddling over her grass.

“Yep, that’s my timer. Good to see you kept your word.” He held up his phone, letting her see that he had indeed set his phone for two minutes.

“I should withhold these, considering you doubted me, but I’m feeling generous today.” She pushed the plate toward him.

“You shouldn’t have taunted me to do it.” He bit into the cookie and moaned, the sound tiptoeing down her spine. “Fuck, these are delicious.”

“Glad you like them.” Astrid lifted her glass, hoping the tartness of the lemons and the ice in the drink would cool her down. That moan of his had her remembering the other times he made that sound.

For the next few minutes, they sat and enjoyed the snack under the warm California sun. Birds chirped in the trees as insects called to one another and a butterfly flittered around before disappearing over the fence.

If she wasn’t aware that there was someone trying to get her, she could almost let herself believe that everything was right in the world. But it wasn’t, and Callum still hadn’t told her how the meeting went.

If it was bad news, he would’ve told her. Or he would’ve looked unhappy when he’d walked in.

He’d done neither of those things, and apart from the little shadows she spied in his gaze, he seemed content.

“I know I fired a lot of questions at you, probably too many to remember, but are you going to tell me what happened?” she finally asked when the cookies had been eaten and the lemonade drunk.

“It went well. I still have a job. And yes, I’m still protecting you. No, you don’t need to call Ox because of my previous comment. Also, you don’t have to message Penni. And yes, I do everything Penni tells me to do too,” he finished with a big grin as if he’d just aced a test.

Astrid’s mouth dropped open. “You remembered everything I said?”

“That’s what you got out of that? Did you hear what I said?” He was smiling that happy, full smile again, and her heart fluttered with emotions she wasn’t used to feeling.

“I did,” she whispered, attempting to reconcile how much her life had changed in such a short time..

A warm hand cradled her cheek, and she looked up to find that Callum was squatting in front of her, concern highlighting his brown eyes.

How had she missed him moving?

It didn’t matter. All that mattered was that he was in front of her. Going with everything that was consuming her, she cupped the back of his head and leaned down to kiss him. His lips welcomed hers, and she tasted the combined tart and sweetness of the lemons and chocolate. A combination that tempted her to want more.

Somehow they ended up on the ground, his arms around her and her breasts squashed against his chest. The concrete base of the patio had to be digging into his back, but he didn’t let on to her that he was in any distress. If anything, he deepened the kiss as if he couldn’t get enough of her. She would never get enough of him. She knew deep in her soul that he was the one she hadn’t known she’d been searching for.

A squawking of a bird overhead shattered the haze of wantonness that enveloped her the second she kissed him.

“We could take this inside. It will be more comfortable,” she suggested, lifting herself away from him, even though that was the last thing she wanted to do.

“We could, but...” Suddenly, Callum’s demeanor went from relaxed to tense and the cookies Astrid had consumed coalesced into a heavy ball in her stomach.

“But?”

Callum’s arms tightened around her and in a couple of movements he was standing with her cradled against him. She looped her arms around his neck and rested her head on his

shoulder. Whenever he was around, she felt cherished and protected.



WHAT WAS GOING through Astrid's mind? A tumult of expressions flashed behind her hazel eyes. He would ask her, but first, he needed to tell her about what he'd learned during his meeting with Ox.

He'd planned to tell her everything when he walked in, but the sight of her hair caught up in a messy knot on the top of her head, the shorts she wore that showcased her long legs fried his brain, and all he wanted was to have her in his arms.

Now, though, now he needed to tell her.

Once he got them inside, he lowered her to the ground, but kept an arm around her and led her to the living room.

"What you've got to tell me is serious, isn't it?" she asked as she settled herself on the sofa.

"Yeah it is. Cass was able to find out some information about the tattoo that you identified."

Astrid swallowed as her eyes widened, and she swallowed as if bracing herself for whatever it was he was about to tell her.

The last thing he wanted to do was worry her, but he wasn't going to keep anything from her. She needed to know what was happening. It was her life, after all. "The guy who was killed and the one chasing you are members of the Ramirez drug cartel out of Mexico."

For a few seconds, Astrid blinked at him, and he wished that it was anything but a drug cartel chasing her. Cartels had a long reach and an even longer memory. Extracting oneself from their radar wasn't an easy task, but Growler was going to do everything possible to make it happen.

"What does that mean for me? They're never going to leave me alone. I'm a liability. Something they need to get rid of." She jumped up from the couch and started to pace around

the room. Growler wanted to pull her into his arms, but he left her to pace, knowing that she needed this, maybe more than she needed his embrace.

Nothing she said wasn't what he'd been thinking about the whole drive home. Cartels didn't like to leave loose stings hanging. Even if Astrid vowed never to say anything to anyone, it wouldn't make a difference to them.

But he would make sure that they would forget everything about Astrid Conway. No matter what it took. He would find a way to make it happen so Astrid could live a life free of troubles from the Ramirez cartel.

“It means that things are a little more complicated, but we have a place to start now. You have all of Alliez working to protect you. Not to mention there are other people who want the cartel shut down.”

Growler couldn't tell her that those other people were the United States Government and that his SEAL team had been sent to eliminate the head of the organization—a mission they'd failed at executing, but one he believed was still a priority to all who'd been involved.

“Why am I so important to them? All I saw was an argument. I walked away before I saw them pull the gun and shoot the man. Why can't they leave me alone?”

Growler wished he had the answers. “That's what we need to find out. But trust me, I will make sure you can live your life with no fear.”

Needing to hold her, he closed the distance between them and tugged her into his arms. This was his home. She was his home, and he would make it safe for her.



PEDRO STOOD at the window in the expensive hotel room Javier was staying in, not seeing the city view or Hollywood sign outside. His focus was on the well-dressed man with slicked back black hair and a large gold watch adorning his

left arm. He was seated on the couch as if he didn't have a care in the world. As if he didn't hold Pedro's fate in his hands.

The fucker didn't care about that. All Javier cared about was himself and his position in the cartel's organization.

"Tell me again why we are bothering with this woman?"

Pedro clenched his hands until his nails dug into his palms. "Because, as you know," he explained patiently. "Mr. Rook doesn't like hanging threads."

Javier lifted a shoulder negligently. "What exactly did she see?"

Why am I wasting my time on this asshole? He would know if he spoke to Mr. Rook.

"Please don't play me for a fool. You know what she saw. Otherwise, why else would you be here?"

Javier stood and stalked over to where Pedro stood. If he thought his movements were threatening to Pedro, he could think again. Pedro hadn't gotten to where he was without facing off—and defeating—people who thought they were more dangerous than they were.

Pedro lifted his chin, daring Javier to make his move.

"I know why I'm here. The thing is," Javier said quietly and menacing, "we don't want to draw attention to us. There is much we need to do here, and offing a celebrity chef isn't one of them."

Anger consumed Pedro. He didn't believe for a minute that Mr. Rook didn't want Astrid Conway silenced. Javier was playing a game, but what was it?

"I disagree." Pedro stood his ground, knowing that Javier wouldn't do anything to him here for the same reason Pedro wouldn't do anything to Javier.

"There are things you aren't privy to that I am. Now get out. I don't want to see your face."

Pedro stared down Javier. "When did all this change? Mr. Rook wanted her gone. Isn't that why he sent you here?"

Javier laughed. “Why I’m here is of no concern to you.”

He turned his back on Pedro, effectively dismissing him. How he wanted to finish Javier right now. Prove to Mr. Rook that the man he thought invincible was and had been taken out by him—Pedro Gonzalez. However, he controlled it. The mess would be too much to clean up, and it was too much of a prominent place for him to off Javier.

Maybe he’d still get rid of Javier. After he disposed of Astrid Conway.

Chapter Twenty-Three

TODAY WAS THE LAST DAY OF FILMING FOR THE CURRENT season, and Astrid was part relieved and part sad. Relieved that the crew and others who worked on the show weren't in any danger from the person after her and sad because she wouldn't see the people who'd been on this amazing journey with her for a few months. The show was contracted for another year, but show business was fickle, and anything could happen. The ratings for the upcoming series could tank, and the network could cancel her show. Anything was possible, and she never took it for granted.

“What are you going to wow us with today?” Basil asked as he came onto the set.

“As if you don't already know,” Astrid said with a smile.

Her whole season was planned with each dish she'd be cooking before shooting even began.

Basil chuckled. “This is true. I’m looking forward to it. I know when it airs, Nancy will want to make it. You know my wife, always wanting to make what you make.”

“I’ll make sure to give you a printed copy of the recipe so you can hand it over to her after the show airs. And I love that she wants to do that. It’s why I love doing this show.”

Basil laughed again. “It’s been a good season, Astrid. I know everyone who watches it will love it.”

As usual, Basil reassured her that everything would be fine—was this becoming another superstition they now shared? It didn’t matter if it was. Astrid liked it and appreciated that she’d gotten Basil as her director.

“I’m hoping so. Is everything good here? I need to dash back to my dressing room to grab something.”

“Yep, we’ll be ready to shoot our first scene in twenty minutes. That’ll give you plenty of time.”

“I don’t need that long.” Although if Callum followed her, which she was sure he would because when she was on set he didn’t let her out of his sight, they could share a couple of kisses. Fortunately, her make-up girl hadn’t put any lipstick on her yet, so she wouldn’t have to worry about her and Callum messing it up.

With a wave to Basil, she stepped off the set and headed back to her room. As expected, Callum followed.

“Everything okay?” he asked as he fell into step beside her.

“Yep, I need to grab something from my dressing room.”

There wasn’t anything she needed to get from her dressing room. She just wanted another few minutes alone with Callum. Have his arms hold her. He was becoming an addiction she would quite happily indulge in.

“Okay.”

As much as she wanted him to hold her hand, she knew he wouldn’t. Ox might not have a problem with their relationship, but they still didn’t want to advertise it to all her colleagues.

The last two weeks had been amazing. The nights were incredible. Losing herself in Callum's arms was more than she'd ever expected she would experience. There hadn't been anymore weird things happening to her. No car chases. No one shooting at her. Part of her almost believed that whoever had been after her had given up.

The question was—why had this person gone quiet?

Callum reached past her to open the door to her room, a gesture that had taken her a little bit to get used to.

“Thank you,” she said demurely.

The second the door snicked shut, Astrid turned and pushed Callum against the wood, enjoying his little “oof” of surprise. His arms immediately closed around her. She didn't know why this feeling of melancholy was biting at her, only that it was. It could be because filming was finishing. But this was deeper, as if there were a line drawn in the sand and after today, things would be different.

Was it an omen that something bad was about to happen?

Astrid pushed that thought away and concentrated on this moment and the man in her arms as she pressed her lips against his.

A shaft of desire assailed her, and she wished that they were at her place so that they could take this further. For whatever reason, she wanted to lose herself in the passion she and Callum created. Wanted to forget the outside world and focus on the two of them.

The way his lips danced over hers. The way his arms held her close. The way their hearts beat in time.

After a few more seconds, she pulled away and rested her cheek against his chest.

“Not that I'm complaining because kissing you is one of my favorite things in the world, but what's going on? You seem, I don't know, anxious.” He smoothed a hand down her back and her eyes drifted shut.

Whenever he held her, a calmness settled over her. She shouldn't be surprised that he'd picked up on her uneasiness.

"I don't know. I always get this one on the last day of filming. There's so much uncertainty in this business. I maybe popular now, but it doesn't take much to get canceled these days. I would never want to hurt or offend, but people these days don't give second chances, regardless of innocent intentions or not. If that happened, not only would I be out of a job, but so would everyone here."

Her chest heaved as she attempted to catch her breath.

"Whoa, slow down. Nothing like that is going to happen." Callum pressed his lips against her temple. "And do you know why?"

Astrid glanced up at him from beneath her eyelashes. The admiration shining in his eyes chased a little of the anxiety away. "Why?"

"Because you're you. The fact that you just said that makes me believe you're conscious of your brand and not only that, but I've seen how you are with people—respectful, kind. And if you were going to comment on anything that might be a hot topic, I'm pretty sure you'd run it past Penni first."

His point was valid, but there had been times when people's private conversations were recorded and replayed all over the internet. People who thought they were in a safe space expressing thoughts with friends only to find out that they weren't.

"Not if I'm in public. Anything can happen when I'm out grocery shopping. Grabbing a coffee. Or pumping gas, for goodness' sake."

"Ahh, Comet, when you're with me, I'll make sure that when we're out, I'll protect you as best I can from prying eyes."

Astrid touched his cheek, the fine bristles prickling against her palm. "You can't be with me every hour of every day. One of the things I acknowledged the first time I was recognized in public—I'm my brand, and I will protect that with integrity

and smarts. I'm very conscious of being me whether I'm on TV, at an event or in the street. The reason I am successful is because of the people who watch me. I'm not going to treat them in a way that's not kind and respectful." She ran her hand over his hard chest, a chest she'd slept against the previous evening. "Although I do like the idea of you being with me all the time."

Callum smiled, and his eyes crinkled in the corner—she'd never get tired of seeing it. "Me too. Now I think it's time I got you back to the set. We don't want everyone to gossip about us."

Astrid shrugged. "I think they've worked out that something is going on between us. I don't care anyway. You're not my dirty little secret, Callum, and I won't let you think that."

Her relationship with Callum wasn't something to be ashamed of. If anyone suggested otherwise, she would put them in their place.

"You're not a secret of mine, either." He hooked a finger under her chin and lifted it so that she looked deep into his dark gaze. "You are special, Astrid Conway, and I'm very glad that you're mine."

"Ditto."

Leaving her room to do the job she was being paid handsomely to do was hard, but the sooner she started, the sooner she could get home, crawl into Callum's arms, and stay there forever.



THERE WAS a package waiting at Astrid's front door when they pulled up to the house. The box was your average looking brown cardboard one, yet the hairs on the back of Growler's neck stood to attention. The same warning he got when shit was about to hit the fan on a mission.

"Were you expecting a delivery today?" he asked casually as he slowed the car to a stop, further away from the front of

the house than he would normally park.

“No, but that’s not unusual. From time-to-time companies bypass sending things to the network or my PR company and send direct to me so I can review or endorse the product.”

Growler didn’t like the idea of random companies knowing where Astrid lived. “Right. Stay here. I want to check it out.”

“Is that really necessary?”

“Yes.” He caught the way her back straightened at his brisk manner. This was the first time he’d used that sort of tone with her.

In the pocket behind the passenger seat was the tablet that Cass had given him. He quickly pulled up Astrid’s file and typed in *Suspicious package, front doorstep. Going to inspect.*

It would be wonderful if there was a program on the device which scanned boxes for anything that would cause danger. Perhaps it was something he could talk to Cass about. Although what he was thinking of was probably too high tech for a tablet to be able to do effectively.

“Cameras,” he muttered to himself.

Checking the feed was going to be the quickest and safest way to find out how the package got on her front doorstep. Locating the *Security Camera Feeds* folder, Growler opened it and brought up the front door camera footage. Fortunately, there was a feature that enabled him to see when the camera was triggered instead of scrolling through the hourly feeds and missing something. A couple of the snippets were bugs flying past the camera, but then he saw a figure walking to the door, their black unmarked van sat in the background.

What company delivered with black vans? Not many that he knew of.

The person dropping off the parcel ensured that the cap they wore was pulled down low over his brow, making his features hard to make out. The way he carefully placed the box on the ground had alarm bells ringing loudly in Growler’s mind.

“Shit,” he muttered and pinched the screen to enlarge the picture. It didn’t help. He wouldn’t be getting out to check it— not after watching that.

“What is it? Is it a delivery of products for me to try?” Astrid’s fingers tapped on his forearm to get his attention.

From the second he saw the package, he’d gone into SEAL mode. His concentration on the task at hand. “I don’t think so. We need to get out of here.”

Popping the tablet away, Growler started the car and pulled out.

“Where are we going to go? What’s going on? Don’t leave me in the dark. This is my life that’s being played with here, not yours,” Astrid demanded.

Growler blew out a breath and rolled his shoulders. “Sorry, you’re right. I’m going to park down the street and call Ox, as well as the authorities, to report a suspicious package. I couldn’t get a good look at who delivered the item, but I believe Cass will be able to enhance the footage to help with identifying who left this for you.”

He kept his voice neutral, tamping down his anger so that he didn’t frighten Astrid even more.

“Okay.” Her response was subdued, and he was even more driven to find the person who was doing this to her and pound them into the ground for causing her this pain.

As soon as he was parked safely away, he called Alliez. The male voice that answered wasn’t typical, but cut down the time needed to explain anyway.

“Ox, it’s Growler. I’ve got a situation at Astrid’s house.”

“I’m listening.” Curt and straight to the point, Growler liked that about his boss.

Quickly, he relayed everything that had happened in the last thirty minutes. “It could be nothing, but everything in me is telling me it’s not.”

“Always trust the gut. I’m on it. Angel is out on a job, but Irish is here. I’m going to send him out. I’ll speak to Cass

about the footage and then head your way.”

“Roger that. Once we hang up, I’ll call the police and appraise them of the situation as well.”

“I’ll text you a number. Ask for Captain Doherty. He’s one cop you can trust, and one I’ve dealt with a lot. He’ll get the ball rolling with his team.”

“Will do.”

“Hang tight, Growler.”

The line went dead. Growler could feel Astrid watching him. He took her hand to let her know that he hadn’t forgotten about her again. Hadn’t forgotten that she was worried. Hadn’t forgotten that her home could, potentially, blow up.

Chapter Twenty-Four

THE FLASHING LIGHTS WERE STARTING TO GET TO ASTRID.

She sat in the SUV and watched as Callum, Ox, the police and God knew who else, discuss the situation. From what she'd been able to work out, with limited communication, was that the parcel hadn't been a bomb, but there had been something in it that wasn't a range of saucepans for her to endorse either.

Tired of waiting, she assumed it was more than safe enough for her to get out, given the fact that everyone was milling around in groups.

Marching over to the group of men, she tapped Callum on the shoulder. "What's happening?" she demanded. In the short walk from the car to the group, a full head of anger had steamed to life. "I think I mentioned, this is my house, my life so, you know, it would be really nice if y'all included me in this conversation."

Astrid didn't care if she was being rude. Didn't care if she stepped on toes she shouldn't. Just because she was a woman didn't mean she was going to fall apart if someone told her something bad.

She'd faced her father withering away to nothing from ALS. She'd had hard, emotionally draining conversations with his caregivers at his assisted living facility. She could deal with a conversation about a potential danger dumped on her doorstep.

None of the men in the group spoke, but Astrid thought she saw a spark of admiration in the intense blue gaze of a man she hadn't met before, but knew he was part of Alliez as Callum had greeted with a slap on the back. Ox, she noted, stepped away, along with the two police officers who'd been standing around.

"You got this, Growler?" Intense blue eyes spoke, and Callum's eyebrow rose in surprise as if this was the first time he'd heard the guy speak.

"I do."

Blue eyes nodded, then walked away.

"Who was that?" Astrid asked, as he headed toward a vehicle similar to the one she and Callum now drove around in. He walked with purpose, but like his eyes, he gave off intense stay away vibes.

"Irish, he works at Alliez."

"Right." The anger that propelled her forward and had her demanding answers, appeared to have disappeared and left in its place, was uncertainty and...tiredness. "Can I go inside?" she asked, needing the familiarity of her things to normalize her life. Although that was impossible.

"In a few minutes. The police are finishing up with what they need to do."

"Are you going to tell me what was in the box?" Astrid wrapped her arms around her waist as the wind picked up and swirled around her. A shiver wracked her, and she wished she had a jacket. She hadn't taken one to the studio because she

didn't think it would be necessary, and she certainly hadn't expected to be standing outside hours after she'd finished taping her show.

Callum pulled her into his chest, his arms providing the comfort and warmth she craved. "I'm sorry, Comet. This isn't what you need today."

Astrid scoffed loudly. "You got that. Just when I thought things had gone quiet and perhaps I was safe, it gets thrown in my face."

"I know. I promise I'll explain everything to you when I get inside. I'm not being evasive because I don't think you can handle it. I just don't want to start and then get called away. Do you trust me to do that?"

Her earlier annoyance at being left out of the loop was still there, but she also appreciated what Callum was trying to do. "I do trust you, and I know you won't keep anything from me."

"Damn straight, I won't." Callum tightened his hold on her, and she closed her eyes, letting him take her weight.

She had no idea how long they stood there, but soon Callum loosened his hold and when she looked up, she noticed that fewer people were mingling around. Ox was still there with a couple of the officers, and Astrid suspected he was taking that over, seeing as she was monopolizing all of Callum's time.

"Shouldn't you be over there with Ox?" she asked.

"If I was, I would be, but you're my priority."

"I'm so tired, Callum," she whispered. "I just want to go to sleep and wake up with it all over. Is that too much to ask?"

"It's not and I promise you, we'll figure out a way to make it stop."

A buzz sounded overhead, and she looked up to see two drones flying over the house.

"What the fuck?" Growler rushed Astrid back to the car before she could comprehend what was happening. "Stay

here.”

“It’s fine, Callum, it’s the paparazzi. They use drones,” Astrid responded tiredly. “News must have got out that there was police activity here. Wouldn’t surprise me if they’re lurking in the street as well.”

The price of fame.

It had never bothered her before, but right this second, she wished she wasn’t well known. This pity party wasn’t how she normally reacted to situations. Normally she took a moment to take in, and then she pushed it aside and moved onto the next thing. It was getting harder and harder to do that.

Callum growled his displeasure. “Fucking vultures. Still stay here. They don’t need to see you so they can exploit your fear and stress.”

She loved that he worried about what the public perception of her was. In that moment, her love for him grew even deeper. With every little thing he did, he showed that he cared more and more about her.

“It’s fine. I think I’ve said it before. I knew when I signed up for the show and all the endorsement deals that it put me on the radar for this sort of thing.” Astrid pointed to the sky where the drones still buzzed around like annoying flies. “They’ll get bored and move on to someone else. Or some other piece of juicy information will pass through their channels.”

Callum moved so he stood in front of her, hiding her from everyone’s gaze. She wouldn’t tell him that she could still be seen through the windshield.

“The officers are heading down the driveway to shoo off the paps that are hanging around,” Ox said as he came up to them. “Irish called to let me know that he passed a few vans as he left.”

“What about the buzzards in the sky?”

Astrid chuckled quietly, liking Callum’s names for the drones.

“I think once we get rid of the vans out the front, they’ll disappear too.” Ox glanced up at the two devices now doing a circle around the house.

Astrid was tired and just wanted to get inside. She pushed against Callum’s chest—he moved immediately. “Is it all good to go inside now?”

Callum dropped a kiss on her head. “Yeah, Comet, it’s all well and if anyone has a problem with it, they can deal with me.”

“Thank you.” She loved knowing Callum had her back, not just because she was a job to him, but because he cared.

She lifted her chin. If the drones wanted a picture of her, then she would direct the narrative of what type of photo they’d get of her.

If whoever had dropped the parcel at the door expected her to crumple, they could think again. Inside, she may be scared and ready to fall apart, but on the outside, she was going to project that she was in control. That whoever they were didn’t scare her.



“I CAN SEE why you like her,” Ox commented as Astrid walked away from them.

Everything in Growler wanted to rush forward and protect her from the prying eyes of the paparazzi, but he stayed where he was and admired the way she was giving them a big “fuck you” for thinking she was going to fall in a heap on the ground.

“She’s pretty damn special. But this is fucking ridiculous, Ox. How did this happen? She lives in a gated community. Anyone who comes in has to go through the guardhouse. Didn’t whoever was on duty think they were suspicious in their black van?”

“I don’t know. I know the police are going to question them and look at camera footage, but I’ll ask as well. Whether

they'll co-operate with me is a different matter, but if they do we can compare what they tell me to what they tell the cops."

Growler couldn't get the image of the severed ear out of his mind. He didn't understand the message behind it. Or why it was in such a big ass box.

"Do you think we'll get a trace of DNA or anything from the ear?" he asked.

"Depends," Ox started. "If the victim's records are on file, they may get a hit and then can chase them up. There could also be traces of prints from the person who cut it off, but I'm guessing they probably wore gloves, so they'll likely get traces of latex."

"I wonder if the victim went to the hospital. It would be hard to explain how your ear got cut off." Growler was still watching the door Astrid had entered.

"Possibly, unless they were too afraid to get help."

"Or they were homeless and couldn't." Growler hated the thought of someone being hurt in that way. Regardless of their circumstances, no one deserved that to happen to them.

"You know Cass will be on the case. If there's something to be found, she'll find it."

While Growler appreciated all that Cass could do with her mad computer skills, a sense of unease at the thought of her invading people's privacy—never mind that it could help solve this case. "Is that ethical?"

Ox stared at him, his gaze hard and uncompromising. "Everything we do at Alliez is done within the bounds of the law. However, there are times when lines have to be crossed. Where doing whatever is necessary to find someone requires those lines to be blurred. When your former teammates' partners needed to be found, we did what we had to do to achieve a good outcome. You yourself know that some intel you received while on a mission was obtained in ways that were more gray than black and white."

Growler sighed. Nothing Ox was saying was wrong. "Yeah, I know. Not sure why the thought of someone's

medical records being obtained irked me out this time.”

“I get it. But also know that now we’re working with Julian and the task force he’s on, we’re going to go on assignments with information obtained in various ways. You going to be good with that?”

“Definitely. I don’t know what made me question it. I just feel—” Growler didn’t know what he felt or why he’d questioned something he knew was vital to the way missions were run. Intel was vital. It saved lives. “I *know* that the best information is achieved by doing whatever necessary to get someone to talk. And if Cass’s investigating helps Astrid, then I can’t get upset when the woman I love will have the answers she needs.”

Ox smiled. “You love her, huh? Does she know?”

Dammit, he hadn’t meant to blurt that out, especially to Ox. “Forget I said that. And no, I haven’t told her how I truly feel.”

Ox slapped him on the shoulder. “Look, I know this is all new and different for you. In the military, we got presented with information, and we acted on it. Here, we have to source that information to help us. We’ll get to the bottom of why the Ramirez Cartel is so hellbent on keeping Astrid quiet. And we’ll do whatever we have to ensure that she can put this all behind her and move forward with her life, and you.”

“Yeah, that’s the aim, isn’t it, with everything we do? Whether it’s protecting a starlet from overeager fans or finding someone who sends my woman a severed ear.”

“Exactly. Now go, when I hear anything, I’ll let you know.” Ox took two steps when he paused and pulled his phone out of his pocket.

Immediately, Growler closed the distance, eager to find out if it was an update from Cass. “Was that Cass?” he asked, voicing his hope that he could go inside with some answers.

“No,” Ox lifted his head. “It was Julian. He’s got a job for us.”

Growler's world shifted a little before righting itself. "When do we have to leave?"

The last thing he wanted to do was leave Astrid, especially when a threat had been laid at her front door.

"Two days from now. I don't have all the details yet. It could be a job that may not need all of us."

As much as Growler wanted that, he also didn't want to let the team down. "Right."

"Once I get back to the office, I'll review it and be in touch."

"I'm committed to Alliez, I want you to know that." Growler didn't want to let his team down, but he also didn't want to leave Astrid right now. Not after today's episode.

"I know, Growler. And we'll play it by ear. Your duty is to keep Astrid safe. There will be other trips where I'll need you. Trust me, it's not a one and done type of deal with the FBI." With a wave, he headed to his car and Growler noticed that while he and Ox had been talking, everyone else had cleared out.

He appreciated Ox's words and understanding, although he shouldn't be surprised by Ox's reaction to him not being keen on leaving Astrid alone.

Glancing at the house, he spied Astrid standing in the window watching him, the light shining behind her. The image was so haunting, and a renewed fire ignited in his soul.

Whatever it took, he would make sure Astrid was safe—always.

Chapter Twenty-Five

ASTRID TENSED WHEN CALLUM CAME THROUGH THE FRONT door. The conversation between him and Ox had looked intense. Her mind whirled with possible reasons for that.

The door clicked shut, and she moved from her place at the window to meet him in the hallway. “Now that we’re alone, can you tell me what the hell was in the parcel?”

“I need a drink. Do you want one?”

Astrid took a deep breath, closed her eyes and let it out at the same time she opened her eyes, her gaze connecting directly with Callum’s. There was concern, worry, and guilt on display in his brown eyes. The fine lines around his mouth had deepened with stress and tiredness.

“After today, yes, please.”

Without waiting for a response, she brushed past him and headed for the kitchen. Going to the small wine fridge under

the counter, she pulled out a bottle of her favorite rosé. Behind her, she heard Callum getting some wine glasses down. She didn't know if he liked this type of wine, but she hoped so. She needed a little comfort wine right now.

Once the drinks were poured, they both sat on stools at the island bench. Astrid hadn't wanted to sit at the small table, like they normally did.

Callum's finger trailed up and down the stem of the wineglass, as though he was contemplating how to begin.

"If you're having trouble working out where to start, how about with what was in the box," she suggested when the silence stretched thin between them.

"That's the thing, I want to tell you, but I also want to protect you from knowing, which is an asshole thing to do. You have every right to know, as it happened to you." He looked at her, his eyes pleading with her to understand why he just hadn't told her when they were outside. It could've saved a lot of time and pain. "When I tell you what was in the box, it's not something you're going to easily forget. Waiting to tell you has made it worse for you, but I wanted it to just be us. I wanted to be able to hold you when I explained it."

While watching Ox and Callum talk, all she'd wanted to know was what was in the box. Now, though, she couldn't help but imagine awful things, particularly with what Callum had just said. After all, whoever was after her was part of a drug cartel. If how they were portrayed in movies and in television shows was true, they didn't play. They got their point across in whatever manner was necessary.

Whatever was in the box, she would deal with it. Callum would help her do that.

"I understand why you did what you did. I may not be happy about it, but I get it." Astrid reached over and took his hand, squeezing it. "Please just tell me."

"Do you remember the prank of giving a gift in a large box but there was always other boxes in it, going down in size until there was just a small one left?"

Astrid nodded. She recalled one of her friends from culinary school telling her, her now husband, had proposed that way. Making her open like ten boxes before getting to the ring one. Somehow, she suspected that there wasn't going to be the same happy ending to this story. "I do."

"Well, that's what was left on your doorstep. A package like that."

"And the final box?" she asked, butting in because she was impatient.

"There was a severed ear," Callum said baldly, without any emotion in his voice at all.

"An ear?" Astrid's hand went to her ear. Who on earth sent an ear and why? "Oh my God!"

It all made sense to her, and yet it didn't at the same time.

Immediately, Callum stood in front of her, arms wide, before she could finish speaking. "What?" he looked around the room as if he expected to find an assassin in the house with them.

"The ear. I think I know why it was sent to me."

Callum relaxed, lowered his arms, and sat back on the stool. Instead of reaching for his wine, he took her hand. She welcomed his warmth as the reality of the message sunk further and further into her.

"Why?" he asked softly, his thumb brushing across the top of her hand.

"It's a message saying they know everything. They know I *heard* the gunshots. I *heard* the argument. I *heard* them running away. I may have only seen one man, but I could probably recognize the voices if I heard them again."

Shivers started to shimmer to life. First her legs, then her arms, then her whole body.

"I won't let them get to you," Callum vowed as he pulled her into his embrace.

Astrid rested her head against his chest, the steady thump soothing her frazzled nerves. As much as she wanted to believe him, today's episode showed that they could.

“They got here, even with a guardhouse at the front of my estate.” She pulled back and looked up at him. “How did that even happen? How did whoever delivered the parcel get past them?”

“That's something we're going to find out. I know the police said they were going to speak to guards. Ox also mentioned he would as well. He'll let me know if he finds anything out.”

Beneath her hands, she noticed the tension tighten every muscle in his body. A moment ago, he'd been soft against her now, not so much.

“What? What's wrong?”



GROWLER LOOKED at the woman in his arms, and he wanted to lose himself in her. Kiss away her fears and his worries. All he wanted was to be able to tell her that everything was going to be okay. That nothing bad would happen while he was around. But as Astrid had pointed out, it already had. Somehow, someone from the Ramirez cartel had gotten to her house. It didn't matter that she hadn't been home at the time of the delivery—he hadn't kept her safe. And now he looked like he'd have to potentially go wheels up in two days—something he hadn't done in quite a while.

The words he wanted to say lodged in his throat. He didn't know how to get them out. How to let her know that he would be leaving her. Or for how long.

“You're scaring me, Callum.”

Her words pulled him out of his turbulent thoughts, and he pulled her tight, pressing a soft kiss to the top of her head. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that. I've got something else to tell you. Something I found out moments before I came into the house.”

“Something more about the delivery?”

If only that was it.

“No.”

He dropped her hand and pushed the stool back a fraction, putting a little distance between them. A moment of hurt flashed in Astrid’s eyes at his actions. To be able to tell her this, though, he needed to not have her pressed so close to him. It was now or never.

“Ox decided a while ago to add another service to Alliez Security. He got a call from someone today about it.” Growler thought the less Astrid knew the better it would be, though that made explaining it all even harder. Also, he didn’t know what he could and couldn’t say about his possible trip. Better to keep it as generic as possible. “The new side of the business is going to involve going away for periods of time.”

Astrid pulled her hands away from his, and he wanted to grab them back. He didn’t though. If she needed distance, he would give it to her. “When?”

Growler sighed. “I’m not sure exactly, but Ox said it could be in two days.”

“What about me? After what happened today, you’re just going to go and leave me to fend for myself?” she asked incredulously.

“I would never leave you unprotected, which is why I won’t go. My priority is to you, and Ox knows that and understands it. He doesn’t expect me to go.”

Quiet settled over them, and Growler couldn’t work out what was going through Astrid’s mind. Her face was a blank slate, as though she’d shut down and was hiding from him.

No way could he leave her, not when she was like this.

“You want to go though, don’t you?” A hint of sadness tinged her words, and yet they hit him with the accuracy of a sniper hitting its target.

“I’m not going to lie to you—yes, I do want to go. To go and do what I used to do, not in the same capacity, but still,

going on a mission feeds my soul. But also, things are different now. I have you, and you are what's most important to me."

"You're important to me, too, and I don't want to hold you back."

Growler got up and pulled Astrid into his arms. He needed this closeness. Needed her to know that his words were true. She was number one in his life. "Ah, Comet, you're not. I'm here because here is where I belong."

He pressed his lips to hers and showed her how true his words were.



PEDRO WAS PLEASED with himself as he sat in his car down the road from Astrid Conway's house. Seeing the mayhem surrounding his gift was better than he expected it to be.

He didn't give a fuck what Javier or Mr. Rook had said. He was going to eliminate the chef. He'd already set his plan in motion. Prior to being told to back off, he'd found out that she hadn't been able to give the police a good description of him, only that she'd heard the shots fired. If that was the reason Mr. Rook wanted him to back off, then it was a pathetic one. Regardless of what she'd given the cops, she was still a threat to *him*, and he wanted her gone.

He hadn't seen Javier since that afternoon in his hotel room. As far as Javier and Mr. Rook knew, he was headed back to Mexico. But he wasn't leaving Los Angeles until he'd finished what he started. He would prove to Mr. Rook he had what it took to be a valuable member of his organization.

He was the best at extracting information, like he'd told Mr. Rook. The fact Enrico had been a tough bastard to crack was neither here nor there as far as Pedro was concerned.

Now all he had to do was wait for the moment when the bitch chef was by herself. And there would be one time. No way would the guard be constantly by her side.

When that time came, he would be ready. He would take her and make her regret going to the cops and saying anything. He would show her what it was like to be with a real man, and then he would get rid of her. Either by killing her or selling her for the highest price possible. Or maybe he would keep her for his own personal use. Maybe he'd bring her back here and have her hiding in plain sight, under the nose of the guy who was supposed to be protecting her but had failed. He would know when the time came what to do.

Of that, he had no doubt.

Chapter Twenty-Six

MORNING CAME WAY TOO SOON FOR ASTRID. IF ONLY SHE HAD to get up and go to the studio and do a shoot, but the show had wrapped, and until she was green lit for another season, her days wouldn't be as full as they used to be.

Thank goodness the studio was okay with her doing her own video content like she used to do. Normally between seasons she took the time to rest, try new recipes and occasionally she'd post something on her channel. This break, though, maybe she would do more.

Soft lips brushed her shoulder, and the arm around her belly tightened. Her eyes drifted shut again as she gave herself over to the sweet kisses Callum was placing on her back. The hard ridge of his morning erection nudged her ass, and she leaned farther back into it.

“Morning,” she murmured.

“It is a good one,” he said as he rolled her to her back and he leaned over her.

Last night he’d played her body like he was a first violinist in the Los Angeles Symphony. He’d taken her to the brink of orgasm so many times before pulling back until she was writhing beneath him and begging for him to let her fall over the cliff face. Eventually he’d let her, and her orgasm had been fiercer than anything she’d experienced with him.

“I don’t recall saying ‘good morning,’ just ‘morning.’” She tweaked his nipple, enjoying his sharp intake of breath.

“Any morning with you is a good.” His large hand enclosed her breast, squeezing gently.

Astrid arched farther into the touch, letting her need for him possess her. In the back of her mind, she knew that she needed to face the day. Face the consequences of what had happened the previous day. That could all wait though. This couldn’t. She didn’t want it to wait.

“Take me, Callum,” she whispered as she ground her hips against his hard erection.

“Always,” he responded before he kissed her and she lost herself to the moment. To the way he made her feel. To the bliss the two of them were creating.

When he slid into her, Astrid’s heart swelled, and she clutched his shoulders, keeping his chest pressed against hers so that all that moved were their lower bodies. The rise of her pelvis as she took him in. The lowering as he pulled out until only the tip of him remained.

Her senses went into overdrive. Her skin tingled as her release built up until it consumed her and she called out his name as he called out hers at the same time.

Morning sex was something she could really get used to. They were in sync with each other, and their breaths came out in ragged pants.

Callum gathered her close, and she snuggled into his hold, knowing that soon the real world would intrude and everything she’d been able to forget about for a few minutes would be

back, knocking at the front of her mind, demanding her attention.

All too soon, Callum loosened his hold and slid toward the opposite side of the bed. Astrid wanted to reach out and pull him back, but instead she clutched the sheet to her. This feeling sorry for herself wasn't how she operated and she gave herself a few more seconds to absorb it in before tossing the covers aside and going to the bathroom, just as Callum was coming out.

“Want me to join you in the shower?” he asked with a wink.

Astrid laughed, her blue mood fading away. “As tempting as it is, not this time.”

Callum's eyes narrowed, as though he was trying to see into her brain to see if she was okay. Astrid held his gaze, not wanting him to know the turmoil that still lingered within her. “I'll get started on breakfast,” he said instead, and she released her breath in a big whoosh as he pulled on some sweatpants and departed the bedroom.

Astrid leaned against the door frame and closed her eyes. The image of Callum's fine ass and back imprinted behind her eyelids.

Part of the previous night's conversation came back to her. The information that Ox was expanding Alliez's business and would be taking on assignments that would require them all to go on trips, or missions, he called it. How often would they be called away?

Could she deal with him leaving her on a regular basis?

It wasn't like he would be away for months on end, like if he was still in the military. At least she didn't think so. But the thought of him going to go do something dangerous. Go into a situation where he might not come back to her frightened the life out of her.

Maybe she was making too much of it all. Maybe the trips wouldn't be as dangerous as what he'd done when he'd been a SEAL.

All that mattered was if she could let him go and be okay with it?

Astrid headed to the shower and pondered the question. The feelings she had for Callum weren't false or surface level. They were deep and growing deeper with every passing moment they spent together.

They hadn't known each other long, but they'd spent nearly every waking hour with each other. He was a quiet presence that she knew she could count on when she needed him.

Was she caught up in a Stockholm Syndrome kind of situation?

No, she didn't believe she was.

All she knew was that if she couldn't see him. Touch him. Love him. Then her life was going to be an empty shell. There was no way she could go back to how she was before Callum. Her professional life wouldn't change, but her personal life had. It had changed the moment she'd locked eyes with him in the Alliez conference room, and it had changed for the better.

If she only had Callum for a short while, then at least she'd had him and wouldn't have to wonder what might have happened between them had she pushed him away because of his job.

Snapping off the water, Astrid toweled off. Her decision made—life without Callum wasn't a life she wanted.



GROWLER GRABBED the toast that had just popped up and placed it on the plates he had set out in front of him. He then spooned on the scrambled eggs and a couple of slices of crispy bacon. He'd heard the shower shut off and expected Astrid to come down the stairs at any moment.

There was so much he had to tell her. A lot had changed overnight. When he'd read his messages, he'd been glad he'd been sitting. He'd had to read them three times before the reality of them sunk in.

He'd called Ox and then Cass to confirm the contents. After what had occurred the previous day, it seemed too good to be true. Both confirmed the validity of the information, with Cass telling him to check Astrid's working folder where he would find the visual proof he needed.

"You trying to put me out of a job?" Astrid asked as she walked into the kitchen. The familiar vanilla scent of her bath wash swirled around him.

Immediately, his body responded to her closeness, but he tamped down his desire. After he told her the news, they could go upstairs and celebrate, considering she didn't have to be at the station and he didn't have to go into the office until late afternoon.

"Have we had this conversation before?" he queried.

Astrid picked up a piece of bacon and bit into it, her eyes shining in mirth. "Who knows, maybe? Maybe it's our thing."

He laughed and sat next to her. The next few moments passed in silence as they ate their breakfast.

"Are you going to tell me what has got you smiling so big?" Astrid laid her silverware over her empty plate.

"Maybe I'm just happy to be here with you." Teasing her hadn't been part of his plan, but he couldn't resist. He was just so fucking relieved.

"Nice try, Growler. How about you have another shot?"

He paused at hearing his nickname slipping from her lips.

"What happened to Callum?" He couldn't believe he asked that question. It didn't matter what she called him. Why was he making such a big deal out of it?

Astrid shrugged. "I figure that if I want something out of you, I need to use a name that triggers a response to orders."

Growler sat there, stunned for a heartbeat, before laughing. A deep belly laugh. "I guess I deserved that."

"You did." She crossed her arms, a classic defensive move, but Astrid wasn't shutting him out. The laughter shining in her

eyes and the way her lips curved into a large smile told a different story.

Deciding that he'd dragged it out for long enough, he leaned across the table and unfolded her arms before taking her hands in his. "You're free. The threat is gone."

Her brow furrowed in confusion, as if she didn't understand what he was saying. Then it cleared, and her smile returned. "What? Are you joking? How did this happen? When did this happen? You aren't playing with me, are you?"

The need to have her close to him propelled him to stand and pull her into his arms. Immediately, hers closed around him and he sighed. There was nothing better in this world than having this woman in his arms. Holding her close to him. Loving the way she fit perfectly against him. "I'm not lying. It's true. Cass heard chatter on the dark web last night that word was being passed around that the Ramirez Cartel were no longer interested in you. They had something bigger in play."

"No, that can't be right. Not after what was left on my doorstep yesterday. It doesn't seem possible that they would send me a message like that and then, a few hours later, call off chasing me."

Seconds ago her body had been pliant in his embrace, now her muscles were stiffer than a tree trunk.

Her disbelief wasn't unexpected. Hell, he hadn't believed it until he'd seen the proof. "I know it's hard to believe. Let me show you what Cass found. When you see it, you'll believe the threat really is over."

Without waiting for a response, he dropped his arms to grab her hand. Growler led her to the family room and sat with her on the couch. Grabbing his Alliez tablet off the coffee table, he pulled open the document he wanted to show Astrid.

"Read this." He handed the device to her.

Growler sat back and watched her eyes scanning the text. He could tell that she was re-reading it a few times. Not that he blamed her for doing exactly what he'd done. As she'd

said, it seemed so far-fetched that in the space of twelve hours the threat against her had gone, but there it was in black and white.

“This is too good to be true.” Astrid placed the tablet back on the table. “None of this makes sense. What is this other thing they’re focusing on? Why were they so hellbent on getting me before, but they’ve now decided that they’re going to back off?”

“I get it. I thought the same. But I called both Cass and Ox—it’s all true. Cass vetted and verified the information. For whatever reason, the cartel have deemed you’re no longer a threat and announced that to anyone who was listening.”

Growler held Astrid close, hoping that what he was saying was getting through and she could believe it.

“It’s over,” she whispered.

“Yeah, baby, it is.”



PEDRO SMASHED the burner phone in frustration. No one. Fucking no one was going to help him. Every single one of his fucking contacts were *busy*. The likelihood of that being true was slim. Word had somehow gotten around that anything Pedro wanted done couldn’t be done. Whether it came from Mr. Rook or Javier, Pedro didn’t care—it just had.

Well, if he couldn’t get the help he needed, it wouldn’t stop him from achieving the end goal. Maybe it was better this way. There were fewer people to fuck up the plan.

If he couldn’t trust himself to do it right, then who could he trust?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“DO YOU REALLY HAVE TO GO?” ASTRID ASKED AS SHE brushed invisible lint from the shoulders of his leather jacket.

“Yeah, Comet, I do.” A determined glint had turned his milky chocolate eyes dark, like the darkest chocolate.

The past week had been blissful. She’d been able to drive her own car. Go to the store. Live the life she’d had before everything had gone to shit. Callum hadn’t been by her side all the time, as his job of protecting her was over now that the threat had gone. But he hadn’t gone back to his place. In fact, more of his things appeared at her house with every passing hour.

The trip that he’d told her about, the one he wouldn’t be a part of because of needing to protect her, had been delayed—until now. He’d received a text the previous evening advising him it was now a go. There was no reason for him not to join his team and she’d told him so while knowing it would be hard

to watch him leave, knowing he could be walking into a dangerous situation.

“Do you have everything?” she asked, even though she had no idea what he needed to take with him.

“I have the necessities. Will pick up more when I get to Alliez’s office.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to drive you there?”

A slow smile spread across Callum’s face, and her insides melted at it. “I’m good. But thank you.”

Astrid knew she had to let him go. Had to let him walk out the door, but saying goodbye was hard, especially as her feelings for him had sharpened and deepened the more time they spent together. “I, I—umm, I’ll miss you,” she blurted out when what she wanted to say was “I love you,” but she kept the words swallowed down.

Callum looked like he wanted to say something. His mouth opened and closed twice. Instead of saying something, he framed her face with his hands, lowering his head until his lips were a hairsbreadth away from hers. “I’ll miss you, too.”

Astrid only had a second to take in what he said before his mouth covered hers in a sweetest kiss. His lips moved slowly over hers, teasing her to open beneath him. Her fingers entwined in the hair at the base of his neck. Everything about this kiss felt as if it was a new beginning. A new start. As though an imaginary line had been cast and they’d crossed over to a new side. A better side.

“I really have to go.” Callum pressed a kiss against her forehead as he held her tight.

She loved it when he squeeze hugged her. It gave her the feeling of completeness and rightness that this was where she belonged.

“I know.” Determinedly, she took a step back, keeping her hands resting lightly on his chest. “Go, do your thing. I’ll be waiting for you when you get back.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. Had she said the wrong thing? Had she pushed too hard by saying what she did? Although that didn't seem likely, considering he'd told her he loved her too.

When he opened them again, she gasped at the sheen of tears. "No one has ever waited for me to come home from being away."

During their time together, they hadn't really talked about their parents. Now wasn't the time to ask. When he got back, though, she was going to question him about it. "Now you do."

"I do indeed." He glanced at his watch and swore under his breath. "I really need to go."

Astrid swallowed and blinked quickly as tears built in her eyes. She wasn't going to break down in front of Callum. The last thing she wanted him to think before he left was that she couldn't cope with him leaving. "Be safe."

Callum brushed the back of his fingers down one cheek, the touch leaving a trail of warmth and craving in its wake. "Always."

He bent and picked up his backpack, slinging it over his shoulder, and headed to the front door. Astrid followed and wiped away the stray tear that had leaked out of the corner of her eye. She gripped the door in her hand as he skipped down the stairs and climbed into his car.

They hadn't said goodbye to each other. It hadn't been a conscious action on her part, and she didn't know if Callum had deliberately avoided saying it to her.

The car started with a loud roar, and she lifted her hand in a wave, receiving one in return. How long she stood in the doorway after Callum's car had disappeared out of her line of vision, she didn't know. But she was aware of the tears trickling down her face. This first time was the going to be the hardest. The next time wouldn't be so bad. At least she hoped it wouldn't.

But no way would Callum know that when he left, he took a piece of her with him.



THE HUMIDITY of the jungle hit Growler, and he slapped at the bug that landed on his arm. It hadn't been that long since he'd been on a mission, but it hadn't taken him long to forget how unpleasant it was to wear full gear in the middle of the day.

"Good times, hey?" Angel came up beside him, a big grin on his face.

"The best," he muttered as another mosquito decided his blood was tasty.

As much as he was mentally complaining, Growler couldn't deny that it did feel good to be back in the thick of things. The rush of adrenaline had been continuous from the moment the plane had touched down in Brazil.

Their job was simple: go into the bowels of the Amazon and take out the leader of a cult who'd fled there after his compound in Peru had been raided by the authorities. Growler wondered why the FBI was involved, and why they were being sent to eliminate the guy and not, say, a SEAL Team, but his job wasn't to ask questions. It was to follow orders. No doubt things would become clearer when they were back stateside. Not to mention, no way would Ox put them or the company in a situation that wasn't legitimate.

In front of him, Ox held up his hand in a fist, and Growler immediately dropped to a crouch, as did Angel and Irish.

"Movement ahead," Ox murmured through the comms. "Four guards surrounding the building."

While they didn't have all the equipment that was usually available when he'd been on a mission in the past, they had Cass watching their every move back in Los Angeles. On each of them was a small device which transmitted their location back to her. Ox also had a microscopic camera on his vest which was giving Cass a front row view of their location and the building they were about to enter. Through the camera, she

could relay the number of heat signatures back to them so they knew what they were dealing with.

“Two people inside,” Cass reported. “Second person—innocent—and not in a situation to be a threat.”

What the hell did she mean by that?

Even though they were outnumbered, not by much, but still outnumbered, Growler was confident with the skill set of two former SEALs and two former Deltas, that they would be able to take down the guards and get their man.

“Fuck,” Irish mumbled.

Then it hit Growler what Cass had meant. Intense fury pulled at him—he was going to make the fucker pay. He only hoped that the person they were going to find with the former cult leader hadn’t been a prisoner for long.

While Cass may have said the second person in the cabin was an innocent, the guy they were here to eliminate had run a cult. He’d brainwashed many to do unspeakable things. No way was he or his teammates going to take a chance with anything or anyone.

“ANGEL AND IRISH flank around to the left. Growler, you’re with me,” Ox directed.

Slowly, they made their way to the right side of the cabin.

While it would be easier to rush through and take them head on, by coming from either side, they had the element of surprise on their hands. Fortunately, whoever had built the small building had created small tracks that surrounded the perimeter, enabling Growler and Ox and the others to get into position.

“On three. Radio silent. Cass, hit record and leave the room.” Ox issued the instructions quickly.

A spike of adrenaline pumped through Growler. Flexing his fingers around his rifle, he prepared himself for what was to happen next.

The men they were about to eliminate were chatting in Portuguese. Growler picked up the odd word or two, but he

sent it to the back of his mind. His focus was on himself and Ox. He steadied his breathing and heart rate.

Ox gave a short nod, and Growler slung his rifle over his shoulder and grabbed his KABAR from his pouch on his hip. A quick slice across the throat was as effective as a bullet, only much quieter.

“Three. Two. Go,” Ox whispered.

In unison, he and Ox came up behind the men standing guard and swiped their necks. The man immediately slumped in Growler’s arms, and he lowered him to the ground. He caught the slightest sound of a grunt coming from opposite to where he stood and knew the others had all disposed of their men.

They took up position on either side of the door, and Growler grabbed his rifle. This time, all it took was a slight nod of the head from Ox for the action to happen. This may have been the first time they’d worked together as a team, but the way they moved into action, it was as though they’d been working together for years.

Angel slammed his foot against the door frame. Wood shattered as the flimsy door fell off its hinges. A muffled scream came from the bed in the middle of the room. Glancing over Ox’s shoulder, Growler made out their mark. He was balls deep in a young girl who looked only fourteen.

Without thinking of the consequences, Growler bounded forward and shoved the guy to the side, keeping his gun pointed at the middle of his forehead. He was aware of movement around the room, but he kept all his attention on the naked man on the ground.

Growler expected him to be cowering, wondering what the hell had happened, but the guy looked belligerent...smug almost.

“You can’t touch me,” he taunted.

The barrel of another gun joined Growler’s, pointing at the man.

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Irish’s voice was low and deadly. “By order of the United States Government.”

Irish pulled the trigger before Growler could, and a perfect round hole marred the man’s forehead. His naked body slumped to the ground, brain matter and blood covering the dusty wooden floor.

“Clear the area. Another team will be on site in thirty minutes to clean up. Head to the evacuation point,” Ox commanded.

Surprised at the mention of another team had Growler looking up at his boss. “Do we need to take pictures before we go?”

Ox tapped his vest. “Done. Let’s get out of here.”

The sound of muffled cries came from outside, and Growler looked through the open door to see that Angel had wrapped the young girl in a blanket. “And her?” he asked.

“She’ll come with us part of the way. Cass has already got onto Julian, and he will have the relevant authorities meet us at the airport and collect her. They’ll question her and then take her back to her family. If she has one.” Ox gave the room one last look before heading to the exit.

Growler nodded. “Roger that.”

The four of them headed behind the cabin to the extraction point. Irish had the young girl in his arms, and her tears had stopped. Her eyelids were drooping as she lightly bounced up and down with each step Irish took. Even though Growler couldn’t see Irish’s face, he imagined that the other man was as pissed as he was that a girl as young as this one had had her innocence torn away from her from a fucker who got off on power plays and tormenting whoever he could.

An hour later, they were airborne on their way to the meeting point where they would then get on another aircraft and head back stateside. He’d been away from Astrid for three days, but it felt like it was a lifetime.

He couldn’t wait to see and hold his girl again.



ASTRID STROLLED the aisle of the grocery store, putting random items into her cart. Her mind was not on the task of filling up her refrigerator or pantry. Her mind was on Callum and the many miles that separated them. She didn't know where he'd been headed or what he was doing, but she wouldn't feel relaxed again until he was in her arms.

Her phone trilled in her purse and she grabbed it, smiling when Penni's name flashed on the screen. Wheeling her cart to a place where she wouldn't inhibit people from getting to the shelves, she connected the call.

"Hey! How's it going?"

"Hi, I was just calling to see how you were doing?" In the background, she could hear Logan's excited squeals, the sound so happy and free. She envied Logan. He didn't know how bad the world could be. The innocence of a child should always be protected, and that was what his dad did every time he was called away.

"How do you do it?" she blurted out.

"Do what?" Penni asked.

"Deal with Fort going away to places unknown and not knowing if he would return or not."

A sigh echoed down the line, and Astrid felt bad for asking her friend that. Should she have even told Penni that Callum was away on some trip? Penni had called a couple hours after Callum had left, and because she was still feeling so raw about him going away so soon after the threat on her life had been cleaned up, she'd blurted out that Callum had gone away.

Penni being Penni had calmed her down. If she'd been surprised about Callum and the other guys from Alliez going away, she hadn't said anything.

"Honestly, it's not easy. The first couple of times are always the hardest, but I knew he had a good group of men at his back and that, all of them combined, would make each other get back safely. While Callum may not have been with

Alliez long, and not know the others well, but they're all former special forces, working as a team is as natural as breathing to them."

Penni's words helped a little, but Astrid wasn't sure she could do handle if Callum went away a lot. Then again, she knew that he also needed this. That personal security wasn't what he loved doing, but this was.

"I suppose. I'll just be happier when he's standing in front of me."

"Girl, I know how you feel. Do you want to come down for the weekend? May help you take your mind off things."

"Yes, I'd love that." It really was a no brainer for Astrid to accept the invitation. Getting out of LA was exactly what she needed.

"Great. I'll ask the other girls around, and we can have a girls' night. Let the men look after all the children. Let me know when you're leaving so I know when to expect you."

The dark cloud that had been hovering over her since Callum walked out the door lifted a little. Astrid suspected it wouldn't disappear until her man was safely home. "I will. I think I might catch the train."

"Perfect, then I'll know exactly when you'll arrive. It's going to be a fabulous weekend."

"I can't wait."

They disconnected the call, and Astrid immediately proceeded to the checkout, eager to get home and plan her trip. She didn't know what she'd done to deserve Penni coming into her life, but Astrid was most thankful the other woman had. Not only had she become a close friend, she'd also been the catalyst for Astrid to meet the love of her life.

Life was pretty perfect.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

PEDRO STAYED WHERE HE WAS IN THE AISLE, LOOKING AT THE item in his hand as if he was reading the ingredients.

He couldn't wipe the smile off his face. The opportunity he'd been waiting for had finally arrived. A way that he could get Astrid. He knew if he waited, it would happen.

His cellphone buzzed, but he ignored it. It was probably Javier. He didn't think they suspected he was not back in Mexico, but he wasn't going to answer the call. Not until he had achieved what he wanted to achieve.

While he'd been keeping a low profile, he still wanted to know what was happening. So he'd visited the normal places where the chatter was ripe. The same thing he'd heard over and over was that Mr. Rook had found a person of interest, and he was putting all his resources in locating this person. Pedro didn't know who it was, but they had to have been important if Mr. Rook decided to direct most of his attention to them.

Pedro would get involved when he returned from his little side mission. He was still convinced Mr. Rook wanted Astrid eliminated.

Leaving his cart with the half a dozen items in the middle of the aisle, Pedro exited the grocery store. He'd found the best spot to lay low and still be able to see all of Astrid's movements. When she left for the train, he would make his move.

The only train she would be getting on would be the train to eternal pain.



ASTRID PARKED her car in the long-term lot of the train station and grabbed her bag out of the back. Excitement bubbled, and it was so hard to contain so that it didn't burst out. Before she'd walked out of the house, she'd received a call from her producer advising that the network had seen some of the early episodes of the show and decided to extend her contract for another two seasons. They'd also said that her book publisher wanted another cookbook from her. She planned to work on it on the train ride. She had a couple of hours to think about the theme and what recipes she wanted to use. This was just the thing she needed to take her mind off the fact that Callum was still away.

She couldn't wait to share the news with Penni too, although it wouldn't surprise Astrid if her publicist already knew. Penni had her ear to the ground and contacts everywhere.

Lost in her thoughts, she bumped into someone. "Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry." Astrid looked up with an apologetic smile on her face.

Her smile dropped when she met the eyes of someone she'd seen once before. Dread pooled deep in her soul, and she took a couple of steps back, needing to put some distance between her and the man in front of her.

Quickly, she glanced around to see if there was someone she could run to for help, but the lot was empty. There was no

one around to help her.

“What do you want?” She kept creeping backward. If she could get between a couple of parked cars, she could dump her bag and then run.

As if he was aware of what she was doing, he took two quick steps and before she could do anything, he grabbed her by the arm. “I want you.”

Astrid opened her mouth to scream, but he slammed his other hand over her mouth and pressed a gun into her side.

“Not a good idea. It’s time, Chef Astrid.” He smiled, and Astrid swallowed hard.

Callum and Cass were wrong. The threat against her wasn’t gone at all.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

THE PLANE TOUCHED DOWN, AND GROWLER SIGHED IN RELIEF. They were finally back in California. He couldn't wait to get home and shower.

Once the plane taxied to a stop, he was up and grabbing his bag from the overhead locker. Ox had made the decision that, for a safety aspect, they would travel home in pairs. Knowing how eager Growler was to get back to Astrid, Ox had him on the first flight out. Angel and Irish would arrive the next day.

Unfortunately, he still had to wait for the flight attendants to do everything needed before the doors could be opened and they could disembark.

Growler tapped his fingers on the seat in front of him, willing everyone to move quicker.

A chuckle came from the seat across the aisle from him. "I'm surprised you haven't checked your phone yet," Ox said

as he turned his own on.

“It’s dead. I forgot my fucking charger.”

“Should’ve asked me I had...”

The repetitive dinging coming from Ox’s phone stilled Growler’s impatient finger tapping.

He met his boss’s gaze as Ox put the phone to his ear. “Sitrep,” he barked out.

Anxiety pooled low in Growler’s belly, and he cursed his stupidity again with letting his phone rundown.

How could he have been so thoughtless? What if Astrid needed him?

In front of them, people started moving, but Ox remained where he was, his lips firmed into a thin line.

The anxiety within him grew larger and larger until it threatened to drown him.

Something had happened to Astrid.

He knew it deep in his bones.

“We’re getting off the plane now,” Ox said. “You need to get a message to Irish and Angel. Fuck, we need them here.”

Words Growler didn’t want to hear. Shit must be really bad.

Ox hauled his bag up and gave the age old “let’s move” signal. Not needing anymore encouragement, Growler slung his bag over his shoulder and shot down the aisle.

“Coming through. Make a hole.” Not giving a fuck for airplane passenger etiquette, they both rushed past people to get out of the plane and onto the jetway. All the while, Growler was conscious of Ox talking on the phone.

They rushed past the smiling flight attendant at the gate and headed for the exit. Neither of them had checked luggage, so they didn’t need to head to baggage claim. Once they were clear of the people milling around the gate, Growler grabbed Ox’s arm.

“What the fuck is going on? I know it has to do with Astrid.”

Ox sighed. “You’re right, that was Cass. Astrid has gone missing.”

Growler swayed. The world stopped. “When? How? How long?”

The fact he managed to fire off the questions surprised the hell out of him. Buzzing sounded in his ears, and he was sure that if Ox didn’t have a steady grip on him, he would’ve collapsed to the ground.

“She’s been missing twenty-four hours. Cass is looking into it. She was down with a migraine when Penni called the office. Even now she sounds like shit, but because of us being in the bowels of the jungle and then on a plane, Yolanda couldn’t let us know.”

Twenty-four hours.

Anything else Ox said went over Growler’s head. His mind hung up on the fact that the woman he loved had been missing for a day and he hadn’t known anything.

“Come on, man. Let’s get to the office.” Ox gave him a small shake, and he looked at his friend. “We will find her.”

The determination in Ox’s voice was what he needed to shake him out of his stupor. His woman was missing. She needed him to have his shit together so that he could find whoever had taken her and make them pay. In a slow, tortuous way.



ASTRID SHIFTED on the hard wooden chair, grimacing at the pinch of the ties on her wrists and feet. Fear had driven her for the first few hours. After being grabbed in the parking lot, she’d been shoved into the back of the van where she’d been tied up. The drive to wherever they were seemed to take hours. No one else had come into the shitty cabin she was in. The guy appeared to be working alone.

Why weren't there other men here?

Were they on the way? Was that why he was pacing around the small space?

No way did she want to ask the questions, her cheek hurt from the last time she'd tried.

Looking around for an escape route was futile. No matter how many times she searched the cabin, a larger window didn't appear. A toddler wouldn't be able to fit through the sliver of glass that pretended to be a window. The light attempting to filter through was pathetic because the glass was so dirty.

What was this guy waiting for?

He'd even given her food, cutting the ties around her hands so she could at least use them to fork some of the rice mixture he'd given her into her mouth. At first, she'd been reluctant to eat it. He could've laced it with poison, but as he was also eating it, she figured it was safe. Once she'd finished eating, he'd restrained her hands again.

Now here they sat, waiting.

Did Callum know she'd gone missing? Had he even returned from his trip? Was he even safe? She would give anything to be in his arms instead of bound to a chair.

Astrid closed her eyes and clung to the hope that Penni would've called the Alliez and the police by now. She would've been on the phone the second it became obvious she hadn't been on the train.

Knowing that people could be looking for her was the only reason she wasn't totally freaking out. She wished she'd put on the pendant that Cass had given Callum for her. He'd told her it would keep her safe, and she'd always had it on, until the day she'd left to go to Penni's. Of all the days to change out her jewelry, she had to choose the day she'd gotten kidnapped.

She glanced again at the man holding her captive. He looked agitated. He kept glancing at his phone as if waiting for it to ring.

If the cartel had wanted her dead, why hadn't he stopped the van during their long journey and killed her? Dumped her body on the side of the road. Or down a track where no one traveled and would never find her.

As it was, there was nothing around the place. She hadn't heard any traffic noise or even any planes flying overhead. All she'd heard were birds squawking as they flew by.

Fear burst to life at the thought of her possible demise.

No! I can't think that way. I'm still alive, and I will get myself out of this.

She had no idea how she was going to manage it, but she would somehow. No way was she going to be a victim. Well, more of a victim than she already was seeing as she was stuck in a cabin in the middle of nowhere.

There had to be a way she could get away. Was it possible to crab walk or something with a chair attached to her legs? Or maybe she could tip the chair to the side and then worm her way across the floor. Anything was possible. And if it hurt her, she didn't care. If she gained her freedom, what were a few bruises and cuts?

All she had to do was wait it out. Pity she hadn't thought of this the previous evening. Stress and fear had exhausted her, and she'd slumped into a restless sleep. Not tonight, though. She had no idea how long it would be until darkness fell, but, tonight, she was going to stay awake.

The slamming of a car door had her sitting a little straighter. Had help arrived? No, if anyone was coming to help her, they'd arrive in a stealthy manner. At least she thought they would. Wasn't that how special forces operations happened? Everyone would step quietly so as to not alert anyone of their presence. At least, that's what she assumed was how they were done.

A quick look at her kidnapper confirmed it wasn't help arriving. Clearly, whoever they were, the man in the room with her expected them. He was positively bouncing on his feet, as

though Santa Claus was about to open the door and present him with a sack full of gifts.

Astrid shook her head, trying to clear the humorous thoughts. Where were they coming from? Was she delirious? Had there been something in the food that was now just affecting her?

She kept her eyes glued to the door, waiting to see who was going to come in.

A tall man wearing dark clothes and dark sunglasses stood in the doorway. The sun shone in directly behind him, the sudden light burning her eyes, and she turned her head away.

I'll close them for a second and then when I open them, I'll be able to see the guy better. I need to be able to give a description when I get rescued.

“What the fuck, Pedro?” The heavily accented voice bounced through the small space. “You know that she is no longer a concern. No one is going to be happy about this.”

Astrid blinked rapidly as she opened her eyes, but the man who'd entered the cabin now had his back to her.

But he confirmed what Cass had heard on the web was true—she was no longer of interest to the cartel. If that was the case, why had Pedro taken her?

Nothing made sense.

They were still talking about her, only in rapid Spanish. Pedro looked smug as he argued his point.

The door was wide open. Astrid twisted her hands and feet against her restraints, trying to loosen them. The movement causing the chair to rock a little. The quicker she moved, the more it rocked until it teetered and she clattered to the ground. Her head hit the wooden floor and pain bloomed through it, but she gritted her teeth and tried to move—for what purpose she didn't know, but her flight instinct was kicking in. No matter how hard she tried, she hadn't moved from where the chair had tipped.

Footsteps stomped toward her.

While the stranger may have said that she wasn't to be messed with, perhaps he'd changed his mind. Or Pedro had convinced him that getting rid of her was best for all of them. Astrid felt in her bones that her time was up and she hadn't even moved an inch in her escape attempt.

The tears that she'd somehow managed to keep buried deep burned the back of her eyes. Her thoughts turned to Callum. Apart from thinking that he would come and rescue her, she hadn't allowed herself to contemplate that returning to him may not happen—even though it looked likely now.

Why hadn't she taken the leap and told him she loved him before he'd left? Now he'd never know.

"I love you, Callum. I'll find you in my next lifetime," she whispered.

"I'm sorry I have to do this, but it's for your own safety." The man with the heavy accent was standing over her now.

Astrid knew she should look up and face her killer, but she didn't want to. She didn't want the last thing she saw to be the man who killed her. She wanted the image of Callum's soulful eyes burning with desire as he entered her, to be the last thing she thought of.

She waited for the punch of pain from a bullet as it pierced her skin. Would she even feel it? Or would she feel nothing?

"Time to sleep."



PEDRO LOOKED at the woman's slumped body Javier had knocked out with the butt of his gun.

"Why did you do that?" he yelled at Javier, angry at how the man had come into the cabin and berated him as if he was a child.

Javier stalked toward him. Pedro straightened his spine; he wasn't going to be intimidated by the guy. He didn't care what Javier kept saying. He didn't care that Mr. Rook had taken the target off Astrid's back.

He'd *kidnapped* a woman off the streets. Where was the praise? The congratulations on getting rid of the loose end—like he'd promised Mr. Rook he'd do.

“You took it too far. It's clear you're going rogue.”

“I'm a man of my word. I tie up loose ends, and she was one. *I* didn't want her roaming the streets.”

Javier shook his head. “You are not in charge, though. You knew you were to leave her alone, yet you ignored them. Mr. Rook doesn't like people who don't listen. Who question his instructions. He has bigger plans at play. Plans that are more important than your wishes. No one questions what they are. Our job is to do what we are told. And you aren't doing that.”

How Pedro wanted to slam his fist into Javier's face and feel the bones crunch from the force of the punch. If he was second in command, he could've convinced Mr. Rook that getting rid of Astrid was the best thing to do. Not to mention, he always did what Mr. Rook wanted—except this time, but he had his reasons for going against them. “I don't have to explain myself to you.”

“You are so arrogant and delusional. Anything associating Mr. Rook to the death of a celebrity chef would be disastrous. The authorities already know that someone from the cartel was killed and that a cartel member had chased her. Both of those things were done by you. Mr. Rook doesn't want them sniffing around him, especially not now.”

“They can't pin it on me. I'm very good at my job.” Pedro puffed his chest out. He didn't believe what Javier was saying about Mr. Rook and whoever was looking into the cartel. They had that happen all the time, and all it took was a little bit of money for it to be dropped.

“You're a fool. A liability. A pain in Mr. Rook's ass. Time to die.” Javier raised his gun, and fired off two shots before Pedro could react.

Pedro staggered back, pain ripping through his body. He looked down at his chest, blood staining his shirt from the two bullet holes. The ground rose up to meet him as a dark gray

mist closed in until he was surrounded by blackness, his breath leaving his body on one last gasp.

Chapter Thirty

GROWLER PACED THE CONFERENCE ROOM. HE WANTED TO GET out of there. Wanted to get moving so that he could find Astrid. It was coming up to almost thirty-six hours since Astrid had gone missing, and he'd done jack all.

Irish and Angel had landed and had come straight to the office. Tiredness clawed at Growler's soul, trying to lure him into the sweet oblivion of sleep, but he fought. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had any decent sleep—probably the night before they'd gone wheels up when he'd held Astrid securely in his arms and her body had been curled around his—that was his last decent sleep.

“Here.”

Growler looked up to find Irish standing before him with a cup of coffee in his hand. The last thing he wanted was another cup. He'd been living off the stuff from the moment he and Ox had walked into the office.

He took it anyway. “Thanks, man.”

Growler swallowed some of the scalding liquid down, waiting for the burst of caffeine to hit his blood.

“Cass will find her,” Irish murmured beside him.

“I hope so, but the window of finding her is closing. You know that as well as I do, the first forty-eight hours are critical in the recovery of a missing person.”

Irish nodded. “Yeah, but the cops don’t have Cass. Or her skills. We’ve got the footage from the train carpark. We know it was the asshole who chased and shot at you. That’s all Cass needs to find him.”

“Yeah, and we thought the cartel didn’t want Astrid anymore and look how wrong we were.”

“They don’t want her,” Cass called out while still tapping away at the keyboard. “The cartel aren’t impressed with Pedro Gonzalez taking her.”

“What? You have a name? Why didn’t you say something earlier?” he ground the words out, trying to contain his temper.

Cass looked at him over the top of her glasses, spearing him with a less than impressed look. “Because I just found out.”

Growler closed the distance between where he was standing and where Cass was working, noting that everyone else had gathered around the screens.

“What you got, Cass?” asked Ox.

“Let me show you.” She tapped a few buttons, and the big screen behind her lit up.

Growler grabbed a chair and so did the rest of the guys. The screen was split into four squares. One had a rolling chat stream. How Cass found anything from following that was amazing.

Another screen had footage from a camera paused. The image was grainy, and he couldn’t make anything out. The next was a screenshot of the chat. And the final one was a map

with a blue dot on it. Everything in him wanted that blue dot to be where Astrid was located.

“As you can see from here...” She directed a pointer to the screenshot. “The cartel has put out another message saying Astrid Conway is no longer a person of interest to them. Their focus is on something bigger. Something they’ve been searching a long time for.”

“Any idea what that is?” Growler asked, his natural curiosity at the unsaid words in that message kicking in.

“No. But I’ll be keeping an eye on it.” Cass moved the pointer to the grainy image. “This is the car that Astrid was bundled into.”

She tapped again at the screen, and the image became crisper.

Growler clenched his fists at the picture of Astrid being shoved into a familiar black van. The same van that had dropped off the package to Astrid’s house. “Fucker. I’m going to kill him.”

No one touched his woman like that and got away with it.

“Don’t worry,” Cass smiled. “Pedro Gonzalez is already dead.”

The screen cleared, and then another screenshot from a chat appeared.

Issue has been dealt with. Won't be a problem again. We can move forward with your plans without repercussions.

As far as Growler could tell, that message didn’t say definitively that the person who had taken Astrid was dead. “How do we know it’s Pedro who’s been dealt with? Could be anyone else.”

“Because that message came from the phone of Javier Cortez. The grunt man for the leader of the Ramirez Cartel. He comes and cleans up messes. Best guess is, Ramirez was angry that Pedro had ignored his wishes when it came to Astrid.”

Growler’s sleep deprived mind was taking a few minutes to catch up with everything. Ramirez had taken out his own

man because he'd kidnapped Astrid against his orders to leave her alone. It almost seemed too good to be true.

"I wish we knew why they decided not to bother with Astrid anymore. It seems so out of the realm of how things normally work. Had Pedro been acting on orders from the cartel once it became clear that Astrid had seen the argument and then heard the gunshots to eliminate her? Or had the cartel never been after her and Pedro was doing it all himself?"

Even saying it all out loud, it sounded like a lot of exaggeration to Growler's ears—no matter how many times he said it. If he kept repeating it, maybe it would sink in.

"The fact the cartel put a message out saying to leave her alone suggests they were after her initially. I'm going to dig around and see if I can find out what I can on Pedro Gonzalez," Cass said and sat back, taking her glasses off and rubbing her eyes.

"At least we know who sent Astrid that package. I imagine it was a message from Pedro to freak her out," Ox pointed out.

As much as Growler wanted to puzzle out the pieces, his main concern now was to find Astrid and bring her back home. He could puzzle it out after Astrid was back in his arms.

"I guess so. Still wish I could make the fucker pay for scaring my woman." He made a fist and squeezed, imagining it was Pedro's head. "We have to find Astrid."

"And we will," Ox reassured him.

Silence fell around the room again, and it was doing Growler's head in. In the past, when they'd been working toward going on a mission, his head was in the game, his focus was on the reports he was reading. Now though, nothing could keep his attention—all he wanted was Astrid. In his arms. In her house. In their bed.

"I've got her," Cass announced. "This is where she is."

It took a moment for the words to sink in, even when a small cabin surrounded by scraggly trees popped up on the screen, but it did.

Cass had found Astrid.

“Where is it?” Growler demanded, wishing he could climb through the screen and be standing out the front of the structure, instead of fuck knows how far away he was.

Simultaneously, four phones pinged. “You have your coordinates. I’ll arrange for a jet and pilot to be waiting at the airport for you.” Cass pounded away on the keyboard as she spoke.

Adrenaline steamrolled the tiredness away, and Growler pushed away from the table, anxious to get moving. “Let’s roll!”

They all headed for the exit, and Growler whispered quickly, “Hang on, Comet. I’m coming.”

Chapter Thirty-One

THE BLACK EXPANSE OF ROAD THEY WERE DRIVING ON gradually faded from smooth to full of ruts and potholes.

“How much farther?” Angel asked.

“Just over the top of the rise, according to the map,” Ox relayed to him.

Growler’s knee bounced up and down in anticipation of what they were going to find. The drive from the small airport where they’d landed to the cabin should’ve taken about ninety minutes. With Angel behind the wheel, they were going to make it in under seventy.

The vehicle slowed, and Angel made the turn. The SUV bumped around as if they made their way along the dirt track.

“The cabin should be about two miles on the left. As we don’t know who is going to be there, or what we’re going to

be greeted with, I suggest we stop about a half a mile away and make the rest of the trek on foot,” Ox relayed to everyone.

“Roger that.” Growler didn’t care how they got there, only that they did. As far-fetched as it sounded, he could *feel* Astrid. She was close.

Beside him, Irish didn’t say anything, but he didn’t have to. Everyone was ready to get this mission over and done with.

“Do you think they’d leave her alone?” Angel queried.

“No idea,” Ox responded. “It seems unlikely that they would, but then again, the Ramirez Cartel is reacting completely out of character. If Ramirez didn’t want any attention on him or the cartel, would he leave another man here to be killed? The more I think on it, the more I suspect she will be alone, but we aren’t going to take any chances that I’m wrong.”

“Or maybe Ramirez expected no one to look for Astrid and for her to die a slow death out here.”

Growler wanted to reach over and punch Irish for his offhanded comment, but he refrained. How could he do that when, if the situation was different and it wasn’t his woman taken, he would think the same thing?

The SEAL in him was preparing him for the worst. The man in him was hoping for the best. The internal battle was one he wasn’t familiar with.

The vehicle slowed, and Angel pulled over to the side. The sun had crested the horizon about fifteen minutes before. They still had the element of surprise, and by arriving this early, if there was a man stationed with Astrid, they could eliminate him without too much fuss.

“Growler, you’re with me when we get to the cabin,” Ox ordered when they got out of the car. “Irish and Angel, you take the back while we take the front.”

“Copy that,” they all responded.

Breathing deep, Growler took a moment to take in the air’s stillness, the quiet birdsong and the gentle buzz of insects

starting their day. He checked his vest for his spare ammo and his side for his KABAR. He then flexed his fingers around his rifle's handle. He was ready. "Let's go."

They jog down the road, a half a mile was nothing to them all.

Ox slowed, and Growler followed suit. He scanned the area and spied the cabin, and the black van they'd seen Astrid being shoved into sat out front. Although one of the tires was flat, so it wouldn't be much of a getaway vehicle if someone was inside guarding Astrid. It also meant that Astrid wouldn't have any way to get back to safety either.

Together, they moved in a line formation toward the cabin. When they got within fifty feet, they broke off. Angel and Irish took the back as instructed.

"Ready?" Ox queried, his eyes watching his every move.

"Very ready." Growler answered his boss's question without hesitation.

Ox moved forward. Growler made sure to step where Ox had stepped, ensuring that he wouldn't step on a twig and alert whoever was inside that there were people outside.

They crept up the steps and flanked either side of the door.

"There's no back exit." Angel's voice came through the comms.

At least they didn't have to worry about that.

Like on the mission they'd just completed, Ox gave the signal to breach the cabin. Growler lifted his foot and jammed it into the door. Wood splintered, and a scream filled the silent morning.



ASTRID SCREAMED the second the door burst open and the barrel of a gun appeared. She scrambled back into the corner as if she could make herself invisible.

Two men dressed in black with balaclavas entered the structure. The instant the first one crossed the threshold, he directed his attention to her.

She recognized the eyes peering through the cutouts in the mask. “Callum?” she whispered.

How was he here?

How had he found her?

Was this real?

Was she dreaming?

Had the lack of food caused her to have a hallucination?

No, there was no way her imagination could conjure up the way the door had shattered into a million pieces of wood. The man in black strode over to her, ripping his mask off at the same time.

“Callum,” she said again, this time her voice a little stronger.

“Yeah, Comet, it’s me.”

The second his arms closed around her, the sobs she’d been holding back from the second Pedro had wrestled her into the car erupted out of her. Loud and messy. Callum’s arms tightened around her, and she sank into him, never believing that she would ever have this again.

Yet here she was. Being held by the man who loved her.

It wasn’t a dream. It was real. He was real.

“Shh, baby, I’ve got you. You’re safe now.”

Callum kept repeating the same things over and over, and eventually, her sobs quieted and she became aware that another two men had come into the space—all of them dressed in head-to-toe black like Callum.

“Are you hurt?” Callum ran his hands over her body, checking for any injuries. She winced as he brushed his fingers across her cheek, encountering the area where Pedro had slapped her.

“My wrists and ankles ache from where I was tied up, but that’s it.” Her eyes implored him to believe that she’d come out of this unscathed. That Pedro hadn’t attempted to assault her in any other way.

As if he could read her silent message, he gave a nod and then placed a gentle kiss on her bruised cheek. “Thank God,” he whispered.

“Was Pedro outside?” she asked.

“Pedro?”

“The man that took me.” She pointed to the bloodstain on the floor. “I think he was hurt. Did he make it outside?”

Callum looked over to where she was pointing and then back at her. “He’s not outside.”

“Oh.” Astrid took that in, surprised she still had the ability to speak coherently about what she thought happened.

“The area is clear. There’s no one in the van, but it looks like there was another vehicle here at some stage. Also, sporadic drops of blood in the dirt.” Angel came into the room and surveyed the situation. “She good?”

“Yes.” Callum pulled her tight into him again, and she relished being with him. He ran his hand over her head, wincing when he reached the bump. “What the fuck? You said you weren’t hurt?”

Astrid shrugged, tiredness invading her and the burst of adrenaline she’d gotten when Callum and Ox stormed into the cabin had completely disappeared. “I just want to go home.”

“Irish has gone to get the SUV. He should be here in fifteen,” Angel supplied.

Callum pressed his lips on top of her head, and she sighed. For a while, she’d thought she would never get a chance to feel that. To be held in his arms. But here she was. Safe. “Okay. Come on, Comet, let’s go outside.”

Astrid rested her head on his shoulder as he tucked her close to his side and led her out of the cabin, sitting on the top step. The sun was peeking through the trees, and a light breeze

ruffled her hair. After being stuck inside for the last couple of days, it was wonderful to be out in the sun.

“Thank you for coming for me,” she said after a while, aware that Angel and Ox were inside taking photos. She had no idea where they were, if they were still in the United States or in Mexico. None of that mattered now. All that mattered was that she was free, and she was back in Callum’s arms.

“I’ll always come for you.” His big hands framed her face so that she could look deeply into his eyes. “When I came back and found out you were gone, the bottom fell out of my world. You’re my everything. The reason I do what I do. I don’t want to imagine what my life would be like without you in it. You own me. I love you, Astrid Conway.”

Tears welled in her eyes. She thought she was all cried out, but it appeared not. “The only thing that kept me going while Pedro held me here was the belief that once you found out I was gone, you’d find me. I love you too, Callum, so much. I can’t imagine my life without you in it either.”

A small smile lifted the corners of his lips. “So we going to do this?”

“Do what?” Hope and happiness sparked to life.

“Do life—together.”

“Yes, please.”

Epilogue

“THE SEMI-FREDO SHOULD BE SET NOW AND READY FOR US TO eat.” Astrid smiled at the camera as she opened the freezer to pull out the dish.

Growler held his breath and crossed his fingers behind his back as he watched the woman he loved do her thing. He trusted the crew had done what he’d asked, but there was always a chance something had gone wrong.

The last six months had been the best of his life. After arriving back in Los Angeles, Astrid had relayed what Pedro had done and the mystery man who’d all but saved her life. How he could’ve killed her but didn’t. Whether he suspected Astrid would be rescued, considering who she was, or not was something no one discussed. Although it was never far from Growler’s mind, how close he came to losing her.

The Ramirez Cartel had been quiet since the incident as well. There’d been no chatter about them on the dark web, but

Cass was keeping a watch and would report if things heated up again.

All that mattered to Growler was that Astrid was free and clear and had no one chasing her. He still found it hard to believe that they didn't want Astrid, but maybe it was only Pedro who'd wanted her dead. With him out of the picture, the cartel had moved on. Either way, Growler wasn't going to question it. But it didn't stop him from always being aware of what was going on around them when they were out. Her show was getting more and more popular and she was being recognized a lot more now than when they first met.

Growler didn't mind it. He loved her and wanted her to be happy, which was why he was standing just out of her line of vision, praying everything would go to plan.

He released the breath with a whoosh when he saw the thumbs up from Basil. Everything was in place.

"It has set nicely, and it's going to taste just as good too." Astrid reached for the spoon, and Growler moved forward, knowing that he was going to be in the shot but not caring because this was the moment he'd been waiting his whole life for.

Astrid dug the spoon in, lifted it and then paused, looking closer at it. He couldn't help smiling, loving the puzzled frown.

That was his queue. Moving quickly, he was behind her on one knee before she could pull the ring from the iced confection.

"What is this?" She turned and gasped when she spied him on the ground. Her hand shook, and he was worried that she was about to drop the ring.

"Astrid Conway, I love you with my whole heart. Will you be my wife?"

"Oh my God, Callum. Yes. Yes, I'll marry you."

She fell to her knees, and he pulled her close, his lips finding hers with unerring accuracy. Around them, the crew

whistled and clapped, but he was oblivious to it all. All that he was focusing on was the woman in his arm. His fiancée.

Growler pulled back and took the ring from her finger. It had a little of the dessert on it, but he pulled a napkin from his pocket and wiped it clean before slipping it on her finger. “You can take it off and clean after, but I need to see it on.”

Astrid shook her head. “I’m never taking this off.”

He laughed and tugged her close again. Life may have been uncertain when he’d left the Navy, but now it was complete in a way he never thought it could be.



EVELINE DURVILLE STARED at the folder in front of her. For the last six months, she’d been compiling information about the actions of the company she worked for. A company she had once been proud to be associated with, but Gerald Morkham had changed and so had the atmosphere at Triple Z Security.

There was more secrecy and off the book jobs being taken. Jobs that she’d discovered involved abusing the trust of the clients they were supposed to be protecting.

No way could she stay quiet now that she had the information, but who could she tell in the office? There’d been a recent flurry of resignations, and the people Gerald hired were people she didn’t feel comfortable being around. She should’ve left months ago, and had in fact looked for a new job, but it seemed companies wanted candidates with far more qualifications than she had, even though she had years of experience.

Now here she was with information that was damning. No way could she forget that she’d seen it. Who could she trust?

Again, she looked at the file as if the answer to her problems would present itself. There it was, in an email from Kyle Matthews of Alliez Security. Memories of Kyle and their one night together stormed her, and so did the humiliation of being tossed out of his bed when he found out who she worked for.

If she took the information to Alliez, would Kyle even want to see her? There was only one way to find out. Tomorrow she'd turn up at his office and hope for the best.



Not ready to be done with the Alliez Security? Continue the series with Eveline and Kyle's (Ox) story in [KEEPING EVELINE](#).



WANT MORE ASTRID & Growler? Then join them on their trip to the Bahamas in this [BONUS SCENE](#).



WANT to connect with my other fans and chat about my books? Come and join my reader group [Nicole Ninjas!](#)



JOIN my Newsletter and find out about sales, free books, contests and new releases before anyone else! Click [HERE](#)



To find out about new releases and sales follow me on Bookbub. [Follow me](#)

Also by Nicole Flackton

Alliez Security

[Keeping Astrid](#)

[Keeping Eveline](#)

Keeping Teresa (TBA)

Keeping Cassandra (TBA)

Seal Team Tango

[Saving Imogene](#)

[Saving Penni](#)

[Saving Angela](#)

[Saving Madeline](#)

[Saving Jennifer](#)

[Saving Rebecca](#)

[A Merry SEAL Christmas](#)

Station 7: Crew 5

[Shelter for Tory](#)

[Shelter for Calla](#)

[Shelter for Dahlia](#)

[Shelter for Holly](#)

[Shelter for Rose](#)

[Shelter for Poppy](#)

Guardian Seals

[Protecting Lily](#)

[Protecting Maria](#)

[Guarding Erin](#)

[Guarding Suzie](#)

[Guarding Brielle](#)

[Guarding Antonia](#)

[Guarding Faith](#)

[Guarding Amberley](#)

Special Forces Operation Alpha World

[Rescuing Samantha](#)

Tarpley Volunteer Fire Department Series

[Fighting for Nadia](#)

[Shelter for Cerise](#)

The Billionaires

[The Victor](#)

[The Hunter](#)

[The Warrior](#)

[The Protector](#)

[The Reminder](#)

[The Loner](#)

[The Recluse](#)

Welcome to Bunya Junction

[Home to the Outback](#)

[Runaway to the Outback](#)

[Doctor in the Outback](#)

Reunion in the Outback

Danger in the Outback (April 2024)

Lovers Unmasked Series

[Masquerade](#)

[Rescuing Dawn](#)

[Seducing Phoebe](#)

Lovers Unmasked Boxed Set

The Prentice Brothers of Sweet Ridge

[One Hot Texas Summer](#)

[Falling for the Texan](#)

[A Merry Texan Christmas](#)

Sweet Texas Secrets

[Sweet Texas Fire](#)

Man's Best Friend

[Blind Date Bet](#)

[Next Door Knight](#)

[The Matchmaker's Match](#)

The Elite

[Fighting to Win](#)

[Fighting to Dream](#)

[Fighting for Love](#)

[Fighting for Redemption](#)

Emerald Springs Legacy Series

[Daniel's Decision](#)

[Emerald Springs Legacy Collection](#)

Novellas

[Swipe for Mr. Right](#)

[Wrong Time for Mr. Right](#)

[Fighting Their Attraction](#)

[Tangled Vines](#)

[Christmas in Ghost Gum Valley](#)

[Trapped by Cupid](#)

About the Author

USA Today Bestselling author Nicole Flockton writes sexy contemporary romances that sparkle and seduce you one kiss at a time. Nicole likes nothing better than taking characters and creating unique situations where they fight to find their true love.

When she's not busy writing she's looking after her very own hero – her wonderfully supportive husband, as well as her two fabulous kids and various fur babies. Her kindle is never far from her reach. She's a tiara wearing certified chocoholic, Cinderella lover, major BTS fan, sports lover and a glitter aficionado.

You can visit Nicole at her website www.nicoleflockton.com

